

## What is a production designer?



The production designer oversees props, costumes and sets

### Production designer

The production designer collaborates with the producer, director and the director of photography to establish the visual feel and specific look required for the film – whether sophisticated, grungy, ultra-modern, rustic, corporate, exotic, comic book.

The production designer has overall responsibility for everything on the screen except the locations, the lighting and the actors. They take direct responsibility for studio sets, additional location construction, set dressing, props, action vehicles, animals and weapons. They guide key personnel in other departments such as locations, costumes, hair and makeup, special effects and visual effects to establish a unified visual appearance to the film.

Some, like Catherine Martin (*The Great Gatsby*, *Moulin Rouge!*, *Australia*), undertake both costume and production design.

Some production designers have worked their way up through the ranks of the art department, but most have some formal training in architecture, fine arts or industrial design. Many have undertaken specialist training at the Australian Film, Radio and Television School (AFTRS), or at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA).

Even before pre-production, the production designer starts a creative collaboration with the director and director of photography. With the script as their guide, they determine the stylistic approach. They discuss other films, posters, comic books, interiors and photographs. They may visit an art gallery together to refine their discussions or undertake some preliminary location surveys. During this time, the production designer begins to collect reference material from books, magazines and the internet in order to refine decisions, and to communicate the visual approach for the film to other crew and cast and potential investors.

At this time the production designer starts to bring the art department team together. It is usually the biggest department on the film, and draws on many talents.

- The art director is the production designer's right hand, responsible for the costing and realisation of the visual brief
- The art department coordinator provides administrative and logistical support and research, and is responsible for clearing any copyrights on brands, signs and graphics
- Set designers create technical drawings to build or modify sets, locations and signs
- The construction manager and a team of carpenters, painters and welders build studio sets and modify locations

- Scenic artists paint [backdrops](#) and other elements needed for the set. These could be cloud backdrops or a city backdrop to be seen out of a set window. They also paint murals, complex prop pieces and paintings seen on walls to avoid copyright problems.
- Set decorators dress the settings – for example, a home interior with carpets, curtains, furniture and unscripted props or a park with benches, fences and park signs
- Graphic artists create signage, books and posters
- Props buyers hire or buy the scripted props
- The standby props person manages the hand props for actors to use during shooting
- The greens team is responsible for all the plant material used at locations and on sets
- Vehicle coordinators select appropriate vehicles for action and background
- Animal wranglers provide livestock, which may range from one small dog (*Legally Blonde*) to hundreds of horses and great herds of cattle (*Australia*). They also organise transport, food and shelter, harnesses, cages and veterinary services as needed.

The production designer, art director and other members of the art department work closely with other departments on the film. They work with the first assistant director to schedule the order in which sets can be ready, and to prepare wet weather cover, so the crew has a location available in case rain prevents an exterior shoot. They consult with the sound crew regarding acoustics in the various sets. They work closely with the stunt coordinator to ensure sets, props and costumes meet stunt requirements for ease of breakage, repeat props and fireproofing. They also stay in close contact with the visual effects team, to make sure certain sets and blue/green screens are set up in a way that allows digital shots to be inserted during post-production.

In a sense, the art department is always in pre-production. They are always working ahead of the crew to have sets and props ready, locations dressed, and carrying out the specialised tasks described.

During the shoot, the production designer has a watching brief, ensuring that the work of his or her department is achieving the creative intent of the director, and adjusting and modifying plans and activities to reflect changes in the schedule. Feedback from the producer, director, cast, crew, editors and the VFX department might suggest some changes – this character’s suitcase needs to have a secret compartment, this balcony has to be strengthened to hold the camera crew for a new angle, a location has fallen through and design aspects of the new location have to be addressed.

Throughout pre-production and shoot, the art director keeps the production designer informed of the budget and design elements may have to be modified to be cheaper or more lavish. Very big art departments have their own separate team of accountants to assist with budget.

The production designer finishes work at the end of the shoot – his or her creative work is done. But the team carries on for a week or two, wrapping the sets, disposing of the materials, returning hired set dressings and props and selling off or donating the remaining items. Traditionally, the production designer will gift a small item from the remaining props to each member of the art department, as a memento of the shoot.

[Click here to view interview with production designer Felicity Abbott](#)

#### Useful resources:

- [The Importance of Production Design](#)
- [Skyfall Video Log: Dennis Gassner](#)
- [Explainer: what is production design?](#)
- [Building Edge of Tomorrow Exosuits](#)

Creative Content Australia is a not-for-profit organisation committed to raising awareness of the significance of copyright, the value of screen content and the impact that downloading and streaming pirated films and TV programs has on the creative industries: [www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au](http://www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au)

Creative Content Australia develops and distributes free online education resources to schools throughout Australia to stimulate classroom discussion about copyright and promote the value of creative content and good digital citizenship online [www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info](http://www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info)

