The Filmmaker's Guide to Production Design

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Chapter 7

COLOR

Color performs many functions in production design. Color is not only used to achieve verisimilitude in the images; color can communicate time and place, define characters, and establish emotion, mood, atmosphere, and a psychological sensibility. In visual storytelling, color is one of the moviemaker’s greatest assets. As in all areas of filmmaking, the color design must be given serious thought and must be carefully planned. You are not just presenting pretty or eye-catching colors; you are telling a story and defining the characters. A set, location, or environment is interpreted by its use of color. Color is a powerful design tool that often works subliminally. Many colors come with an intrinsic symbolic meaning. In Silkwood, production designer Patrizia Von Brandenstein made notable use of the color yellow in the plutonium plant. When it appears on road signs and in urgent public messages, yellow signifies a warning of danger. The yellow in Silkwood had a metaphoric power. The plutonium plant Karen Silkwood and her friends worked in was a great threat to their health and safety. The yellow was both a warning and a dramatic foreshadowing of what was to come in the story.

The production designer creates a color palette for a film. The chosen range of color is a way of expressing and defining the world of the film. Color allows the designer to create a tonal context that can complement or contrast with the narrative. The goal is not to color-coordinate as an interior designer might when decorating a living space but to consciously select each color for its dramatic impact.

On Dick Tracy (1990), production designer Richard Sylbert used the primary colors red, yellow, and blue to signify the comic book world of the story.

The Last Emperor (1987), designed by Ferdinando Scarfìotti, featured golden tones and rich saturated reds for the Forbidden City sequences that presented the magical, insular, old world of the young emperor. For scenes where the adult emperor is placed in a prison camp, director Bernardo Bertolucci, director of photography Vittorio Storaro, and Scarfìotti dramatically shifted the color palette to somber blues and grays to indicate the change in China’s political climate.
In *Married to the Mob* (1988), directed by Jonathan Demme, production designer Kristi Zea employed an eclectic juxtaposition of bright colors to illustrate the downtown New York scene. For the ornate and tacky Florida hotel room scene, which concludes the film, Zea used the color turquoise to demonstrate the mob’s lavish and cheesy taste in décor. Tony the Tiger’s office is all wood, old-world, with overt masculine hues and materials to represent the power of the mob boss.

**The Color Palette**

To create the color palette, start with markers, paint, color swatches, or any color media, and make samples. Color illustrations can help plan the color scheme. Richard Sylbert painted small square wooden boards to plan out the color scheme for *Dick Tracy*. The boards were labeled *Dick Tracy* Red, *Dick Tracy* Blue, and *Dick Tracy* Yellow, and were used as references for the design team.

The color palette should be defined before you proceed. Controlling the mood with color has a great impact on the audience. Be certain that the director, the director of photography, and production designer are all in agreement on the color approach. Will the cinematographer be using color gel, a film stock, or developing process to alter or affect the color negative? Is the movie going to be shot on video? What format—digital video, Beta, PAL? How does the format render the color and texture?

The critical difference in how color is recorded is between film and video. Film has a high contrast range and the ability to present highly saturated color. Video as a medium has improved enormously over the last ten years but inherently doesn’t render contrast as well as film. Areas of image on the high and low end can lack contrast and detail. Very saturated colors tend to blossom and lose definition. In film, stocks vary in their ability to render contrast and grain pattern, which ranges from fine to grainy. Fine grain produces sharp, clean colors that are desirable for many photographic styles. Some films require a grainy look. Heavy grain creates a dark mood, soft-edged color that is great for edgy, raw subject matter. Low-end video is used for low- or no-budget productions. The color, sharpness, and contrast is quite good, considering how inexpensive the cameras are, but any commercial production striving for good production values should consider at least a three chip camera or high-end professional video camera, not what is now considered prosumer equipment. New high-definition digital cameras come close to achieving a film look. Panavision and Sony have developed a state-of-the-art digital camera that runs at the film standard of twenty-four frames per second. One of these cameras was used to film *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (2002), which comes even closer to capturing color the way a 35mm camera can. Most feature films are still shot on film. Kodak still dominates as the film stock of choice, but some filmmakers prefer Fuji film stock that produces what cinematographer Ed Lachman (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1985; *The Virgin Suicides*, 1999; and *Erin Brockovich*, 2000) calls “juke box colors,” which have a candy color quality appropriate for projects with a bright, post-modern photographic approach. The production designer should talk to the director of photography, screen examples of these results, and know what shooting medium is to be used, before beginning to design the color scheme.
Color gels have a significant effect on the color scheme of the production design. Gels come in all colors and have a wide tonal range within each color. A subtle use of a gel on a light or on the camera lens can heighten or slightly augment the color, but extreme use of a saturated red or blue gel will override any color palette inherent in the production design. It is critical that the production designer and the director of photography discuss this so the design will stay within the original concept once filmed. Gels can help accent a location in lieu of painting a wall and could be an inexpensive and quick solution. Gels can benefit both the production design and the cinematography when both members of the team understand each other’s tools and the best result for the story.

If the director of photography has a problem with the color of a set, the time to resolve it is in the planning stages, not at the onset of production.

Because the production designer historically is brought on before the director of photography, this collaboration starts late—after color decisions have been made between the designer and the director. “I was hired to do a TV movie that later became a series called The Flash,” director of photography Sandi Sissel remembers. “It was a $6 million TV movie, which was almost unheard of, but when I came onto it, we had two weeks before production started so all of the locations had been chosen and they were great, really wonderful lofts. The production designer described it to me as ‘the thirties meets the nineties.’ We had a relatively short shooting schedule, but the gaffer, key grip, and I were going around looking at locations, and we said, ‘This is really weird, why do we have all these white lofts? What does this have to do with a cartoon character?’ So we went on to the director and said, ‘You’re going to think we’re crazy, but what if we put colored gels on all the lights and washed all these sets so that they were no longer white but were absolutely bright colors?’ This idea came to me because I had been reading about Dick Tracy at the time, and how Vittorio Storaro and Richard Sylbert were doing all these sets with primary colors. So it just seemed logical that this cartoon character would be something like this. It didn’t make sense that it would be white because that was so unreal, such a fantasy. So we literally turned the offices into yellow, green, red, purple, and these bright colors. Later on the production designer was nominated for an Emmy for his colorful work on this film, none of which was in the production design—all of it was the gels on the lights. Now, had he not given us white sets, we wouldn’t have been able to do that at the last minute, and perhaps had he given us weird colors, it would have been even more difficult to do. It worked out collaboratively; he was very nice about it. He loved what we did and the way that we did it.”

Colors should be used to visually transcribe the layers of feeling and meaning that are in the script. Color should not be imposed on the design to convey the story, or the audience will be aware of the manipulated mechanics of the color and only see it, rather than feel it. An effective color design operates on a subconscious level and allows the colors to impart ideas and feelings separate from the conscious story and physical setting.

On Bernardo Bertolucci’s Little Buddha (1993), scene after scene is bathed in blue. At first it establishes the spirituality of the story and the isolation felt by this young American boy believed to be the next Dalai Lama. However, the overpower-
ing presence of this single color application eventually tires the viewer, becomes self-conscious and obvious. The color is a distraction rather than a complement or an integral element in visually illustrating and narrating the theme and story.

Ridley Scott’s *Black Hawk Down* (2001) utilizes a limited color scheme executed in the production design, cinematography, and costumes. The film is based on a true story concerning a U.S. mission in Somalia. The predominant colors are green and a sand tone. The military is associated with green, so the uniforms and artillery are this color. The buildings and terrain in Somalia are sand-colored. So the color scheme is consistent with the environment and characters. But Scott and his creative team go too far. The color approach extends to the final color correction when the color of a print can be adjusted and altered. *Black Hawk Down* is so heavily green-toned that the color extends to the sky and skin tones. Part of the motivation is that when the massive attack against the Americans begins, and the blood begins to flow, red has a visceral power it might not have achieved if warm or hot colors had been introduced into the overall design. In the example of *Black Hawk Down*, the green palette is so overwhelming it distracts from the characters and action. The viewer wonders why this color dominates, consciously looking for a metaphor or meaning that is never delivered. The film quickly begins to look more like a music video than a dramatic motion picture story. Subtle use of a wider palette, at least in some locations and scenes, would have tempered this obvious exercise in style as style and not as storytelling.

Production designer Richard MacDonald utilized color to create vibrancy in his designs. His technique was to first paint a wall gray or a cold brown color, such as a raw umber. After the cool color dried, MacDonald splattered the surface with a warm color. Although the camera primarily records the warm color, the splattering technique allows the cold color underneath to show through. In MacDonald’s design for *The Addams Family* (1991), directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, he designated the house as a character in the film. In a variation of the splattering technique to achieve optical vibration, one wall in the spooky fun house was painted a light ochre-yellow on encrusted paper with a textured pattern. MacDonald then rubbed a very light lavender blue over the ochre that transformed it into a gray but also projected a vibrating aura that burst forth with vitality when photographed.

During the pre-production stage of *The Morning After* (1986), director Sidney Lumet told production designer Albert Brenner that he interpreted the color of Los Angeles as a tube of Necco Wafers—a candy that combines a palette of light, dusty-colored pastels, encompassing a range of colors from warm to cool. Brenner ran with Lumet’s color metaphor. He went back to the script and made a list of the exterior locations where the Jane Fonda character walked. Brenner assigned pastel colors to specific shots and scenes and then searched for each color scheme on location. Although this concept and process involved a little more traveling for the company during the shooting of the film, Lumet was convinced it was worth the effort for the contribution the color choices made in emotionally interpreting the environment, as he perceived it. The production design supported the director’s vision of the film.

Tony Walton had designed the original Broadway production of the play *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). Richard Lester, who directed the film adaptation, wanted a different impression of Ancient Rome than the scrubbed-
and-polished look often presented in movies. Walton’s design solution for the 1966 film version was to employ reds, oranges, and yellow-golds that were linked to the terra cotta hues popular in Ancient Rome. The designer also accentuated the vaudevillian roots of the play. During their research, Lester and Walton found that in the Ancient Roman era, statues were painted. Moreover, architectural landmarks such as the temples in the Roman Forum, were polychromatic; they were colorfully painted. Slaves from the same household, played by Zero Mostel and Jack Gilford, were referenced by colors that conflicted with the interior coloring of the house, to emphasize they were in a different social class than the residents. The background characters were presented in muddied, sludge colors, but the principal characters were displayed in radiant, jewel colors.

For the design of Last Tango in Paris (1973), the theme of isolation and desolation boldly captured in explicit human horror by the painter Francis Bacon influenced director Bernardo Bertolucci. The principal apartment utilized in the film had been selected when Bertolucci and production designer Ferdinando Scarfisotti visited a retrospective exhibit of Francis Bacon paintings. They left the museum deciding that the flesh color that often dominated Bacon’s paintings would be effective in the apartment to express the psychological state of mind of Marlon Brando’s character. Scarfisotti painted a series of color tests on large sheets of cardboard. The designer always envisioned creating a color gradation on the walls. The Francis Bacon paintings inspired Scarfisotti to paint a burnt sienna color on the top of the walls that gradually blended into a flesh tone and then a cream tone at the bottom. The environment evoked the color of flesh and became a metaphor for the tormented sexuality of the Marlon Brando character.

In Woody Allen’s The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985), production designer Stuart Wurtzel used color to contrast with the glamorous world of the black-and-white Hollywood movies that enchanted the Mia Farrow character, who lived in the downtrodden world of the Great Depression in the 1930s. The movie palace provided her comfort, and the world outside was dark, cool, and green. Colors in the apartment she shared with her belligerent husband were dreary, heavy, and somber. Wurtzel and his art department painted the exterior of every building in the actual town used as a location for the film, to cast the pall of economic and social strife. The exterior locations achieve this with a palette of dull, dreary blues, dark colored wood, beige, shades of subdued gray, brown, black, and the color of dark, worn brick. The main character’s home is done in dark greens and muted browns. The movie theater that is a haven to the woman has cherry-colored wood; the interior of the spacious, majestic theater is lush red, orange, and glowing amber. The original black-and-white movie within The Purple Rose of Cairo was carefully shot as a separate photographic element by Gordon Willis so it would glitter like a 1930s Hollywood entertainment film. It was projected onto the screen in the movie theater, which had been restored to its glory years by the art department team. It created the illusion that the picture palace captured the character’s heart and soul and gave her hope and the strength to escape her dead-end life.

Color can be very subjective, but particular hues and palettes do represent, indicate, and communicate narrative messages to the audience. Warm colors tend to rep-
resent tenderness and humanity. Cool colors represent cold, lack of emotion, and distant feelings. They can also express power and force. Hot colors represent sexuality, anger, and passion, as well as physical and visceral heat. A monochromatic palette is a limited range of colors that can establish a colorless world, sameness, masked emotion, or a sense of simplicity and unity. Earth colors communicate a sense of home and environmental stability. Red is a color with many symbolic meanings attached to it—fire, Hell, Satan, sexuality, and rage. Blue shades can represent water, sky, ice, or a remote emotional state. Green is associated with trees and rolling fields of grass. White can suggest cleanliness, sterility, or spirituality. Black can characterize mystery, evil, darkness, or luxury. Yellow signifies the sun or danger. Gray can reflect a state of calm, lifelessness, or neutrality. Bright colors represent happiness, frivolity, and joy, or they can be loud and garish.

**A Concise Lesson in the Nature of Color**

Combination of colors, hues, and tints are unlimited in what they can express and communicate in the production design of a motion picture. Color can be sublime, indifferent, or overwhelming. For the low-budget production, color is an inexpensive and effective medium to create a visual style and to embellish and emphasize the narrative.

The six basic colors of the spectrum are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. The principal hues are red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, and red-violet.

A value is the light-to-dark variant of a color. A hue on the spectrum is either lighter or darker than other hues. The natural value alignment of a hue can be raised in value by adding white and darkened by adding black. The eye can see about seven separate steps between black and white.

**Color Theory**

The science, art, aesthetics, and application of color theory is divided into two distinct areas: light and pigment. Light is the science of how the spectrum creates color. Pigment is the study of how colors are physically created with paint. The production designer deals in pigment. The director of photography works in light. Both must understand the application to achieve the desired results.

Personal perception of color is subjective. Everyone has a unique emotional reaction to a particular color; even descriptive language can vary as it codifies what is seen and felt about a color. Several theorists have devised systems of notating color. Many of the defining terms used by color theorists are similar, and the language of color notation is employed by the designer to communicate the use and purpose of color in the design process.

The principle concepts of color can be seen in most theories on the subject. What follows are the basic principles of the Munsell Color Notation System. When the light of three primary colors are together in the correct proportions they can produce any color in the spectrum.
The primary colors of light are blue, red, and green. Complimentary colors, also known as secondary colors, are produced by overlapping two primary colors. The light of a primary and secondary color mixed together produces white. When two complimentary color paint pigments are mixed together, they produce black.

Luminance is the light reflected from any color. Luminance designates the brightness or darkness of a particular color.

A hue is the predominant sensation of a color—the viewer’s perception of it as having, for example, the qualities of red, blue, or green. The spectrum is created by the refraction of light through a prism, with the sun’s white light creating several distinct hues. Each theory has a different number of hues. The Munsell theory is based on ten principal colors, the Ostwald Color Theory has twenty-four hues, and the Pope theory starts with twelve principal colors. A six- to twelve-color system is recommended for mixing pigments for scenic painting. The basic colors of the spectrum are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. The intermediate hues create the twelve principal colors. The intermediate hues are yellow-orange, red-orange, red-violet, blue-violet, blue-green, and yellow-green. A shade is a hue mixed with black. A tone is a color grayed by the addition of white.

A value is the brightness of a color, the light to dark variants. The seven value steps of each color in the spectrum are:

- White
- Medium
- Black
- High light
- High dark
- Light
- Dark
- Low light
- Low dark

Primary colors are three spectral colors that when mixed together in the correct proportions, produce any other color in the color spectrum. A tint is a hue that has been diluted with white. For example, pink derives from red and white, beige from brown and white.

In paint, saturation describes the intensity of a color—so, 100 percent saturation is the color in its pure form. Desaturation is the process of graying-off a color by adding white, which produces pastel colors. In cinematography, saturation is achieved by exposure rate, choice of film stock, developing of the negative, and development and printing of the release print.

The chroma of a color refers to its hue combined with its saturation. The intensity of a hue or the intensity of a color is referred to as chroma. A color that is free of white or gray properties has chroma. The following are some principles of color psychology and the cause and effect of color application:

- Warm hues such as orange, yellow, and red appear to be closer to the camera than cool colors like blue, green, and purple. Cool colors make objects look larger and farther away.
- A smooth surface will give the impression that colors are more saturated than they would be if the same color were applied to a dull, matte texture that makes them appear desaturated.
- The lighting has a critical impact on how color appears on film. All colors can be
checked and tested on film or videotape. Reflections caused by the lighting can
dim the luminance and hue of a color or crush the density of the color. Diffusion
desaturates color and gives the area a consistent level of brightness.

• A background and foreground color can modify each other. In contrast and rela-
tionship, an individual color can be modified by other colors appearing within the
same frame.
• Colors appear lighter against a black background.
• Colors appear darker against white. The intensity (chroma) of a color is the
degree of pureness.
• Limiting the palette to cool or warm, or even monotone color, is effective in com-
municating sameness, calm, and a lack of identity or unification.
• In designing the color scheme for a space where a group of characters live or
work, the designer must decide the point of view. Does one of the characters dom-
inate the stylistic tastes of the environment? Are they responsible for the color
scheme? The color palette can represent the individual’s emotional state or it can
express a sense of doom, happiness, or sexual tension that will become a platform
for the characters and story.
• To plan the color scheme, production designers use a painter’s elevation that
shows the colors in their true form without the influence of lighting. A scale draw-
ing of the set is created in a line drawing, and a boxed grid numbered on the top
and lettered on the side is put over it to identify each box. A notion of the actual
color and the painting technique is indicated.

**Black-and-White Filmmaking**

Designing black-and-white productions is an art and craft in itself. During the
classical Hollywood studio era, production designers and art departments were well
trained in working in the black-and-white medium. The principal difference in
designing in black-and-white as opposed to color is that the designer’s palette does
not consist of the color spectrum. The black and white designer is working within
the gray scale and must understand how each color translates to a value from black
to white.

If your film is being photographed in black-and-white, watching other films in the
medium will motivate and inspire, but it will not help you to learn how colors are
interpreted in the gray scale. Practicing and experimenting with black-and-white still
photography will give you an understanding and feeling for how black-and-white film
records a color scene. Since a bright green and a bright blue of the same hue may read
as the same tone on the gray scale, colors in a black-and-white film are not chosen for
their color value but for their tonality on the gray scale. To the untrained eye, the col-
ors of a well-designed set prepared for black-and-white photography will look unbal-
anced and may appear to be garish and to clash in relationship to each other. The pro-
duction designer works to achieve balance, contrast, and a sense of space and dimen-
sion, using the range of the gray scale. The architectural silhouette is the same, but
the detail and modeling must be projected through gray scale values.

After each value is tested, the set is built, then carefully checked and tested with
the black-and-white film stock to be used. Camera tests are made to discover the
tonal range. During shooting, a black-and-white video assist system will help the
designer to see how the set will look in black-and-white. The art department must be
prepared to make corrections and changes to enhance, augment, or correct the design
so it can best serve the characters and story.

**Color Correction**

Color correction is a process where the color of the original negative or master
video tape can be corrected for hue, tone, intensity, and value to achieve the original
intent of the director of photography, or altered to achieve special, specific color
effects that create, mood, and atmosphere.

Historically, color correction was done at a film laboratory where a color timer
would time each individual shot and correct flesh tones and the overall color feel, be
it warm or cool. A new film print was then struck from the negative using the cor-
rections.

A film negative can be transferred to video and the color correction can be done on
a video console that provides more latitude to the specificity of altering areas of color.

Now, digital tools are revolutionizing color correction. Many non-linear editing
platforms, such as Final Cut Pro and Avid, provide the ability to correct and alter the
color of images digitally. Sophisticated digital color correction consoles allow the
moviemaker to make major changes to the color palette of projects shot originally
on film or video. This role of color correction has gone from a generalized applica-
tion, to the ability to literally paint the image at will.

Color correction occurs during post-production and is supervised by the director
of photography and the director. The production designer has not officially been a
part of this process but color correction and augmentation can have a major impact
on how color is used and perceived in the production design.

It is recommended that the production designer be consulted during the creation
of the final version of the project. More and more moviemakers are buying their own
non-linear editing systems, making it easier to utilize color suggestions from the pro-
duction designer during the color correction process. Moviemakers are no longer
confined to expensive supervised sessions at labs and editing suites where the color
correction is done in marathon sessions paid for by the hour. The access of home dig-
ital technology now empowers filmmakers with greater control over the color in their
work.

**Developing a Color Sense**

Study art history. Painters were the first artists to use color to express both reali-
ty and creative impressions. By familiarizing yourself with classical and contempo-
rary art, you will develop an eye for the application, use, and purpose of color in cre-
ating images.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was an artist of great range. In 1890 he arrived in
Paris from his native Spain and began to paint beggars and outcasts. Picasso
expressed his own sense of isolation in a series of paintings later identified as his Blue Period. Picasso applied a palette of cool, blue colors to express melancholy and despair. *The Old Guitarist*, painted in 1903, is a fine example of this approach. The old man is seated on the street bent over his instrument; his white hair, face, arms, and exposed legs are tinged with blue; and his expression communicates that he accepts his face as an outcast of society. The Blue Period paintings are an excellent reference for how color can create an overall somber, depressed mood.

Expressionism is a vital source of influence for filmmakers wanting to use color in a nonrealistic manner to express deep emotions. In 1905, a group of young European artists created a radical style. They were called Fauves (wild beasts). The style combined violent colors, such as those seen in the work of Vincent van Gogh, and the use of distortion such as executed by Paul Gauguin. This radical movement was lead by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), whose work presented flat planes of color, heavy pulsating outlines, and primate forms. The painters of Fauvism used pink, orange, green, and dramatic clashing contrasts of color that created an expressive emotional atmosphere that stimulated a physical upheaval in the viewer. The German Expressionists include Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Erich Heckel (1883–1970), Emil Nolde (1867–1956), Oskar Kokoschea (1886–1980), and Wassily Kandinsky (1883–1970). Their work with color and texture vividly evokes emotional states through a nonnaturalist application of color to figures and nature. German filmmakers introduced this style in film during the 1920s, and its impact influenced film noir and contemporary films that evoke the deep emotional state of their characters and story.

Piet Mondrian (1987–1944) is an excellent reference for post-modern design. This abstractionist painted flat hard-edged squares and rectangles using primary colors, creating exciting spatial and optical relationships. His work is a lesson in how colors and shapes create movement and rhythm strictly through their contrast and relationship to each other.

The area of color field painting contains significant lessons concerning color, mood, and atmosphere. The large block-like color fields of Mark Rothko (1903–1970), demonstrate the power of large color fields, which can be applied to landscapes and to the overall color feel created in the film frame by deep-hued, soft-textured color relationships. Helen Frankenthaler (1928– ) poured thin consistencies of oil paints to get a watercolor wash effect. The color work of Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) addresses the interior life of a character and altered states of emotional reality.

**Discovering Color**

Purchase an inexpensive watercolor set and explore how colors are created through mixing and blending. Practice hues and tints. Create color schemes that project specific moods and emotional states. When you feel more adventurous, move on to oil or acrylic painting, for a more complex investigation into color creation. Fill a brush with one of the primary colors—red, yellow, or blue. Make your application of paint to paper as opaque as possible to get the deepest hue. The better quality
watercolor sets will give a better result in achieving a vibrant opaque color. Create a two-inch square of the opaque color. Then create a series of tints by painting additional squares and adding a little more water each time to lighten the color until the final square is clear water. Study each square. How do the various tints of the original colors impart mood? Write a line or two of prose to capture your emotional and psychological reaction to each tint. To develop skills in creating mood, select a specific mood, whether it’s somber, joyful, sad, or happy. Then, using one color, paint a background that captures the mood. Experiment with different colors; try gray, green, or blue for sadness. Try red, yellow, or blue for happiness.

Research, study, and learn how to photograph, develop, and print color still photographs. Sit in on a film or video lab timing session to understand how color can be rendered and manipulated on film and video. Create a color diary filled with color samples you come across your travels. Identify each color and note its derivation, properties, and capacity of expression.
Working in the studio offers control for filmmakers. Working on location presents conditions of controlled chaos, especially when shooting in exterior locations of populated urban areas. In the studio a set can be built to the exact specifications of the design and shooting can proceed without unexpected delays. On location the filmmakers will encounter the natural weather elements, the wondrous unpredictability of the sun, and a spectrum of interference in the form of onlookers, noise pollution, house rules restrictions, laws, and science.

Scouting Locations

You will encounter two possible situations when on a search for a location to film a scene. The location you consider a candidate for selection will either be perfect for your film as it stands before you or will need modification to be transformed to fit into your production design plan for the film. Be skeptical if you arrive at the notion of perfection too easily. Don’t settle. Does the location fit the aesthetic, practical, and technical attributes the film requires? If modification is necessary, how much needs to be done? What will the transformation cost? If those questions are answered to your satisfaction another phalanx of inquiries to make include the following:

- Is the location available?
- Is the space large enough for a production crew to work in?
- Is there adequate parking?
- Is the location accessible by public transportation and by car?
- Can you get permission to modify or transform the location?
- How long will you need the location for pre-production work?
- How long will you need the space for shooting?
Transforming a Location

Design and plan what alterations need to be made and meet with the owner of the property. The work must be done in pre-production and maintained during production.

Production designer Kristi Zea did several transformations of actual locations for the 1989 film *Miss Firecracker*. The house in the film was supposed to have belonged to the main character’s grandmother. The concept was that artifacts passed down from generations were still in the house. The actual location was an empty house that had begun to deteriorate. The roof was in poor condition, so the art department put up plastic to prevent leaking. The house had been empty, so it was dressed by Zea and her staff. They put in two televisions, one on top of the other. One worked and the other did not. They researched people’s homes in the area where older women or widows were living. They saw family pictures all over the walls, and everything was dark and dusty. Zea decided that the Holly Hunter character left the house pretty much the way it was when she took it over. Her character lived in two or three areas of the house where she added her personal belongings. The rest of the house was left decorated just as the grandmother had left it.

The Southern town of Yazoo City had the right look for the film. A local pool hall that needed very little work had a counter with jars of pickled eggs, a southern delicacy that Zea highlighted in arranging the location.

An amusement park where the Miss Firecracker contest took place was created on location by the art department. The chosen location was close to the town and was a plot of land inhabited by squatters living in a trailer. They relocated them and leveled the area. Trees and undergrowth were cleaned out. A stage for the contest and houses were built. Then an actual carnival company was hired that had the appropriate style required by the script and were set up to Zea’s instructions.

As soon as shooting is completed the location must be restored to its original condition. Check the dailies first to make sure the scene is complete. Repair any damage and remove all signs that a film company was ever there. Leave the location as you originally found it.

Shooting at One Location for Another

Decades ago, producers realized that the high cost of shooting in Los Angeles or New York City made it enticing to shoot in Canada. The incentives were impressive; lower costs, good facilities and support, a range of locations that they were convinced would successfully play for the East and West coasts of the United States. For many producers the bottom line dictates creative decisions imposed on the director. Production designers continue to do their best to use locations in Canada, but those are rarely the best artistic choices. New York locations are often filmed in Los Angeles, where the architecture, colors, and the light are not the same.

If your story is set in one place, but it is financially necessary to shoot in Canada or another lower-cost area, be as specific as you can:
• Utilize confined areas—the wider the shot, the more that is revealed. Control your design illusion by limiting the scope of each shot. The wider the shot, the harder it is to create the intended illusion of time and place transformation.

• Interiors are easier to manage and to match with architectural style.

• Limit exteriors or plan to shoot exteriors in the area where the film takes place.

• When working on location the production designer must modify what exists there to create the intended look for the film. Often the designer must cover up something that would betray the period in the transformation of the location. Television antennas can be removed or blocked from the camera’s view by trees. Overhead power and telephone lines can be avoided by the composition or covered by billboards. Signs created by the scenic artists can effectively disguise the existing area. Roads can be created with gravel, tanbark, and peat.

Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) art directed by William Sardell remains one of the most surprising examples of a New York film shot mainly on locations in Los Angeles. After a long struggle to get *Mean Streets* made, Scorsese was compelled to build the set for Tony’s Bar in Hollywood. The apartment Charlie (played by Harvey Keitel) lived in was shot in an office building on Hollywood Boulevard. And yet, the film has been acclaimed for its realism and specificity to New York City’s Little Italy neighborhood. The churchyard of the old St. Patrick’s Cathedral was shot on location in the Big Apple, and the exterior of the bar was found off Broome Street, but the climax of the film set on New York roadways and the ending on the streets of Little Italy were shot in Los Angeles. As different as those thoroughfares may be, especially the back streets where the protagonist’s car crashes, careful location selection and camera placement succeeds in convincing the audience the entire film was shot on location in New York. There are many such neighborhoods across the country, and although there are similarities—restaurants, specialty food shops, and social clubs—none are as distinctive or well known as the home of the feast of San Gennaro. The feast was shot at the real event but the careful matching and selection of the Bronx locations stand up to the specific geography of the original.

**Matching a Location and Studio Work**

If you are using the exterior of one location to represent the interior of another, the architectural structures must match. If trees, buildings, or any architectural elements are established in the exterior view of a location that would be visible in the interior, they must be recreated either on a backing in a miniature, or setting outside the window of the studio set, or the interior location to be used.

If the exterior of a building doesn’t match the interior, the shot should be positioned carefully during post-production either from the best angle to link them architecturally or by cutting to another shot before making reference to their relationship to each other. A direct cut of a badly matched exterior and interior may destroy the reality you are trying so hard to achieve.
Often a scene will require a combination of location and studio work to create a consistent production design. A spectacular and impressive example is the classic scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959), production designed by Robert Boyle, when a crop-dusting airplane menaces Cary Grant. The sequence required a totally flat landscape so Grant would have no place to hide. After scouting South Dakota and Kansas, Boyle remembered the Tulare Lake Basin in the San Joaquin Valley where he was raised. There were no cornfields there, but one was needed as a place where Grant could hide from his overhead attacker. The art department planted corn there in time for the location shoot. The shots depicting the explosion of a tanker truck and Grant being peppered with bullets from the plane were special effect scenes that needed to be photographed in the studio using rear-screen projection. Boyle had to recreate specific sections of the exterior location on sets in the studio that perfectly matched the location. Availability of the location or the nature of the action may demand studio and location work be combined. Recreating and matching design elements are an essential skill of the art department.

### Putting It All Together

Finding all of the locations that fit together to form the design world of the film is a major challenge for the production designer. Contemporary filmmakers often don’t have the luxury of building everything in the studio, so they must search for each individual element that, when seen in the continuity of the film, totally creates a consistent environment for the characters and story, while serving the director’s vision of the project.

How have production designers accomplished this feat on the movies we see and believe in, as the world in which the film exists and evolves before our eyes? Here is a range of examples:

*After Hours* (1985)—director Martin Scorsese, production designer Jeffrey Townsend. Contemporary New York at night, a Kafkaesque comedy. This film was shot on the quick and on the cheap, on location in New York. In addition to shooting at the Moondance Diner on Sixth Avenue, the production used the Emerald Pub on Spring Street for the bar tended by John Heard. The large and threatening iron gate in front of Griffin Dunne’s workplace was found at the Metropolitan Tower on Madison Avenue.

*The Age of Innocence* (1993)—director Martin Scorsese, production designer Dante Ferretti. A series of locations were utilized to recreate upper class New York in the 1870s. The opera house that opens the film is the Philadelphia Academy of Music. The Beauforts’ luxurious home was shot at the National Arts Club in the Gramercy Park section of New York. Long Island’s Old Westbury Gardens were selected as well as numerous locations in Troy, New York. River Street in an upstate town on the Hudson River was the setting for turn of the century Wall Street. Mrs. Mingott’s salon, which in the film is not far from Central Park, was shot at the Phi Kappa Phi fraternity house at Troy’s Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and the home of Newland Archer’s parents was the Federal Gale House, a residence hall of Russell Sage
College. The scene where Archer and May Welland walk through a white aviary was photographed at the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory of the Bronx Botanical Garden.

*Annie Hall* (1977)—director Woody Allen, production designer Mel Bourne. Throughout his long career Woody Allen’s films have explored his beloved isle of Manhattan. Three movie theaters that represent the City’s intellectual film community are used as locations: the Beekman, the New Yorker, and the legendary repertory house, the Thalia. Brooklyn’s famed Coney Island amusement park is featured in a flashback. Annie’s apartment was on the Upper East Side. Other locations include the Hamptons, the Wall Street Tennis Club, and Central Park.

*As Good As It Gets* (1997)—director James L. Brooks, production designer Bill Brzeski. The apartments of the Jack Nicholson and Greg Kinear characters were scouted on 12th Street in New York’s West Village, Helen Hunt’s place near Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The New York City restaurant where she worked was constructed on the ground floor of the Barclay Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

*Basic Instinct* (1991)—director Paul Verhoeven, production designer Terence Marsh. Shot on location in San Francisco, this sexy thriller goes to Montgomery Street for Michael Douglas’ apartment and to the Tosca Café on Columbus Avenue. Sharon Stone’s notorious leg-crossing interrogation scene was shot on a set at Warner Bros. studio in Hollywood. The Stentson Bar is a lesbian country-and-western bar south of Market Street in ‘Frisco. The chase sequence was shot on hilly Kearney Street and Stone’s sex-trap digs were located south of San Francisco at a beachfront estate in Carmel Highlands. The conclusion of the film, when the Jean Tripplehorn character is shot, was photographed on Broadway in Oakland, California.

*Blood Simple* (1984)—director Joel Coen, production designer Jane Musky. This audacious first film by the Coen Brothers was shot on location in Texas. The quirky neo-noir took place at Mount Bonnell Park above Lake Austin where M. Emmet Walsh gets his instructions to murder John Getz. The illicit affair takes place at the Heart of Texas Motel. The body is buried on Farm Road, South of Hutto, which is northeast of Austin. Walsh burns the X-rated photos of the lovers at the Old Grove Drug Building on Sixth Street in Austin and the gory climax was shot in an apartment building above a restaurant on the same block, with the location serving as the place Frances McDormand moves into.

*Blow Out* (1981)—director Brian De Palma, production designer Paul Sylbert. The company went to Philadelphia to shoot this audio takeoff of Michaelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* that had also been the inspiration for Coppola’s *The Conversation*, a film that first translated the photos to sound. Here, John Travolta is a soundman for a “cheapo” exploitation film when he actually records a murder in progress. The director’s hometown of Philadelphia was the base of operations, with the car accident sequence taking place on the Wissahickon Bridge. Travolta meets Nancy Allen (Mrs. De Palma at the time) at the 30th Street Station. Travolta jeeps through the central plaza of the Philadelphia City Hall in Penn Square and crashes into the window at the famed Wanamaker’s Department Store on Market and 13th.

*Clerks* (1994)—director Kevin Smith. This black-and-white first feature film was made for only $27,000 in Kevin Smith’s home state of New Jersey. When working on a no-budget film (after lab costs and purchasing stock, how much could be left
A filmmaker must use creative thinking to get the film done. Smith shot at Quick Stop Groceries in Leonardo, New Jersey. RST Video was next door, just as the video store is in the film. The scene at the undertakers was shot at Postens Funeral Home in Atlantic Highlands.

*Dazed and Confused* (1993)—director Richard Linklater, production designer John Frick. Linklater shot in his hometown of Austin, Texas. The majority of the film was shot at the Bedickek Middle School. The burger joint was the Top Notch Restaurant, and the al fresco party was done at West Enfield Park.

*Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985)—director Susan Seidelman, production designer Santo LoQuasto. This post-modern classic was shot in New York and New Jersey. When the Madonna character arrives in New York she is in the Big Apple's Port Authority Bus Terminal. Rosanna Arquette gets her hair done at the Nubest & Co Salon on Northern Boulevard in Manhasset. The East Village was the location for a shopping sequence featuring St. Marks Place and a second-hand store, Love Saves the Day, on Second Avenue at East 7th Street. The Aidan Quinn character works as a projectionist at the Bleecker Street Cinema. The production shot at New Jersey locations in Tenafly, Edgewater, and Lakehurst, as well as Roslyn Heights in Nassau County, Long Island.

*Dirty Dancing* (1987)—director Emile Ardolino, production designer David Chapman. This popular low-budget film is set in New York’s Catskill Mountains in the early 1960s. The look does capture the spirit of the 1960s, but the music and the moves are from the 1980s. *Dirty Dancing* was shot in “the mountains” but they were the Appalachian mountains rather than the Catskills. The resort was neither Grossinger’s nor Browns but Mountain Lake Hotel in Mountain Lake, Roanoke, Virginia. The relocation fooled even those who spent their youth in the upstate New York playground where all comedians worth their salt cut their eyeteeth before anyone ever heard of a comedy club.

*The French Connection* (1971)—director William Friedkin, art director Ben Kazakow. As a study in contrasts, this gritty New York movie starts on the streets of Marseilles, France then cuts to Popeye Doyle getting drunk at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge on the Lower East Side. A suspect is tailed on the Triborough Bridge and staked out at Ratner’s Restaurant on Delancey Street. Frog One is found at the Roosevelt Hotel on Madison Avenue, shops at Ronaldo Maia Flowers, and loses his tracker at the Grand Central subway stop. The bad guys meet in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Popeye lives at the Marlboro Housing Project on Stillwell Avenue in Brooklyn. The landmark chase sequence begins at the Bay 50th Street station and, during the five week shoot under the Bensonhurst elevated railway, goes down the Stillwell line to 86th Street to New Ulrecht Avenue, violently concluding at the 62nd Street station. The Doral Park Avenue Hotel on Park Avenue is where Devereaux the French celeb stays and the drug deal and shootout goes down on Wards Island.
Tips for Working on Location

• Scout and research each location carefully. Make sure the requirements and support needed for the productions are available and can be either supplied or brought in.
• Familiarize yourself with as many regions as you can for their potential as locales. The well-informed traveler has a good understanding of the vistas that can be captured by the camera and put to narrative use to filmmakers.
• Plan to make the cast and crew as comfortable and focused as possible when working on location.
• Do community outreach before, during and after location work.
• Be prepared for weather conditions a location may present.
• When in Rome. . . . Don’t behave as an outsider when on location. Show appreciation for your welcome.
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On a big-budget studio production, monies are available to support the art department. The production designer has the staff, facilities, equipment, and budget necessary to carry out their plans. Money can always help greatly to solve problems. Low-budget films have limited financial resources. Some low-low-budget independent films proceed without a production design, or members of the art department convince themselves that the film can be shot on real locations without a production designer to oversee the realization of the vision of the film.

However, in order for a filmmaker to fully realize the vision and objectives for a project, the design of a film must be addressed. Even a low-budget film can have an effective production design by understanding the purpose and responsibilities of the craft. Cost-cutting approaches are necessary. Consider the following:

Consolidate jobs. On a large scale, well-financed production filmmakers can afford a large art department where each member has a specific job. This is not always realistic on low-budget films where the filmmaker may not have access to all the crew specialists, so plan B has to go into effect. The art department can be scaled back. Each person working with the production designer can wear several hats. It is the process of production design that’s important, not how many people work on the crew. The set decorator can also do props. The property master could paint the sets during pre-production. Regardless how small the crew is, use the most capable person for each task.

On a low-budget film, the production designer can be responsible for the work of many, doing the labor of the key art department positions. Production assistants with limited experience and on-the-job training can support the designer. On a big production, the designer designs and then supervises, but on a low-budget he will also have to physically do as many of the tasks himself—help to construct the set, do some scenic painting, whatever is necessary. Production designers should also have persuasive personalities, to draw others in. Teaching skills are helpful to train production assistants and others to work in the art department.
Get local art students involved in the production design of your film. Many of the skills needed for the art department are similar to those possessed by illustrators, graphic artists, fine artists, sculptors, architects, and by those from other artistic endeavors and training. With a little training and supervision from the production designer or art director these other artists can be very effective.

Get local art professionals involved. Many architects, graphic designers, artists, commercial painters, fine artists, carpenters, and others in related fields have a passion for filmmaking. With leadership and some training they can be effective on a low-budget film.

Get as many services, locations, and supplies as you can for free or at a discount. Assign a producer or team member to network, negotiate, and involve companies, individuals, and community groups in the production design of your film. This will support a small-staffed art department and keep the line budget items down.

Budget for the production design. The areas that often get neglected by independent and student filmmakers are production design, post-production, and especially sound design—which is the aural counterpart of art direction. The budget should reflect the needs of each department within realistic expectations. The budget should be created in consultation with the production designer. Each item should be listed and its cost estimated, with miscellaneous backup funds figured in if estimates are under-funded.

Keep the production design realistic as to what money and resources are available for the art department. The production designer must be fiscally responsible to the budget. Find the best deals in paint, hardware, lumber, tools, and art supplies. Research vendors, explore the conglomerate chains such as Home Depot and Staples, as well as independent vendors.

**Keeping the Production Design Budget Down**

When working with a low budget to produce a film, there are ways of keeping the production design budget down, in addition to those previously discussed, without limiting the artistic and creative choices that will visually enhance and interpret the story.

Put all of the money spent on the production design on the screen. Avoid excess and waste. Building a set and then scraping it for another idea, or shooting at a location and then not using the footage because of coverage or editing or coverage problems, are just some of the mistakes filmmakers make that are wasteful of the budget. Building more than you need or spending time and money on décor details that won’t been seen on camera are all traps that can be avoided by careful planning and wise allocation of the production design budget.

Make full use of studio space. Select the venue carefully—don’t pay for space you are not going to use. Camera-test all materials to be used for the design. Don’t employ expensive materials in areas where the camera won’t directly see them.

Don’t design and build what the camera won’t see or is outside of the director’s visualization of the film. Put the majority of the budget into the major sets. Don’t squander money and effort on minor sets. Design sets to scale when possible, to reduce costs.
If available, use a stock or standby set from another production or studio that can be altered inexpensively to create the design plan for your film. Borrow, rent, or lease pre-built, used flats.

On a low-budget movie the filmmaker is always looking to cut costs. The art department is under constant scrutiny to keep spending at a bare minimum. Construction materials are expensive, but there are ways to save money. Recycled materials cost less and are just as effective in many cases. Corrugated cardboard and packaging materials can be utilized for covering or siding flats, when painted and treated appropriately. On a low-budget movie the designer can take full advantage of a cyclorama and minimize the building of scenic pieces. Put all of the design elements to good use. Create multipurpose units that can function in more than one scene or set. Use the same basic architecture, walls, doors, and windows for more than one set by repositioning walls, adding, or removing furniture and décor, and utilizing reversible window treatments.

The most effective way to keep the art department budget to a minimum is to concentrate on only what is within the camera frame.

- Be selective—imply, don’t overstate, the settings
- A creative use of perspective and scale can give the illusion of size and space

Forced perspective is a useful technique to imply more with less. Hallways and room extensions can be painted or photographed and put on a backing placed strategically to give the illusion the set is more architecturally complex than it really is.

Veteran Hollywood art directors often used the forced perspective in their work. Robert Boyle gives two examples of the technique in use: “You’re achieving a large space in a limited space. You bring the background up, and you force everything smaller. For the circus caravan scene in Saboteur (Alfred Hitchcock, 1942), we not only used midgets in the background, we went beyond that. We had cutout figures where the arms move, and we had little lights on the arms. They were supposed to be policemen with flashlights way in the background. It was at night, and you could do things like that. Those were standard ways of working in those days. The long hotel corridor for the Plaza Hotel in New York for North By Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), was a painted backing of the extension of the corridor we built, and the actors came around in front of the painted backing and over to the room. That’s forced perspective in a scenic painting. Then we took the same backing and used that for the reverse angle shot.”

Remember, low-budget filmmaking does not have to signify amateur and shoddily mounted productions. For decades, many Hollywood films overspent and lavished resources that were not necessary. Money squandered does not enhance or support the look of a film. Money spent for amenities not directly translated to the screen are wasted. Low-budget independent filmmaking is a philosophy and can be more effective, practically and artistically, than mega-budget, bloated productions, which don’t serve visual storytelling in relation to the project. Plan and think before you spend. Question all decisions and search for alternate methods and materials that will bring the same results for less output of cash resources.
John Cassavetes, the patron saint of low-budget, independent filmmaking, had a radical attitude toward all Hollywood production conventions, including those in production design. The home he shared with his wife, actress Gena Rowlands, and their family was often used as a location to make their movies. No storyboards or illustrations were drawn. The art department on a John Cassavetes film worked with what they had, and it always fit the search for the truth of the moment in the soul of his characters that the directors obsessed over. The locations were real. The art department arranged, took away, and added, but Cassavetes had a gut for detecting artifice and overmanipulation.

“Money has nothing to do with film. In the end it kills you from being creative and from inventing, finding a way to do it,” Cassavetes philosophized in the documentary *I’m Almost Not Crazy*. “It makes you think, it makes the crew think. You say, ‘We’re in this room, how do we make this a palace?’ So some fool like me says, ‘We either make the picture or we don’t. If we are going to make it, let’s make this room a palace or let’s not make it a palace. Look how easy this changes, it’s a room.’ And you make that adjustment but the emotions stay the same. So the emotions guide you, the sense of humor guides you, saying ‘The hell with life’ guides you.”

Low-budget filmmakers must be inventive and use art direction ideas, principles and techniques from every kind of movie from Hollywood blockbusters to no-budget indies. Production design is adjustable to the needs and resources at hand to the filmmaker. Keep your mind open, the integrity of the film forefront, and be bold.