

TELEVISUAL

TELEVISUAL.COM

WINTER 2025 £20

PRODUCTION DESIGNERS

PRODUCTION

CHARACTER BUILDING

Genre report: How drama is bridging the funding gap

SET FOR ACTION

The art and craft of the production designer

CUTTING IT FINE

Top editors on shaping the perfect narrative

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

Behind the scenes of Apple TV's *Born to Be Wild*

FINISHING TOUCH

Best recent work in UK vfx, post and animation

POINT OF VIEW

The DoPs on *Die My Love*, *Slow Horses* & *Amadeus* shoot from the hip

BUSINESS PARTNERS

Producers turn to brands to boost budget

facilities



50

Our exclusive survey of the UK's top post and vfx houses, now in its 38th year

PRODUCTION DESIGN: SET FOR ACTION

Top Production Designers who have been responsible for building the worlds of films and TV series including *Game of Thrones*, *3 Body Problem*, *A Quiet Place: Day One*, *Avenue 5*, *The Gentlemen*, *Fountain of Youth*, *The Woman in Cabin 10* and *The Essex Serpent* explain how they transform scripts into physical reality. Jon Creamer reports

DEBORAH RILEY

Game of Thrones S4, 5, 6, 7, 8; 3 Body Problem; Demonic; Nothing Left to Fear; Friendship!



The task of the production designer is to create worlds that an audience can believe in. When it works, the audience should accept

the finished set as 'real' within the language of the show. To do this, you have to be a visual sponge and have what one art director termed early in my career as, 'the eye'. You need an adventurous spirit, a deep interest in the socio-politics of different worlds and know how to allocate the available resources: the talent, the time and money. While that is all true, my career in the art department has led me to believe the actual heart of being a production designer should be about much more.

I like to think that the production designer is the cheerleader of the art department. We

have the honour of working with artists who are dedicating their time and giving generously of their talents to support the vision of the show. We have to believe that all boats rise together and that our greatest task is to bring out the best in the team. The production designer needs to create an environment where creativity can thrive.

Returning to a television show year after year taught me the value of loyalty. Without all of the members of the art department also coming back, there is no way we would have been able to manage the ridiculous amount of work in the time available. We were work colleagues who became close friends and without those kind of bonds, we would never have made it through.

Inspiration for the look of a show or a particular set should first come from the script and initial conversations with the director / producer.

Some sets are designed for specific shots and others have to sustain days or even weeks of filming. Sometimes you have to fill in the blanks and come up with logical linkages and make sense of what might be an abstract brief. You have to be able to understand the narrative flow and reflect that visually. It is the research that drives it and the skeleton of any given design. I have always been free-ranging, but it usually comes down to behaviour and environment studies in one way or another. The built environment and how people function within those spaces is endlessly fascinating to me.

More often than not certain images become crucial and those are the ones that we build on. Sometimes it is hard-won, other times the key inspiration is instinctual. One thing that I know for sure is that you can come up with an idea when on a deadline. You just have to trust the process.

Concept artists play a huge role in communicating ideas with not only the directors and producers, but also the art directors and construction team. Being able to build a set on time and on budget is a real skill. Money is tight and very often time is even tighter. The more practice you get, the better you are. Surrounding yourself with talented people is key and you need to feel supported and confident in every part of the process. From the very first concept drawing, all the way through to the art directors, plasterers, painters, set dressers and greens team, you need people in your corner. It comes back to creating an environment where people are encouraged to do their best work where their contribution is valued. By bringing out the best in others, it also brings out the best in yourself.



I usually get involved with a project quite early on. I work almost exclusively for Guy Ritchie these days. I'm sent the script very early, usually before the project is financed. I'll put together an initial budget based on the script, and then we work with the financiers on how to achieve the biggest impact for the money available. Do we build sets? Can we afford a studio? Do we have to shoot in a warehouse that isn't soundproof? Or do we shoot entirely on location because there's no money to build anything? A lot of it is finding a visual strategy that fits both the budget and the time they have.

Many producers are experienced in one area - financing, casting, writing, but very few are across all the disciplines. A production designer with experience can point them in a direction to help them achieve what they really want or need to do.

MARTYN JOHN

Fountain of Youth; The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare; The Gentlemen; The Covenant; Wrath of Man; The Last Kingdom

For example, on the film I'm currently working on (Guy Ritchie's *In the Grey*) we're looking at shooting in Malta for seven days because of a 40% tax rebate. I can "get" three countries in one location. Because I know it well, I can turn Malta into Spain, Venezuela - and Malta. **Every project is different.** I've done a lot of period films and a lot of high-octane action films, so what excites me now is exploring new challenges in each script. On this one, for example, we have to make Venezuela out of Malta. Venezuela is abundant and luxurious; Malta is a dusty rock. So, it becomes about finding Spanish-style architecture, accentuating it and bringing in plants and greenery. I like the trickery of my job - making the impossible look real and tricking the eye. **Once we've got our strategy,** I look at where the money needs to be spent. What do we build, where do we build it? I sketch plans. I

used to be an architect, so I can draw quickly with a knowledge of structure. I look for locations that fit the general vibe of what we're trying to create, and then I hire the right team. Production designers actually don't "do" that much, we administrate the design process. It's about making decisions: "Yes, no, more here, less there, make it green, make it pink." **I have two core teams** I use depending on who's free. I like working with the same people because we understand each other - what I can ask of them, what they can deliver, and knowing when someone is floundering or flourishing. When you have a shorthand, you can say one word, and everyone knows what we're doing. **The design changes constantly throughout the shoot.** Guy rewrites dialogue every morning, so we always need buyers ready to grab whatever he wants. You have to anticipate and react quickly. Once we're dressing a set,

sometimes the items just don't work and we have to pivot - rehire, bring things from home, change direction. Guy often walks on to a set and says, "No, this isn't right," and we redo it overnight. It's nerve-wracking but exhilarating. **The biggest challenge on a project is money.** Materials and crew are expensive. If you have no time, you need more people, which costs more and can cause chaos. Balancing those factors is the biggest challenge. **The most important skill for a production designer** is flexibility. You have to be able to react to constant changes because it does change on a daily basis, sometimes hourly. You need an eye for quality and the organisation to deliver it. But flexibility is the key.



ALICE NORMINGTON

The Woman in Cabin 10; We Live in Time; The Essex Serpent; Great Expectations; Suffragette; White Teeth



Like to get involved as early as possible.

The average prep time is 10-12 weeks. It will depend on the scale of the project.

Ideally, I get some pre

prep to develop ideas with the director and scout locations. This is the most exciting time, developing ideas with more creative freedom and breathing space. It also helps form the foundations of the project - what is on location, what is built, what is affordable. This is a huge help to all departments once full prep starts.

There are many reasons to be attracted to a project. The priority is always the script. Is it a story I want to tell? do I connect with the script, the characters and the world depicted? Is it a visual world that excites me or I haven't portrayed before? Will I be challenged? Do

I connect with the director and does their vision interest me? What other creatives are involved or do I know? Working with HOD's you know, trust and love to work with makes a big difference or having a great actor attached. Then there are more practical reasons. What impact will it have on my personal life, where is it based / filming. Juggling family and career in film is often tricky and can have a big influence on decisions.

I rely heavily on reference to communicate ideas and create mood boards for each set. I set these out in story order so it's very clear what the visual framework and tone is for the whole film. The walls are covered in references so anyone coming into the art dept can get a clear sense of the film we are making and its visual journey.

Research will depend on the project, but I always start with a general sweep to convey tone, atmosphere and mood. It can come

from art, photography, real life, history, nature, architecture ... anywhere that inspires me or fuels my imagination. I rarely look at other films for research unless a director has specifically asked me to. Sometimes in my research, an image presents itself that can be really unexpected and spark an idea or a path to follow. I love the research period and finding new references. A historic script or something based on a real event will need more in-depth historical research. I think it's good to know the "reality" of a world but then you can choose which elements of that reality to use or discard. Some projects need a lot of detailed research for authenticity.

The design starts with reference, conversations and then leads into 3D models and set drawings. I came from theatre and still love a 3D card model. It helps to visualise a space along with computer models. If the budget allows, I can

work with a concept artist which is a luxury. Drawing on to location photos also helps for quick info. I work closely with my set dec to develop a look for each set and character.

You have to adapt to the locations that are viable. Ideally the design will lead and inform what the locations are. Sometimes a location will present itself that is completely different to the brief, but it could be an exciting new way to look at an idea. You need to be flexible, open to ideas and think outside the box at times.

So many skills are important for a production designer. Amongst them... A strong visual sense for storytelling and world building, an ability to see things in your mind's eye, flair for original and creative ideas, curiosity, patience, good communication, good leadership, team player, problem solving, flexibility.



When reading a script, I cannot help researching immediately after finishing it. I find researching so enjoyable whatever the genre, period or setting. I create research files, mood boards, colour and tone layouts. These sometimes change over the development period of the project, but I find are always important to share with the director and other HoDs as they join the project.

I communicate my designs with the director and my team using a wide range of tools. The most basic method is a sketch on the back of the script; these doodles breathe life into a set design. Beyond that, designs can be firmed up using 3D software like Sketchup which I use extensively, building the representation of a set or location, adding colour, props and furniture. This gives my team a clear brief to work on the

A Quiet Place: Day One; Apartment 7A; Avenue 5; Johnny English Strikes Again; Crooked House; The Son; Belle

SIMON BOWLES

construction drawings and the set decorating team a brief for finding suitable items. In 2019 I was an early adopter of Virtual Reality to communicate my set designs. On Avenue 5 we had a huge, beautiful 3-storey atrium with corridors running off to rooms. Using VR, the director Armando Iannucci could walk around the set months before we even started building it. However, even with all this technology I find it still better to build a tabletop model from card with scale plastic people and toy cars sitting within it the best way of communicating with director and DoP. Everyone in the room can see it and understand it immediately and with a pair of scissors and roll of tape in my pocket, it can be adjusted as we stand there together.

I love the set building process, from initial planning to briefing painters creating paint samples, to working with sculptors and decorative metalworkers. Starting out in my

career I worked as a carpenter, scenic artist and prop maker which has given me a solid understanding. I design sets considering the individual skills of the construction team and design to their strengths. Every step of the construction process involves many in my art department working closely with the construction manager and their huge team. The construction drawings are not just handed over to them, the dialogue on texture, colour, patina and ultimately recycling of sets continues daily.

I work very closely with the Visual Effects Department. I start before they come onboard, often part of the process of interviewing and choosing the VFX company to work with. I design all sets with the VFX in mind. I see their work as an extension to the construction department. I often find myself designing sets and buildings then metaphorically tearing the drawing in half, giving the lower storeys to

construction and the upper levels to the VFX coordinator. I always supply as many real samples of textures and paint samples to ensure the physical and digital sets match together. This work does carry on into post-production when I am normally on to another project so ensure I keep my communication going with VFX into this period.

The most important skill for a production designer is listening. Listen to the director about their vision as that is where the heart of the project lies, listen to the producer regarding budget and timescale, listen to your crew when they feel pressure to deliver your design at the quality you are after and listen to the characters in the script as they can tell you so much about the details to help your design.

