film + design
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Interior Design Studio 3/5. Semester 1, 1999

Introduction

The design of scenography, staging, lighting and objects for representation and presentation within the film genre forms one of the most seductive areas in the practice of interior design.

The merging of space and movement within this medium provide context and site for the visual translation of narrative, engagement of image and spectacle and discourse surrounding the iconography and imagery of history, culture and society.

This studio, delivered to second and third year interior design students at the University of South Australia, delved into the multi-disciplinary practice of the film process. It introduced students to the various roles and responsibilities of the designer working within the medium of film. It attempted to meld the theoretical and practical through a series of design projects which analysed and developed design proposals while challenging traditional realms of interior design practice.

Four specific theory lectures were developed to provide a theoretical reference for the project work. These were structured to explore notions of montage, place, and fragmentation through representation and imagery. To augment these lectures and translate existing skills into the conventions of film design practice, practical workshops exploring the techniques of script breakdown, drafting, lighting and packaging formed an integral part of the lecture series.

To develop critical analysis and observation of existing practices, students were asked to watch a minimum of ten films — either from the supplied listing or as proposed. They were asked to comment both in visual and text form, on the various devices used to visualize the narrative in each film.

To do so, they identified the broad themes of the film and documented design methods used to represent these themes — form, lighting, spatial sequencing, etc.. Gaining an understanding of a body of film works allowed students to engage in both theoretical and practical approaches to the design process in a reflective and responsive way.

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IDEA

The studio

The studio was based on the notion that architectural form relates to the form of film as one text to another; both film and architecture being composed of patterns, fragments, structure and language organized in space and time.

Initially, the discussions of this textual form were underpinned by an historic reading of the representation of urban experience as expressed through the film genre. Students were introduced to ideas of the cinema as a product of urban modernity and also a producer of urban culture and civilization, the city as subject of film genre, revealing psychological and social situations for the production of architectural and design theory and history.

Early film produced records of the city rather than interpretations of text as technical problems and location prevailed over language and aesthetic codes. Walter Benjamin's 'flâneur' wandering through busy streets, selectively reproduced various views of different subjects and urban motifs.

German film depicts the urban experience — or the metropolis — as 'over-civilization of mass society'. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* switches from apocalyptic illusions of the city losing itself (the underground city), to a metaphorical 'new age' civilization. The threat of the destruction of the underground, bringing with it apocalyptic effects to the metropolis, acts as a catalyst for a 'new age civilization'. The German expressionists, with their medieval nightmares set in an urban metropolis, brought together the complex imagery and superstition of an older time with the fragmented and unresolved condition of modern urbanity.

Idealism and prosperity were replaced with regression, aggression and pandemonium — issues of decay, nervousness and angst. *Dr. Caligari*, with its bizarre and distorted screen architecture, became the text for the new metropolis: demonic, haunted, decayed, pessimistic, reflecting the cultural transitions experienced in contemporary urban life at that time. Contemporary examples from *Blade Runner* to The *Fifth Element*, exploit both the earlier and later texts of the urban condition. This framework of filmic space as representations of the city was interrogated through three different

left - t. diakomichalis + k. coker. cut, fiilm sets, stage three

narrative versions of the urban experience.

Stage one

The introductory stages concentrated on developing an understanding of visual imagery as it related to the narrative form while fostering process and research for a developing design methodology. Traditional lecture and tutorial sessions were augmented by site visits and workshops aimed at developing specific skills. A selected reader of references specific to the lecture material was supplied.

The first stage introduced students to analysis and critique of text, narrative and theme and their translation into built form. A short piece by J. K. Huysmans was provided in which metaphor, iconography and notions of the city were embedded. Huysmans' character moves away, not only from the city, but from the urban condition, choosing to shut himself up in a snug retreat 'deadening the thunderous din of life's inexorable activity'.
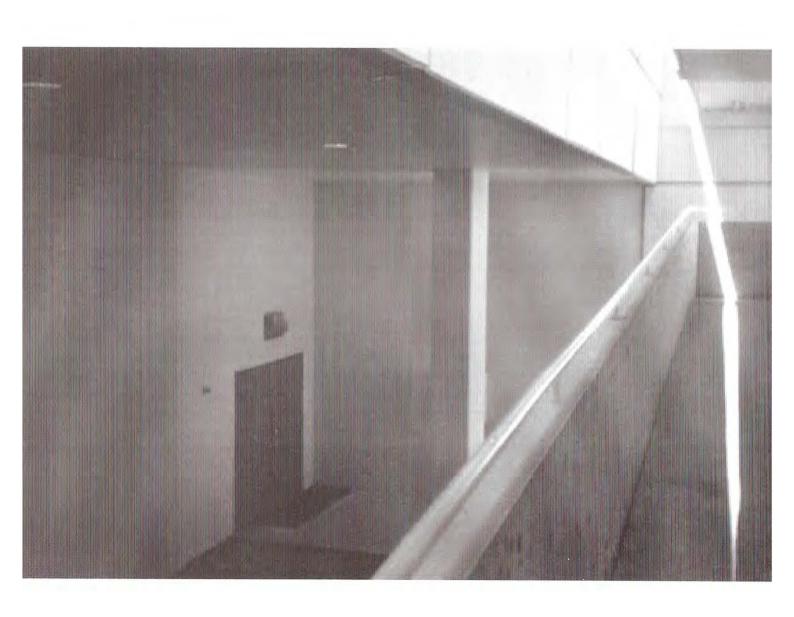
Students were asked to identify the themes of the narrative, and then source and photograph three architectural examples that represented each theme.

To encourage self-directed learning and critical analysis of feedback, presentation sessions were removed from the final submission of staged projects. Students presented completed projects within the specified weeks and then, armed with the written and verbal feedback, were given the option of developing the work in preparation for the submission, usually two weeks later.

This process underlined the overlapping nature of design and strengthened the notion that finalisation of one stage did not necessitate the end of that thought process. The final presentation included verbal and written feedback with work submitted and exhibited for assessment, moderation and review. The studio space was prepared for exhibition and the semesters' work exhibited. Consequently, the final submission became an artefact of a curated process rather than an assignment task to be completed.

t. diakomichalis + k. coker. cut, fiilm sets, stage three – right

Submission

The nine slides were presented with a verbal critique describing how selected sites represented each theme. This presentation included an A4 design folio — visual and text based — which documented the process of critique, observation and representation.

Stage two

Having approached the form of film from a descriptive and essentially interior (both text and images) approach, the second stage drew on ideas of the city as the subject of film genre.

Italo Calvino's 'Smog' was used to reveal both psychological and social conditions of the modern city-state. Calvino was chosen for his structuralist descriptions of the urban state and the manifestation of those conditions within the city itself.

Students were asked to analyze the Calvino piece and identify the narrative themes and from them, the moments of exposition, incitation, complication, climax and resolution within the text.

This method of exploration both mimics and develops the filmic language and visualization of text.

In order to integrate and interrogate the relationship between design and film, students were then asked to map spatial sequences and definitive objects which defined those identified moments.

Submission

This interrogation of narrative was realized in built form through the design and construction of a model of an imaginary streetscape, which physically embodied both the theme, and the iconic moments of the text. The streetscape was the setting for Calvino's narrative.

The model included four photographic images, representing the theme and iconic moment of the narrative. The chosen images were to form an integral part of the communication of the intent of the model.

The findings of the research were presented in an A4 design folio, visual and text based, documenting all references and design development.

left - michelle kewley. isolation, stage one

Final stage

The final stage introduced the professional aspects of production design while consolidating Stage one and two through developing design methodologies, schematic design, documentation, research, construction and presentation.

Students were introduced to a script in current production and, in the week six workshop, were shown conventional film methods for script breakdown. This breakdown formed the basis of a concept brief, proposing an individual design approach to the project.

Using the brief they developed a series of design proposals for interior set design and sourced exterior locations, exploring imagery, spatial/temporal relationships and historic reference within built form. These were presented as complex storyboards describing both built sites and location sites.

In the week nine workshop, students produced a set of technical working drawings for four of the storyboarded sites. Drawings were detailed using conventional construction methods, materials and finishes as they related to set construction.

Forming groups of three, students then chose one set of documents and built 1:10 scale models of the four documented sites. This process mimicked the practice of film design in that students worked collaboratively toward a final built outcome which was not necessarily their own individual project but translated narrative and design effectively.

Working with a lighting technician in the week twelve workshop, students developed an understanding of the methods employed in the representation of built form for a framed and mediated medium.

Working with the script, they mapped out the first twenty scenes visually using photographs from the models, their own drawings and other visual references, eg. location shots.

This comprehensive project was documented in the design report and exhibited as both group and individual works in the week fourteen submission.

karmen corker. streetscape, stage two – right

Submission

The final submission was a comprehensive record of the entire studio exploration:

1. An illustrated/text based folio for the design including theoretical references — a summary of all design intentions and background for the design. This included a summary of all aspects of the design proposal in a report format with a text based description (The folio included the critical analysis of at least ten of the listed films);

2. A concept brief and script breakdown as developed in workshop. The design proposal described in text form, using standard film conventions;

3. Storyboards/drawings and location shots. The design proposal described in two dimensional form, including plans, perspective, details and materials using standard film conventions;

4. Working drawings of four sites. Design development through technical drawings of four of the film sites. Plans, sections, elevations, details, materials and finishes using standard film conventions were included;

5. Model and photos used to communicate the design. The design proposal described in three-dimensional form, including photographs to describe the qualities of the filmic space; and

6. A final presentation package. Information presented in a creative and professional manner.

sam green. streetscape, stage two – right