

What are the architectural influences in the *Harry Potter* film series' set design and immersive environments?

By Sneha Kanakala

Author Biography

Sneha Kanakala, a 12th-grade student at Trio World Academy in Bengaluru, India, is deeply passionate about liberal arts, engineering, and entrepreneurship. She aspires to explore the intersections between these fields in her future studies, a journey that this research paper is a part of.

Abstract

This research paper delves into the architectural influences on the set design within the *Harry Potter* film series and why it was so successful. This review focuses on three key locations—Hogwarts Castle, Diagon Alley, and the Burrow—studying the use of Gothic Revival, medieval, Victorian, and rustic architectural styles to uncover the film's cultural and historical context. The study emphasizes the importance of thoughtful set design in audience engagement and creating a deeper connection with the fictional world. This case study demonstrates how architecture serves as a framework in set design and ultimately contributes to the massive success and impact of the *Harry Potter* series.

Keywords: Set Design, Gothic-Revival Architecture, Medieval Architecture, Victorian Architecture, Film Production, Cinematic World-Building, Fantasy Films

Introduction

Set design, also known as scenic design, plays a pivotal role in the film industry. It gives life to a director's vision, creating physical environments where the film's action takes place and employing everything from large-scale structures to the minutest details (Deguzman, 2023). This element of filmmaking is crucial for establishing the narrative's mood, style, and authenticity, guiding the audience's visual experience, and supporting the storytelling process. Set design plays a massive role in immersing the audience in the story's setting, period, and themes (Berklee, n.d.). It works hand-in-hand with other elements of the film, like lighting, sound effects, and costumes, to enhance the visual storytelling in a movie.

Architecture provides a framework in set design for creating believable and engaging environments. Using architectural styles and principles, filmmakers can build visually appealing and contextually appropriate settings with a greater sense of realism and depth of the fictional world (Clarke, 2024). Architecture in set design sets the cultural, historical, and geographical context of the narrative, contributing to the overall aesthetic and coherence of the film (Tommasino, 2023).

The *Harry Potter* film series, based on the books by J.K. Rowling, stands as a monumental example of the power of set design in creating immersive environments. Considered a film "classic," this unique and visionary series grossed a whopping \$7.7 billion in just eight movies (Nast, 2011). Apart from the storytelling, the series was successful because of the impeccable set design (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, n.d.). The series, spanning eight films released between 2001 and 2011, is known for its richly detailed and visually phenomenal sets, which bring the magical world of Hogwarts to life. There is a range of architectural style influences, from Gothic

Revival and medieval influences in Hogwarts Castle to Victorian and Edwardian features in Diagon Alley to rustic, whimsical designs in the Burrow (Domusweb.it, 2023).

The intricacy and authenticity of these sets not only captivate the audience but also play a critical role in reinforcing the outlandish elements of the story (Tommasino, 2023). By studying the set design of the *Harry Potter* series, we can more effectively understand the architectural influences that contribute to creating immersive environments in film, specifically the *Harry Potter* series.

Historical and Theoretical Background

Set Design Basics

The setting of a story is the general time and place of it, whereas the set is a specific location in the setting where that scene takes place. Set design, or production design, involves creating physical surroundings where a storyline unfolds (Deguzman, 2023). It is a collaborative process between the director, production designer, and art department to construct sets that convey the story's setting, period, mood, and themes. The production designer is responsible for overseeing the visual concept of the film and ensuring that all elements of the set harmoniously work together to support the narrative (Berklee, n.d.). Set design often works alongside other elements of film to deepen the visual storytelling: lighting, costume design, and sound effects (Admin, 2014). The primary goals of the set design are as follows:

Creating Believable Environments: Sets must be convincing, immersive, and authentic to make the fictional world feel real and natural to the audience. As Barnwell (2023) notes, "the authenticity of a set design can significantly affect the audience's suspension of disbelief and overall engagement with the film."

Enhancing Visual Narrative: The design should be cohesive and reflect the story's themes, character development, and plot progression (Clarke, 2024).

Establishing Mood and Atmosphere: The aesthetic choices in set design aim to evoke specific emotions within the audience and create the desired atmosphere for different scenes throughout the storyline (Deguzman, 2023).

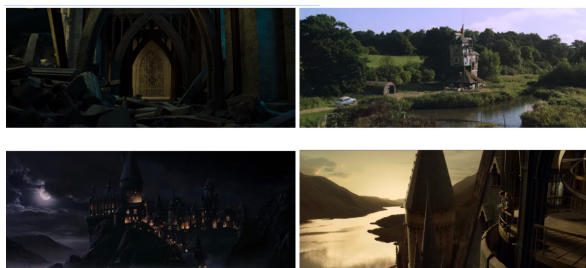
Effective set design requires a thorough understanding of various elements, including color, texture, space, and scale, and the ability to integrate these elements seamlessly with other aspects of film production, such as lighting, costume design, and cinematography.

Architectural Principles

As a discipline, architecture provides a wealth of styles, principles, and techniques that can be applied to set design. Key architectural principles relevant to set design appear below:

Style and Period: Architectural styles, such as Gothic, Baroque, and Modernist, convey specific historical and cultural ideas. Using these styles helps establish the film's time period and geographical setting (Deguzman, 2023).

Figure 1
Screenshots from the film adaptation of *Harry Potter*



Note: L to R, top: Columbus, 2001; Cuarón, 2004; L to R, bottom: Yates, 2007; Yates, 2011.

Form and Function: The design of buildings and spaces must be functional and aesthetically pleasing. Form refers to the visual appearance and structure of the set, while the function is concerned with how the characters and the narrative use the space (Tommasino, 2023).

Proportion and Scale: The proportions and scale of architectural elements influence how visually impactful a set is. Proper scaling ensures the set feels realistic and appropriately sized for the film's context (Nast, 2011).

Materials and Texture: The choice of materials and textures adds depth and authenticity to the set. Different materials can evoke various associations and contribute to the atmosphere (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, n.d.).

Spatial Dynamics: The arrangement of spaces and the flow between different areas within the set affect how scenes are shot and how the audience experiences the space (Clarke, 2024). Open, expansive areas create a different mood than confined, intimate spaces.

Case Study: The *Harry Potter* film series

The *Harry Potter* film series is a British-American production based on the novels written by J.K. Rowling, consisting of eight films released between 2001 and 2011. The first two films, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), were directed by Chris Columbus. Alfonso Cuarón directed the third film, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), followed by Mike Newell for the fourth, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005). David Yates directed

the final four films: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Parts 1 and 2* (2010, 2011). Stuart Craig, Alfonso Cuarón, and David Yates played key roles as primary production directors and set architects throughout this journey.

The series spans genres of Fantasy, Adventure, and Drama (Domusweb.it, 2023). The *Harry Potter* books tell the journey of a young wizard named *Harry Potter* and his close friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, as they grow up at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The story centers on Harry's struggle against the evil wizard Lord Voldemort, who wants to conquer the wizarding world and make all the non-magical people (Muggles) his subjects. The setting is a richly imagined magical world hidden within our own. It involves spellbinding locations, mystical creatures, a complex social structure, and, of course, magic (Barnwell, 2023).

Architectural Design Elements in Set Design

Hogwarts Castle

Hogwarts Castle is one of the most iconic locations in the *Harry Potter* series and the primary setting for most of the story. The design of Hogwarts is heavily influenced by Gothic Revival and medieval architectural influences, contributing to its magical, timeless, and stunning appearance (Clarke, 2024).

Gothic Revival Elements

Pointed Arches and Ribbed Vaults: These are prevalent in Hogwarts' corridors, Great Hall, and classrooms. The pointed arches create a sense of verticality and grandeur, and the ribbed vaults add to the detailing of the building (Nast, 2011).

Stained Glass Windows: The castle contains numerous stained glass windows, often depicting historical or magical figures, boosting the mystical atmosphere (Tommasino, 2023).

Figure 2
Hogwarts' stained glass windows

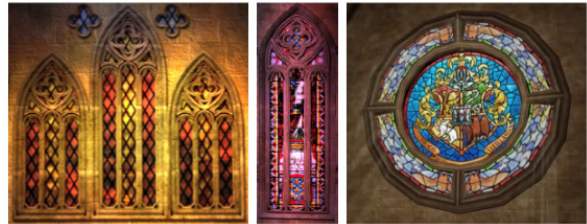


Figure 3
The cloisters in Gloucester Cathedral



Note: The cloisters in Gloucester Cathedral were used in several scenes in the *Harry Potter* films (Domusweb.it, 2023).

Medieval Influences

Castle Layout and Towers: The overall layout of Hogwarts, with its sprawling grounds, multiple towers, and defensive walls, is reminiscent of medieval castles. The numerous towers, such as the Astronomy Tower and the Gryffindor Tower, reflect that of an ancient, labyrinthine structure (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, n.d.).

Figure 4
Blueprints of Hogwarts' Castle

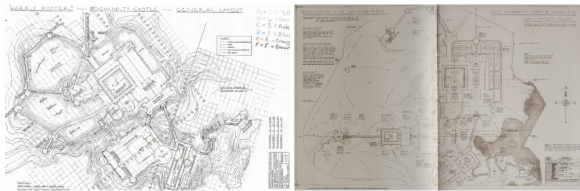
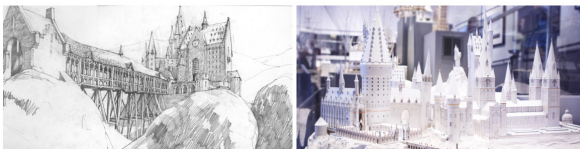


Figure 5
Initial Sketches and Model of Hogwarts Castle



Stone Construction: The use of stone for both the exterior and interior of Hogwarts gives the castle a sense of permanence and durability, fitting for a centuries-old institution (Barnwell, 2023).

Figure 6
Screenshots from the *Harry Potter* films



Diagon Alley

Diagon Alley is the commercial hub of the wizarding world that is always bustling with witches and wizards purchasing magical supplies. The architectural design of Diagon Alley is influenced by Victorian and Edwardian styles, creating a whimsical and fun electric atmosphere (Deguzman, 2023).

Victorian Elements

Narrow, Winding Streets: The layout of Diagon Alley, with its narrow and winding streets, mirrors the crowded and bustling urban environments of Victorian-era cities (Tommasino, 2023).

Figure 6
Screenshots from the *Harry Potter* films



Ornate Shopfronts: Many of the shopfronts in Diagon Alley feature detailed woodwork, large display windows, and elaborate signage, characteristic of Victorian commercial architecture (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, n.d.).

The Burrow

The Burrow, home to the Weasley family, is stark in contrast to the grand and historical settings of Hogwarts and Diagon Alley. Its design is rustic and whimsical, reflecting the warmth and eccentricity of the Weasley family (Barnwell, 2023).

Rustic Architecture

Asymmetrical Structure: The Burrow's haphazard, multi-story structure, with its leaning towers and mismatched additions, gives it a charming and somewhat chaotic appearance (Clarke, 2024).

Figure 7
Initial Sketches and Model of the Burrow



Use of Natural Materials: The Burrow is constructed from a mix of stone, wood, and other natural materials, creating a cozy and homely environment (Nast, 2011).

Whimsical Features

Overgrown Garden: The Burrow is surrounded by an overgrown garden with magical plants and creatures, adding to its rustic charm and the overall vibe of the Weasleys.

Eccentric Decor: Inside, the Burrow is filled with quirky and magical objects, like self-knitting needles and enchanted clocks, reflecting the magical nature of the household.

Figure 8
Screenshots from the *Harry Potter* films



Visual Storytelling Impact and Audience Experience

Creating an Atmosphere

The architectural elements in the *Harry Potter* films play an important role, creating the magical and immersive atmosphere that defines the series. The highly detailed and historical designs of places like Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and The Burrow transport the viewers to the universe of *Harry Potter*, making it feel fantastical and surreal. The use of Gothic Revival and Medieval elements in Hogwarts, for example, evokes a sense of ancient magic, while the eclectic Victorian and Edwardian styles of Diagon Alley create a bustling, engaging marketplace. These architectural choices contribute to the overall mood and tone of the series, unique for every set (Clarke, 2024; Deguzman, 2023)

Storytelling

In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, the *Harry Potter* set designs enhance the plot and character interactions. With its multiple secret tunnels and hidden rooms, Hogwarts Castle's large and imposing architecture reflects the intricacy of magical education and the mysteries that Harry and his friends solve. With its many stores and magical goods, Diagon Alley acts as a portal to the wizarding world, giving Harry the resources and information he needs to continue on his adventure. The cozy and disorganized layout of the Burrow contrasts with Harry's upbringing with the Dursleys and reflects the love and support of the Weasley family. Every component of the set design has been thoughtfully chosen to support the storyline, its themes, and character development (Barnwell, 2023; Nast, 2011).

Engaging the Audience

The architecture and set design in the *Harry Potter* films significantly enhance the audience engagement and create emotional responses within them. Viewers are drawn into the story and immersed so deeply that they feel like they are part of the wizarding realm themselves. Using familiar architectural styles blended with magical elements creates a sense of familiarity and wonder, making audiences connect with the fictional world on a deeper, more engaging level. The way the story is presented through the sets encourages repeated viewings as fans discover new details and hidden Easter eggs with each watch. This level of detail and engagement contributes to the enduring popularity and impact of the “*Harry Potter*” series (Clarke, 2024; Domusweb.it, 2023).

Conclusion

Stuart Craig, the production designer for the *Harry Potter* series, played a pivotal role in creating the architecture and set designs that brought the magical world to life. Craig’s vision and attention to detail ensured that every location, from Hogwarts Castle to Diagon Alley, was meticulously designed to accurately live up to and reflect the history and magical atmosphere of the wizarding world created by J.K. Rowling (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, n.d.).

The architectural and set designs of the *Harry Potter* series are a masterclass in creating immersive, believable environments. Using historical architectural styles, the designers crafted stunning sets that deeply intertwined with the narrative. These carefully crafted environments captivate the audience and enhance the story’s themes and character development. The architectural influences in set design establish the cultural, historical, and geographical context, making the magical world feel otherworldly and familiar at the same time.

The “*Harry Potter*” film series demonstrates the important role of architectural influences in set design to create captivating and immersive cinematic worlds. The success of the series highlights the crucial part of thoughtful and authentic set design in enhancing visual storytelling (Clarke, 2024).

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