

# A Sense of Place: The Job of the Location Manager

by [Matt Mulcahey](#)

Like many departments on a **film set**, the locations department has duties that are a mixture of artistic and practical, a blend of orchestrating creative epiphanies and managing tedious logistics. Location managers might jaunt off to explore tropical beaches or spend the day sharing their favorite secret enclave of New York with an esteemed director, but they also might toil for weeks



figuring out where the crew will park, eat and go to the bathroom. And if you've ever worked on a low-budget movie without the cash for a fancy *honeywagon* [truck that collects human waste], you know that invariably involves a

plunger.

"There's nothing more exciting for me than getting on a plane and going to find **locations** in a place I don't know. It's like being a paid tourist. That's part of the creative side of the job," says Brian M. O'Neill, a Los Angeles-based location manager whose credits include *The Disaster Artist*. "But then there's also the monotony of 'Where does the trash go? Where does everyone park?' Believe me, no one has ever parked close enough to make them happy."

The job of a **location manager** has two main phases, beginning with searching for the places where the movie will unfold. Scouting begins early in **preproduction**, sometimes months before cameras roll. Though scouting often continues during **principal photography**, once the crew is assembled on set, the location manager also becomes the guardian of a teetering Jenga tower of logistics.





"You've got to see problems and fix them before they even happen," says John Latenser, an Atlanta-based location manager who frequently collaborates with Jason Reitman and Alexander Payne and recently worked on *Black Panther*. "You don't really hear much on set about locations when you have a good location manager. It's only when something is

overlooked or there's a screw-up that you hear about the locations department."

Location managers are among the first people on a project to offer their interpretation of a script. They are often hired before the **production designer** and occasionally even before the director. When O'Neill gets a new **script**, he tries to do his first **read-through** without focusing on the

potential logistical nightmares. "I try to not even take notes the first time I read a script. I just try to focus on how the material makes me feel," he says. "That can be hard to do because my brain immediately wants to be like, 'Rush hour on the 10 freeway in Los Angeles and it's 1974? Jesus, how am I going to do that?' But I try to save that for later."

Inevitably, the job of the location manager does indeed become







"Jesus, how am I going to do that?" "There are always ten ways to dice the apple, so you have to figure out how much time you have, how much money you have, and what's most important," says O'Neill. "The first thing to figure out is where in the world you're going to shoot. In the current economy of filmmaking, that means 'What **tax incentive** are we going to try to chase?' It means, 'Can we make Atlanta look like Puerto

Rico?" For Latenser, the scouting phase of the job is where the creative fulfillment arrives. "That's the best part of location managing, when you're out **scouting** and helping shape the film," says Latenser.

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When searching for the perfect spot, the location manager must account for the conflicting needs of different departments. A location might have a window that lets in the perfect amount of glowing magic hour light at dusk, but it's next to a screeching scrap yard: perfect for camera, not so much for sound. Ultimately, it's the director along with the **producers** who make the final call, and location managers often go to extreme measures to



give them what they want. For New York-based Kip Myers, that meant matching a location to the childhood memories of Martin Scorsese for a scene in Netflix's upcoming *The Irishman*. Based on





a memoir of the hitman who claims to have taken out Jimmy Hoffa, *The Irishman* features a recreation of a mob hit that took place at Umberto's Clam House on Mulberry Street in 1972.

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Sometimes a location manager must find the ideal spot — even if the



director doesn't quite know what he or she is looking for. "I was working on a Michael Bay film, and Michael said he wanted a location that had to be black," recalls Balton. "So I'm looking for months and finally I see something that's the direct opposite — it's white — but I just had a feeling. So, I showed it to him and he says, 'This is exactly what I was asking for. Why did it

take you so long?"

Once locations are chosen, the location manager must convince property owners to let production disrupt their businesses and their lives with armies of trailers and hordes of crew members. "Scouting is the creative side of the job, but then you've got to get the [location owners] to let you do what you want — to turn this street back to 1983, to close that bridge, to have this explosion in the middle of this intersection," says O'Neill. "We are basically the liaison between our fictitious world and the real world." "A lot of the job is knowing how to talk to

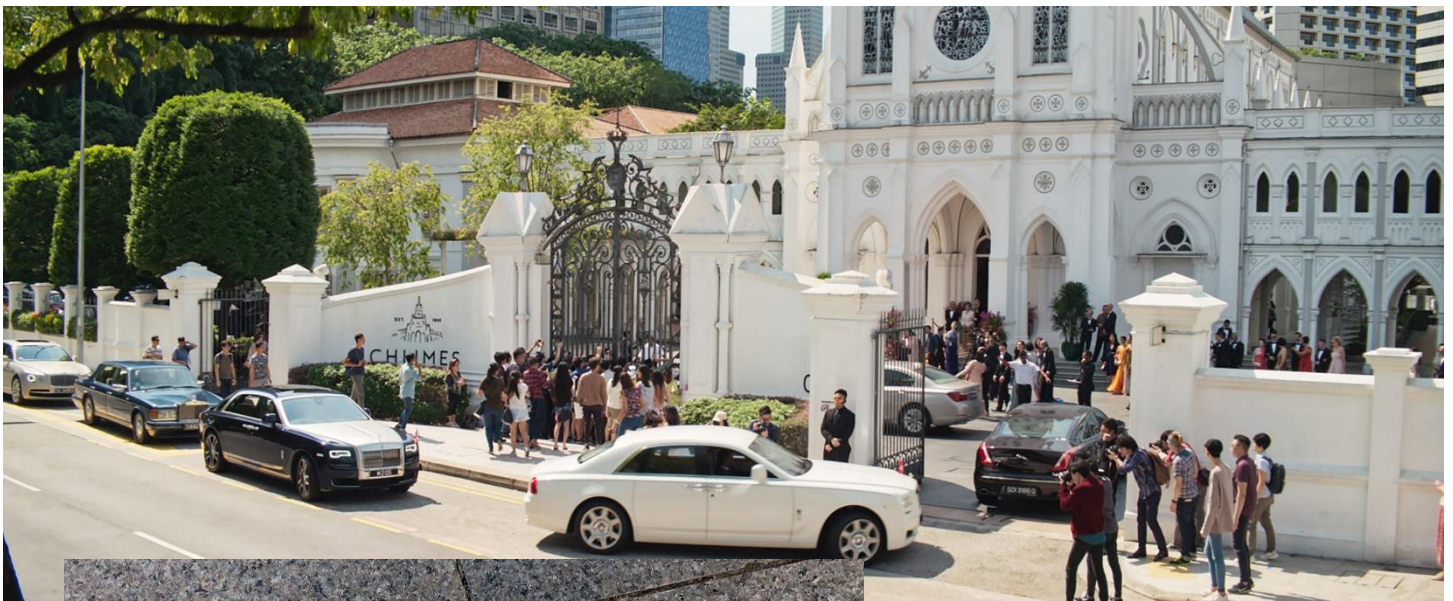




people," Latenser agrees. "Alexander Payne calls his locations department his 'diplomatic corps.' There are many different approaches, and you just have to feel out each person and figure out what's going to persuade them."

Persuading locations to share their hospitality can be a difficult ask in the cramped confines of New York City, where Myers's unusual

requests have included bringing 10 camels onto Fifth Avenue for *The Dictator*. On any given day, Myers might hire up to 15 or 20 parking production assistants just to place permit signs and cones



to "hold" parking 24 hours in advance of the arrival of production trucks and campers. "We arrive early in the morning and stay late at night with our trucks and equipment in residential neighborhoods that aren't used to having an additional 100 people hanging out. I am constantly reminding our crew that we are guests," says Myers. "This isn't just a



New York issue, but it's heightened because we are working in such a heavily populated, congested urban area."

With the proliferation of tax incentives pushing production into nontraditional regions, location managers are now frequently dispatched to locales where folks are all too happy to be involved in the making of a "major motion picture." But that initial excitement can be tenuous. "When you go to a place that's new to film production, you get welcomed with open arms. The circus has



come to town and everyone wants to be a part of it," O'Neill says. "If treated properly, they're happy to welcome you back. But ultimately, if you stay in one place too long, the welcome sometimes wears out."

Having money to

throw around can certainly extend that welcome. Big-budget movies can solve problems by throwing cash at them in a way that indie films can't. That's a lesson that Latenser learned during his days working in Washington, D.C., where flashing a few bucks to grease the wheels is a time-honored city tradition. Latenser offers up an anecdote from *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* to illustrate the point: "The Library of Congress is generally considered off-limits for filming. Almost everything that's within the jurisdiction of the capitol police is off-limits to filming. However, if you have \$50,000 to start with, they'll consider allowing you to film there. Some places like that are just totally inaccessible to a small film, but the big movies can make it happen with their money."







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Working in locations can mean scouting in a seaplane next to Alexander Payne, like Lori Balton did for *Downsizing*, or it can mean rubbing elbows with prime ministers, which O'Neill has done. But the day-to-day grind of the locations department can be far from glamorous.

That's particularly true for the locations assistants working their way up through the department. They are the ones picking up the trash, dealing with the angry residents who want to know why there's an orange traffic cone in their favorite parking spot and wielding the plungers. The hours can be brutal: Locations assistants are among the first to arrive each day as they post signs to direct the crew to parking and set, and among the last to leave as they pick up the trash left behind.

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