

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

5 Insider Decorating Lessons From Movie-Set Pros

Many of the enviable interiors you see in film and TV are created by people who also design real-world residences. Here, the tricks that translate to home décor



Manhattan-apartment dining room designed by Marks & Frantz PHOTO: MARCO RICCA

By Jen Renzi

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THE SILVER SCREEN frequently inspires home design, especially when a movie strongly evokes a particular period, place or character. “Sets—both historic and current—are the perfect combination of aspirational and mysterious,” said Los Angeles-based decorator Melinda Ritz, whose film and television career includes conjuring the urbane, tony apartments featured in NBC’s “Will & Grace.” In fact, designers like Ms. Ritz, who do both scenic and interior work, often find that the former unexpectedly fuels the latter. “Many clients find us through the style-driven movies we’ve done,” said Lisa Frantz, of New York firm Marks & Frantz, whose film credits include the early-aughts power minimalism of “The Devil Wears Prada” and the implausibly posh starving-artist eclecticism of “Sex and the City.” Tony Duquette (1914-1999), a pioneer in this sort of crossover, created dramatic interiors for Elizabeth Arden and J. Paul Getty and designed lavish sets and costumes for MGM (1945’s “Ziegfeld Follies”) and Broadway (the original, 1960, production of “Camelot”).

Set design and interior design share many challenges. The need for a *mise-en-scène* to “read” through a camera relates to interior-design concepts like sight line and focal point. Circulation, another décor concern, has a corollary in stage blocking. Set design even schools designers in economy. “Film taught me what was cinematic, a wow factor for real living, and that it does not have to be expensive,” said New York decorator Miles Redd, who majored in film and began his career in that industry.

Dallas decorator Michelle Nussbaumer credits her early work in theater for her ability to use objects inventively. She’s been known to blow up a detail from a painting or photograph to cover an entire wall to, as she puts it, “create the feeling of a Venetian palazzo or 1940s Hollywood.”

Here, interior designers divulge other sleight-of-hand techniques they picked up while dressing sets.

Lights, Camera, More Lights

“Sets are lit from multiple angles to eradicate dark shadows,” said Brooklyn interior designer Jaime Walters, a veteran of home-renovating shows, where rooms are made



Philadelphia interior by Jaime Walters PHOTO: MICHAEL PERSICO

camera-ready. For this dining room of a Philadelphia townhouse, she created an inviting—and flattering—environment by supplementing a dimmable chandelier with a ceiling-mounted art spotlight and a glowy floor lamp. “Lighting from above flattens and deadens a space, whereas lighting from all angles gives an object shape and volume,” explained London designer Tim Gosling, who studied and practiced theater design before focusing on interiors and furniture. “I like a border sunk into the floor with inset up-lighters, library standing lamps to pool light around seating areas and side tables, and traditional side lights to add rhythm.”

Consider Scale



PHOTO: MARCO RICCA

“For film and television, we avoid large-scale chairs, because they can swallow up an actor,” said Ms. Marks. “Think about your stature: If you’re only 5’ 6“, you don’t want a 42-inch-deep sofa.” For this foyer in an Old Greenwich, Conn., home, she chose a pair of petite antique armchairs tailored to the inhabitants despite the ceiling’s double height. Ms. Ritz encourages “sit testing” and considering a chair’s scale vis-à-vis your body before making a purchase. For a TV talk show hosted by Suzanne Somers, Ms. Ritz brought in 40 types of chairs to determine, among other things, how overwhelmed Ms. Somers appeared in them. Big furniture can overpower a

room as well. “Many manufactures make seating quite overscaled and not suited to older-style homes or apartments,” said Ms. Marks. Ms. Nussbaumer added that scaling furniture to a room, and not the human body, became popular in the 1980s “and makes a space look dated.”

Manipulate the Windows

Windows on a set frequently look onto the surrounding sound stage. “We dress windows in sheer fabrics and use gelled backlighting to make them look more real,” explained Ms. Marks. Translucent sheers in a residential context can similarly screen a subpar view. For this parlor-floor living room of a Brooklyn brownstone, sheer Roman shades obscured foot traffic outside and cut daytime glare without darkening the space. Some



PHOTO: MARCO RICCA



Dallas home of Michelle Nussbaumer PHOTO: NATHAN SCHRODER

of Ms. Marks' favorite styles include "linen with natural slubs, which create a bit of interest, and the finest, thinnest wools," for their exceptional drape. Her TV work has broadened her residential bag-of-tricks, which also includes tinted and graphically patterned sheers. "Ivory tends to look too bright on camera, so we gravitate to colors like pale yellow and blue, and some directors of photography really love patterns."

Work the Sight Lines

"In both realms, you have to create focal points, moments that draw the eye so it takes in something beautiful from every angle," said Ms. Ritz. Ms. Urban added that on a set "you design for the perspective seen through the camera." Similarly, in a residential space, designers consider what features will be visible from certain key vantages such as the family-room sofa or the front door, Ms. Nussbaumer explained. You can create attention-getting vignettes in a room by grouping artwork or accessories like mirrors, or doing something as simple as outlining a door frame with a 6-inch-wide mirrored border—a technique Tony Duquette used all the time. Here, in the master suite of her Dallas home, Ms. Nussbaumer styled a fireplace with a generous array of blue and white china to create a visual anchor; meanwhile, the desk, curtains and corner cabinet form their

own vignette.

Supplement the Kliegs

Especially advantageous in spaces short on natural illumination, reflective finishes amplify light. "Here, bookcases lined in antiqued mirror helped brighten a dining room—a super-helpful trick we use on film sets," said Ms. Frantz. Also adding sparkle to this Manhattan-apartment dining room her firm designed: the same antiqued mirror set as panels in a door, a blown-glass chandelier, polished table and crystal candle holders. If you prefer less glitz, Alyssa Urban of New York firm Cullman & Kravis, who started her career designing sets for "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," recommends "more subtly reflective finishes [to] add texture and depth." She suggests silver leafing, verre églomisé and cabinets fitted with translucent chicken-wire glass.



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