

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ALEX**

Production design's a concept it's not widely understood. It has really got everything to do with the framing of the action, the connective tissue that holds together the environments and the objects and all of the things that characters in the film interact with. It's the responsibility for the services that absorb and reflect light into the camera.

**MCDOWELL:**

For example, *Fight Club* was a film that had a central character of a house that was never clearly described in the script or in the book. We, as a design team, are responsible almost in every film for building a back story that is more dense, more detailed than the script itself. And there's a couple of reasons for that.

So as an example, in *Fight Club*, the back story is that a captain of industry comes to a new town to develop his industry, and builds a beautiful house out in the suburbs, in the countryside. It's a Victorian house. He builds it in the turn of the century, 1900.

And gradually, over the years, the industry that he builds begins to grow and starts to encroach on the suburbs. And inevitably, the house starts to be surrounded by a more urban setting and starts to lose its value. So by the 1960s, perhaps, his grandchildren are force to subdivide the house and sublet half of the house.

So they put in walls, they build a second staircase, do a renovation, and sublet. And then the property values continue to go down. And eventually, they rent the house and then move out, and then squatters move in.

And squatters set fires in the living room and the hallways, and the house decays. And then security moves in, pushes the squatters out, and puts a fence around the house. And then the space monkeys move in and start making soap.

So in *Fight Club*, we did this for two reasons. The first reason-- and the standard reason why we would normally build these kind of stories-- is that we have to

answer hundreds of questions a day about what the qualities and the services and the materials of the house are. And so when a painter asks us what color something should be or what level of decay it needs, when people are really starting to distress and do the final services on a house, we have those answers at our fingertips because of this story we've developed.

The second reason specific to *Fight Club* is that Ed Norton and Brad Pitt are one and the same character. And so their affair with Helena Bonham Carter can only exist if one of them is always missing from the scene, but the audience can't be aware of that. So this Victorian house allows us to have two doors into every room-- servants doors in the Victorian time.

And the conversion in the '60s with the second staircase allows us to have two staircase routes through the house so there's a machine for narrative that's embedded in this thing that looks like architecture, that is designed to be able to enable this French farce, this constant passage of the bodies in and out of this room so that the audience never knows that they're the same character until the payoff at the end because Helena Bonham Carter never knows that they're the same person.

A big part of what you need to learn as a designer or a filmmaker altogether is that there's a big difference from what you see to your eye and what the camera sees, and what the edited footage looks like. You have to kind of go through an entire film or several films to really understand the relationship between what you design and your intent and the final outcome and this sort of high level need to achieve production value-- which means getting everything that you make on film, not building more than you ever need, and not making something that isn't fundamentally necessary to the story so that you maximize a budget, you maximize your resources, you maximize the time you spend to support the film in all the ways.

So the production designer's job is very much the balance of aesthetics and design intent and the sort of integrity of process that's going to actually get all of that on the screen. It's not enough just to design great stuff if you can't afford to build it. It's not enough to design good stuff if it's not what the camera wants to shoot. I'm Alex

McDowell, I'm a production designer and creative director.