

The Production Designer

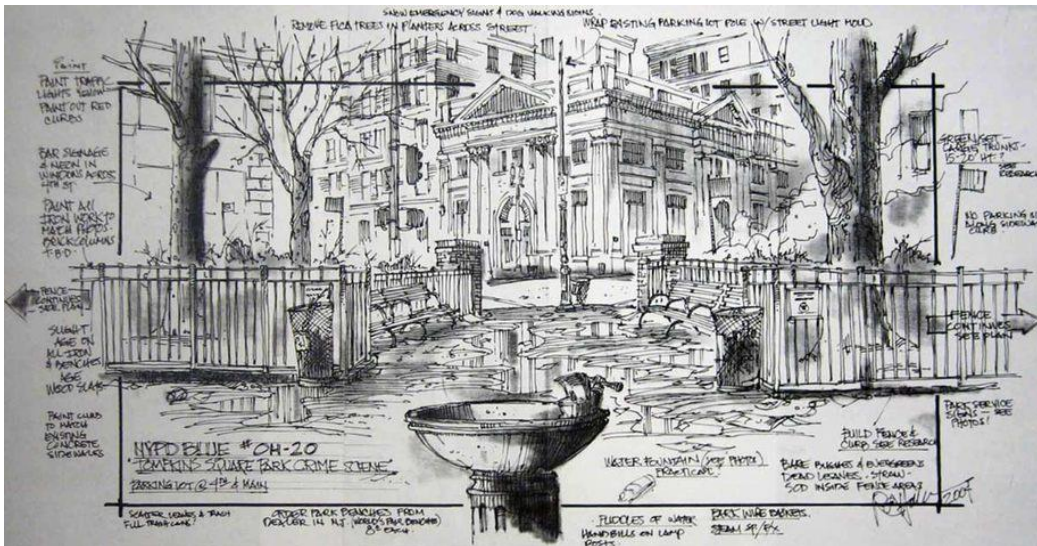
SECTION ONE

What Does a Production Designer Do?

Production designers may not be as well-known outside the film industry as directors, writers, and producers, but aspiring filmmakers learn very quickly that movies can never go from idea to the big screen without a talented production designer. So, What exactly does a production designer *do*?

There On Day One

As the *head of the art department*, the production designer is in charge of making sure each

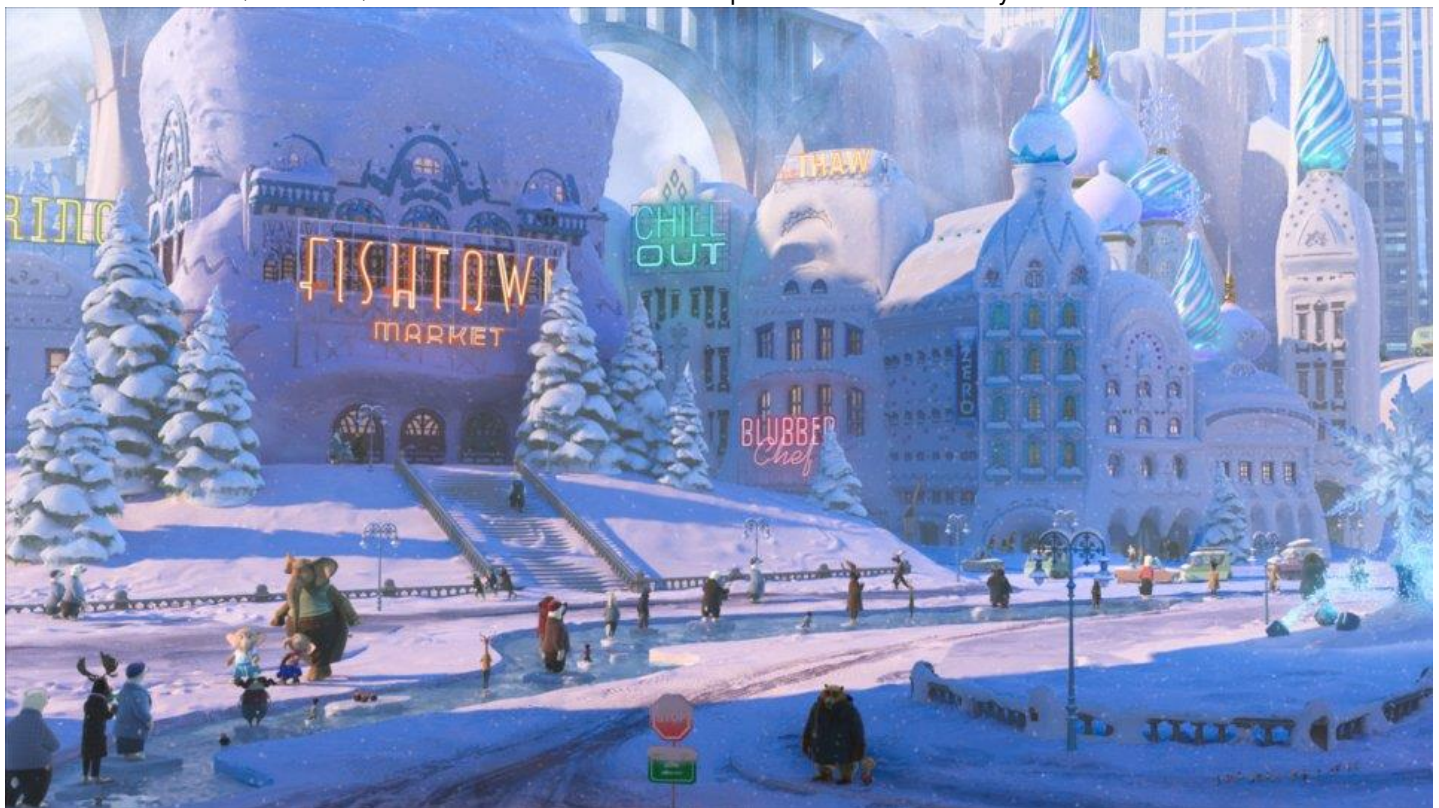


shooting location is perfect, prepared, and on point with the vision of the film. Film is a language of *visual* storytelling, and so the visuals captured by the camera matter immensely. Your locations, sets, costumes, lights, etc. all work together to create a world on screen, and this

world is a crucial part of telling your film's story. Having an incredible script and cast of actors onboard won't be enough if what the audience will be looking at doesn't tell a cohesive story. This is why the production designer's job starts during pre-production alongside the director and producer of the project. The production designer takes the writer's work, the director's vision, and the producer's plan, and synthesizes it into a visual story.



Together, the pre-production team formulate ideas and plan for the visual context that will be used to [tell a captivating story](#). This includes deciding on colors, themes, compositions, and other visual elements that work best to evoke the emotions, themes, and actions of each scene and the project as a whole. With their strong knowledge of art and design, including color theory, lighting, and more, the production designer will have a significant influence on the final look of the movie — and, indeed, on how the audience experiences the story.



Doing the Homework



Once the desired look and feel of the movie has been decided, it is up to the production designer to make it happen. This begins with research. Production designers help identify which [places and assets](#) will be

needed to create the right atmosphere for each scene. Whether it's a sci-fi adventure set in the year 3000 or a story about the conquest of England by Vikings a thousand years ago, the product designer makes sure every detail is considered when crafting a believable set.

Another big responsibility left in the hands of the product designer is the budget. They play a big hand in calculating the cost of materials and resources needed, including any CGI elements



required for the movie. More often than not, the production designer is responsible for helping to steer a production around the common pitfall of a misallocated

budget. Many film projects fail to bring a story to life in an enthralling way simply because money was spent unwisely, leaving certain departments with little to work with. Production designers must keep the whole film and the whole budget in mind at all times.

Making the Story Come Alive



After countless design sketches and discussions with art directors, the art team is finally ready to turn all those drawings and ideas into reality. Since the art department is usually the largest on any film set, the product manager must have good management skills to make sure everything is being made with the same creative vision. This includes working with set designers, illustrators, graphic artists, wardrobe supervisors, set decorators, propmasters, makeup artists, special effects supervisors, [and more](#).

Like any creative project, things don't always go as planned. A product designer is often called upon to come up with quick, effective solutions on set, all while making sure the whole team stays motivated, creative, and productive. The best product designers have enough patience to lead their team amidst script changes or unexpected issues so that each milestone is reached no matter what.

As you can see, product designers hold a position of unique and important responsibility within a film. As a production designer, you'll be expected to be fully present and fully engaged from start

to finish, working long hours every step of the way in order to make sure the movie looks as intended. Without the production designer's organization, creativity, and knowledge, every area of the art department would have trouble staying focused and on the same page. And without a cohesive design, the look of a film may not be strong enough to tell its story.

NOTE: Not all images are in the original. This is a modified version of material sourced here: <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/what-does-a-production-designer-do/>

SECTION TWO

Creating Great Production Design for Film & Video

By [Johnathan Paul](#)

Production design is the key to creating the world in which a film exists.

Production design is a huge component of the filmmaking or video production process. There's a lot that you can convey to your audience through great **production design**. With this in mind,



we're going to rely on the experience and knowledge of [Colin Gibson](#) (*Mad Max: Fury Road*), [Grant Major](#) (*Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*), [Rick Carter](#) (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*), and the legendary [Stuart Craig](#) (*Harry Potter Series*).

What Is Production Design?

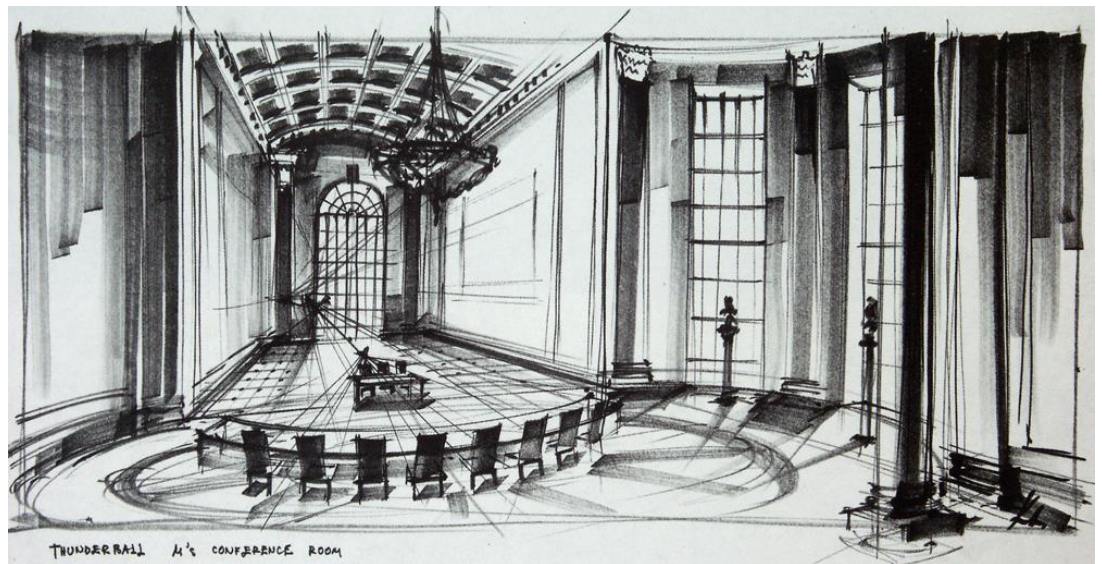
Production design is the process of developing and creating the “look” of a film or video environment. This includes creating the initial concepts, building sets, fabricating costumes, developing makeup effects, and working with the **VFX** [visual effects] team. In the end, all of



these sections come together to present the audience with visual information that establishes a sense of place and conveys an emotional response through the background elements, costumes, and props.

Who Runs the Design Team?

At the head of production design is the **production designer** or PD. The PD will work closely with the director and cinematographer to set the overall look of



the film and to bring the director's vision to life. They also oversee all aspects of the production



design from concept to construction. However, they do not do this alone; there are several key crew members that work alongside the PD.

Production Design Team:

- [Art Director](#) (AD): works

- directly with the PD and oversees the draftsmen, storyboards, artists, and set decorators.
- [Production Illustrator or Concept Artist](#): creates the initial sketches and designs alongside the PD and AD.
- [VFX Coordinator or Supervisor](#): works with the PD to ensure CGI elements match the look of the practical set.
- [Set Decorator](#): develops the look of the set through research and obtains items to fill the set.
- [Set Dresser](#): arranges the items from the set decorator and ensures continuity between scenes.
- [Costume Designer](#): works with the AD to develop the look of the characters, pays close attention to period and place.
- [Makeup Artist](#): oversees all makeup aspects of the production, from simple adjustments to special effects makeup.

Why Is Production Design So Important?

As mentioned above, this is **the process of building the physical look of the film**. The set, costuming, and makeup design all need to be reflections of one



another. If one of these aspects is off, then you run the risk of pulling your audience out of the experience.

One worrisome issue that production designers face in today's industry is they must fight to retain control over the look of the film due to the reliance on **CGI** [computer generated imagery] visual effects.

*"You often have to fight for control of the look of the film when you have the production sub-contract out to digital companies these virtual environments."
— Grant Major*



In an [interview with Deadline](#), production designer Colin Gibson stated that PDs need to push for practical sets and effects. He mentions that audiences today are far more impressed when a set is practical and crafted by an amazing **production design team**, which was the approach he took when designing *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

"You still need to get the hair up on the back of people's necks. You still need real physics." — Colin Gibson

Of course, there's no stopping the advance of digital filmmaking. While some production designers see this as a possible issue, PD [Rick Carter sees it as a natural progression](#) toward a new era of hybrid filmmaking. These are the principles he employed when designing practical and digital elements for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

"There's something that's going on with the computer and with hybrid moviemaking... Just a lot that's physical and a lot that's digital, and it's all part of the new vernacular." — Rick Carter

So, as you can see from the words of these Oscar-winning designers, production design is absolutely crucial to a film or video's success. Let's look at the collaborative process of designing a film or video.

Production Design: The Three-Part Process

1. Concept

Each production design begins with the production designer reading the **script** to determine the



initial visual style. Once this is done, meetings with the director and cinematographer take place to solidify the design. To make this happen, concept illustrations and mock-ups are researched, produced, and sent to the director and producer for approvals. These concepts and mock-up designs cover set architecture, costumes, props, VFX design, and makeup.

2. Planning

Once the designs are approved, the PD's team moves into the planning stage. Additional research on build locations for the sets takes place. Blueprints for set construction are drafted. Also, budgets and property lists are developed to ensure that this portion of production doesn't run beyond the funding allowed.

3. Fabrication

Once designs are approved and plans are finalized, the actual fabrication of the design begins. Construction crews come in and actually build the set if needed. Also, the **set decorator**, **dresser**, **costume designer**, and **makeup artist** begin the process of developing their individual parts of the production design. When this portion is done, the director, cast, and crew begin film production.

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