

3. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF PRODUCTION DESIGN

The truth is stranger than fiction.

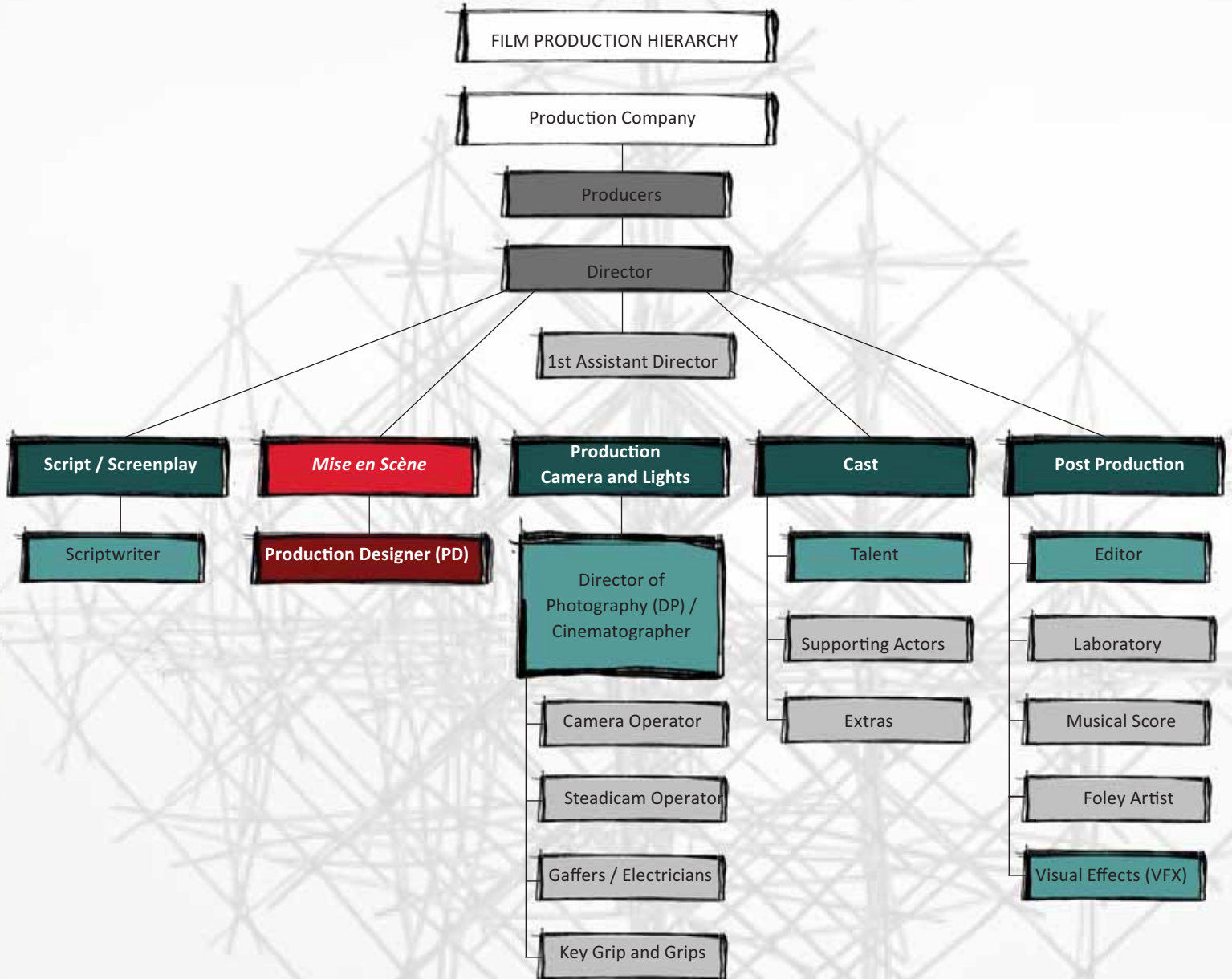


Figure 3.6 Film Production Hierarchy

Production Design is the design of cinematic environments. In order to understand the role of the production designer (PD) within the film production process, it is important to have a broad understanding of the numerous role players and their tasks within the film production process as well as the film production process itself.

3.1 THE PRODUCTION DESIGNER'S ROLE IN FILM PRODUCTION

Feature films are created by teams of hundreds of people, working for between three to five years (Louw 2009). The production team is started with producers that maintain the budget and the director who is the central creative force (LoBrotto 2002:15). The director is "[u]sually the key decision making force in all stages of a film" (Mamer 2002:418).

The look and style of a motion picture is created by the collaboration between the director, director of photography or cinematographer (DP) and PD. The three parties corroboratively, are referred to as the 'trinity'. The PD together with the DP has to create an atmosphere for the film, that the director can use to direct the cast in and determine the cinematography together with the DP (Barnwall 2004:21).

The responsibilities of a PD vary from one film to the next. It is determined by the director and the production designer. It depends on the director's strength of visual style and the desired involvement of the PD (Weavind 2009; Tashiro 2008). The collaboration of the trilogy determines how much of an environment the production designer will create (Tashiro 2008).

In general, the director and DP "is responsible for the visual decisions that determine staging and camera setup" (Katz 1991:97). "After the

director, the PD is the person with the most comprehensive artistic overview of a project" (Tashiro 2008). The PD has to interpret the script and the director's vision into physical environments - in essence visualize the narrative to create an environment in which the film can take place (LoBrotto 2002:1,5).

To achieve this, the PD needs to integrate several departments (see diagram below) such as sets, wardrobe and props, to create an integrated whole "guided by the director's overall conceptual and thematic plan" (Campbell 2002: 16; Katz 1991: 97).

Camera, composition, light and movement is the domain of the DP. "The DP is usually brought onto the production team later than the PD, due to budgetary reasons, as the DP is more expensive (Barnwell 2004:46; LoBrotto 2002:15). The PD and the DP work closely together during pre-production and early production (Tashiro 2008).

Production design technically ends at the edge of the frame, so it is ideal if the designer knows how the director and DP want to frame a scene (which in turn is influenced by photographic processes and lens choices). Because this changes frequently many designers build the whole set in order to prevent later frustration. Directors also prefer to get as much **coverage** as the budget allows to have more editing options (Campbell 2002:167).

The manner in which the DP will light the scene has certain technical aspects the production designer need to consider – such as space for lighting equipment (Tashiro 2008; Weavind 2009).

Other key parties in film production can be seen on the diagram to the left. The departments under the PD will be discussed under 3.3.

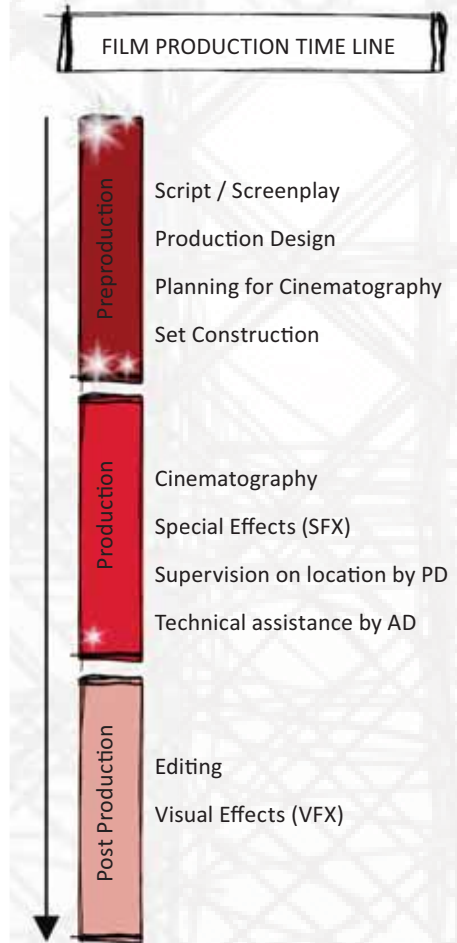


Figure 3.7 Film Production Time Line

Figure 3.8 Film Production On Location (adapted from AFDA 2009)



Gaffer (or Chief Lighting Technician)

Heads up the crew responsible for lighting and other electrical matters during filming

Best Boy *The gaffer's assistant. This person orders all necessary lighting equipment and oversees the lighting crew*

Scriptwriter *Creates a screenplay that is the foundation of every film*

The Script Supervisor (or Continuity Person) *Writes down very specific notes of every scene during filming so that he or she can check that all of the details are correct*

Production Designer *Heads the Art Department; is responsible for creating the overall visual appearance of the film*

Special Effects Coordinator *Makes sure the special effects crew sets up the effects according to the director's wishes*

Director of Photography (DOP or Cinematographer) Responsible for the quality of the photography and the cinematic look of the film



Script Supervisor Reports to the Director of Photography; work with all of the camera support equipment on the set; co-ordinates camera movement

Assistant Cameraman Assists the Camera Operator

Focus Puller Adjusts the focus of the lens as the actor moves closer to or further from the camera, or when the camera moves during a dolly shot.



Clapper-Loader Loads the camera with a new roll of film as needed, and operates the clapper board

Costume Designer Conceives and designs the costumes to be worn by the actors in the film

Make-up Artist In charge of make-up applied directly on the skin of an actor for cosmetic or artistic effect

Director Interprets the script and unifies the components of the film into something that bears his or her signature

Assistant Director (AD) Controls the shooting schedule and is responsible for keeping the production on schedule

Producer Given control over the entire production of a motion picture and is ultimately held responsible for its success or failure

Executive Producer Secures financing for a film

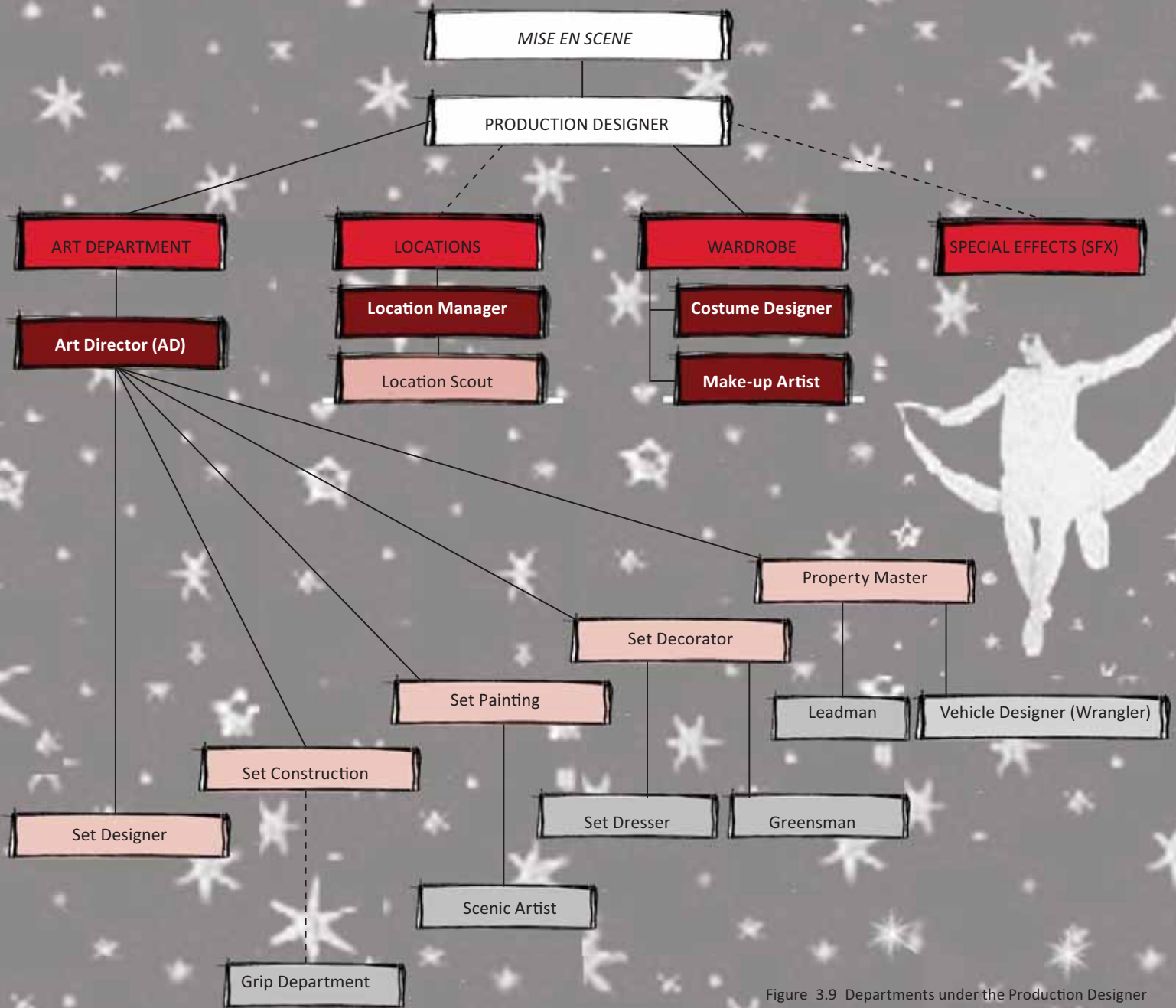


Figure 3.9 Departments under the Production Designer

The term ‘production designer’ is often confused or used interchangeably with ‘art director’ (AD) or ‘set designer’. In order to understand this, a brief look at the history of production design is necessary, as the change in terms relates to the role becoming more complex over time (Barnwall 2004:8; Ward 1994:49).

3.2 A SHORT HISTORY OF PRODUCTION DESIGN

The origins of production design were born out of the collaboration between the decorative arts, theatre, and architecture, of which architecture had the most pronounced influence (LoBrotto 2002:93). Many production designers originally came from the field of architecture and “brought structural design concepts to cinematic storytelling” (LoBrotto 2002:98; Barnwall 2004:13).

“The title ‘technical director’ was one of the earliest credits used in the US, then ‘interior decorator’, only moving on to ‘art director’ in the 1930’s...the changing terms reflect the changing complexity and focus of the role over time” (Barnwall 2004:8; Ward 1994:49).

The term ‘production designer’ was first used to describe the contribution of William Cameron Menzies in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), by the producer David O. Selznick. Before this, the physical environments depicted in films were inexpressive and suppressed in favour of the narrative. Art directors merely designed sets and scenery. Menzies was the first to fully visualize a motion picture in its totality and to create a film environment that impressed in itself (Tashiro 2008 and LoBrotto 2002:2). Menzies “designed the shot itself, in terms of size, angle and move-

ment” (Barnwall 2004:13). The role and relationship of director and PD had become blurred. The PD’s role was no longer just supplying the background as the AD before him had done, but he was involved in the fundamental planning of the film. The PD’s assistant became known as the art director (Barnwall 2004:13).

The AD was now responsible for managing the art department budget and supervising the construction of the sets, while the overall design of the film was the responsibility of the PD. This is the same division of responsibilities that is still maintained today, but it varies from film to film. The director directs the actors and the PD directs the visual elements (Barnwall 2004:13).

3.3 THE PRODUCTION DESIGN TEAM

3.3.1 THE ART DEPARTMENT

This is the department where the production designer will be most involved. The team includes the AD, set decorator, set designer, scenic artist and property master, digital concept artist, concept illustrators, graphic designers, storyboard artists, property department and construction department (Barnwall 2004:124; Rizzo 2005:317).

Art directors plan and execute the design of the sets; are responsible for the budget and have to oversee the art department crew (Rizzo 2005:317). On-set AD’s run the show during production (LoBrotto 2002:44).

Set designers do the actual drafting (Campbell 2002:16).

Conceptual artists assist the PD in conceptualiz-

ing fantastical world spaces, objects or creatures such as those in *Star Wars* (Campbell 2002:16).

The **scenic artist** is responsible for “work which includes the preparation, painting and/or coloration of all textures, plastering, appliquéing on scenery, sets and properties; the application of all decorative wall or surface coverings; all lettering and sign work...and the painting and aging in the construction studio or on the set” (Internet Movie Database [IMDb] 2009).

The **set decorator** is in charge of “decorating the set with all furnishings, drapery, interior plants, and anything seen on indoor or outdoor sets” (IMDb 2009).

The **set dresser** maintains, moves and resets the set decoration items according to the decorator’s requirements and to accommodate camera, grip and lighting setups. The set dresser is also responsible for set decoration continuity (IMDb 2009).

The **property master** is responsible for all props - items handled by actors (LoBrotto 2002:21). This can mean designing or buying props. Props also include all movable objects in the film (Bordwell and Thompson 1997:19).

The **leadman** is the assistant to the property master and responsible for tracking down props (Bordwell and Thompson 1997:19).

The **construction department** is responsible for building the set (Skillset s.a.).

3.3.2 THE LOCATIONS DEPARTMENT

Although not actually under the PD, the location department has to work closely with the PD, as locations form a crucial part of production design.



Figure 3.10 A scenic artist doing the final touches to one of the sets for *Coraline* (2009) (Annazhu.com s.a.)

Location scouts find appropriate locations and **location managers** makes arrangements for use of locations and supervises locations during production.

3.3.3 WARDROBE DEPARTMENT

The **costume designer** needs to work in collaboration with the PD and AD to ensure that the costumes adhere to the visual concept of the PD.

3.3.4 SPECIAL EFFECTS

Special Effects “refer to effects produced on the set, as opposed to those created in post production” (IMDb 2009). This department is also technically not under the PD, but because this has a visual impact on the setting, close collaboration is necessary.

3.4 THE PRODUCTION DESIGN PROCESS

A film setting is a metaphor. Vast amounts of information can be communicated with one set, that would have taken pages of dialogue and description in a novel or other non-visual narrative medium (Barnwell 2004:27). The creation of a connected visual metaphor from the narrative is the key role of the PD.

“Production design is a branch of architecture in which environments are built, but seldom in their entirety and seldom to last. What the production designer creates are spaces, facades and even entire towns. Through these, the designer can evoke mood, establish themes and give characters life” (Heisner in Barnwell 2004:120).

3.4.1 PREPRODUCTION

Preproduction is the period of planning and preparation, before actual filming starts (Mamer 2002:27). This period can last two to three months or several years. For the film as a whole there are five phases of preproduction namely scriptwriting; production design; script analysis; cinematography (when the DP joins the team) and rehearsal (Katz 1991:98). Preproduction is the phase where the PD is most involved (Weavind 2009).

In this time the designer has to conceptualise, research, draw, plan and build (Barnwell 2004:59).

Analysis - The Script (Barnwell 2004:47-48)

> The script is the starting point. It is important to note that “[t]he set is conceived in relation to the shooting script, which details the movements of the actors and camera.” This helps the designer create sets that will actually be in shot. Director may decide certain script parts unnecessary or changed etc. (Barnwell 2004:48).

> It needs to be broken down into more digestible units such as locations, interior and exterior, day and night, period, etc. This will assist the production designer in establishing how many settings there are. This is known as the breakdown.

> For each setting a breakdown of essential items, characters, special effects etc are needed.

> The emotion of each scene can also be noted as this will form an important part of the concept.

In the case of the production for *The Lorax*, the starting point was the picturebook with

the same title, instead of a script.

Research

Production Design

> The concept or approach needs to be established. “Without the concept there is no overall design, just disparate sections of setting” (Barnwell 2004:50). This needs to consider the director’s vision and the intention of the script (Weavind 2009 and Tashiro 2008).

> The script needs to be rewritten in visuals. This can be done by means of sketches, production illustrations or **storyboards**. These are done by production illustrators and storyboard artists. Knowledge of aspect ratio’s proxemics, camera angles and camera movement is essential to create these (Tumminello 2005:248; Weavind 2009).

> After the concept has been established, choosing the **colour palette** is essential (Weavind 2009).

> The designer needs to consider the composition of the mise en scene.

> The designer needs to consider any practical lighting required by the DP, i.e. lighting that is actually seen or used in the scene (Barnwell 2004:59).

The Budget

“Films [sic] noirs of the 1940s are classic examples of budgetary influence on setting. The lack of money for extensive sets induced the need for sections to be lost in shadow” (Barnwell 2004:48). Another means of lowering costs is to use one space and rework it.

Figure 3.11 A scene from Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) filmed in Gaudi's *Casa Batlló* (1906) (YouTube.com 2009)

3.1.1 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRODUCTION DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

There are many similarities between production design and architecture. The differences, however are more pronounced. Key differences between the two disciplines can be summarized as follows:

- > Emotion is essential to production design.
- > Production design is temporary of nature (Barnwall 2004:24; LoBrotto 2002:99).
- > Practicality is not at the core of production design (Barnwall 2004:24).
- > Knowledge of aspect ratios, proxemics, camera angles, camera movement and camera lenses is essential (Weavind 2009)
- > The location for a film (a site in architecture), is of less importance and usually chosen later in the design process than in architecture. It is often usually only chosen after the storyboards have been done. The location can also change at very short notice before shooting (Weavind 2009).

"It is undeniable that the cinema has a marked influence on modern architecture; in turn, modern architecture..." influences cinema (Mallet-Stevens in Neumann 1999:14)

The Shooting Schedule

The PD needs to adhere to the shooting schedule and work as economically with time as possible. This also requires creative thinking on the part of the PD. To save time one location can be used, a location or set can be revamped instead of being made from scratch or scenes can be shot out of chronological order (Barnwell 2004:50). Sets can be used for filming while other are being prepared.

Filming doesn't always take place in sequence and the designer can use this in designs.

Location Scouting

While location scouts are photographing possible locations, the designer together with storyboard artist, concept illustrators and concept modellers produce sketch ideas and 3D models (Rizzo 2005:49).

Animatics

According to Rizzo (2005:59-60) an animatic is more than a mere 'moving storyboard' that determines how scenes flows into each other (as is the general assumption). Each storyboard frame is analysed by means of a computer generated image according to plan, elevation, isometric sketches, set info, camera info and additional equipment info where applicable.

Technical Drawings

Both architectural and theatrical drafting styles are tolerated in Hollywood, although the former is the preferred convention (Rizzo 2005:139-141). Technical drawings are sometimes referred to as director's plans, blueprints or bluelines (Rizzo 2005:197; 308). It depends on the budget if the designer, art

director, set designer or a draftsman draws the technical plans (Barnwell 2004:72). From these drawing the sets are constructed.

Set Construction

Set Painting

Finding Props

Set Decoration

"...[T]he set is furnished and propped by the set dresser, who will have plans from the designer to work to" (Barnwell 2004:76).

3.4.2 PRODUCTION

Production is when actual filming takes place (Mamer 2002:27). The PD is on set if budget allows. On set duties include ensuring that everything happens according to their specification, checking that there are no colours that clash with that of the film's colour palette and checking that there is no branding or signage in view of the camera (Weavind 2009).

On larger production there is usually an onset AD seeing that their head of department's ideas are communicated, while the designer is setting up the next location (Barnwell 2004:78).

"Once production begins...the designer's importance diminishes considerably. While designers are likely to remain on the payroll through production and are often asked to perform work during shooting, their creative input at that stage moves from the conceptual to the techni-

cal..." (Tashiro 2008). Last minute things often need to be done, as will be discussed in the precedent study of *The Bang Bang Club* (2010).

3.4.3 POSTPRODUCTION

The set is struck and set decoration and property are returned.

Editing and detailed finishing processes take place (Mamer 2002:27).