

From Instruction to Consumption: Architecture and Design in Hollywood Movies of the 1930s

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A white telephone! I've always wanted one of those.

—Cecile in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985)

These are the first “on screen” words uttered by the waitress heroine of Woody Allen’s 1985 film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* when she leaves a Depression-era New Jersey movie theater and literally walks onto the silver screen—and into a Hollywood version of a sleek Manhattan penthouse. Although her exclamation upon surveying her new surroundings registers as a witty commentary on a decade of American motion picture set design, it is more incisive than the director might have realized. For white telephones, along with streamlined chrome furniture, faceted mirrors, glass brick walls, and bakelite floors, were not just stylistic hallmarks of American movies of the 1930s. As crucial components of the most popular entertainment of the era they were also a form of mass marketing that attempted to mitigate the social and economic crisis of the Depression by exploiting the standards and mores of the burgeoning consumer culture. Film historian Charles Eckert analyzed this phenomenon with respect to women’s fashion in his 1978 essay “Carol Lombard in Macy’s Window.” He observed that almost from the beginning of the

cinema movie makers and manufacturers recognized “the full potential of film as a merchandiser of goods” (Eckert 99). While Eckert examined clothing and accessories as they appeared in Hollywood films of the so-called Golden Age (1920s–1950s), architecture and design have yet to receive the same consideration, a serious oversight given their prominence in this period.

Throughout the 1930s, architecture, decorating, and shelter magazines featured movie sets alongside “real” architecture and design, analyzing them in as much detail as the newest skyscrapers and redecorated apartments. But movie sets were unique among buildings and interiors because they had an almost unimaginably huge public—as many as 80 million people per week by 1938 (Mast 225). Thus, movie sets had the ability to set trends, arbitrate public taste, and influence and inspire millions of Americans. A Fellow of the American Institute of Architects put it this way when explaining how his colleagues might break into the movies, “the buildings they depict are not permanent to be sure, but they reach many more people with their message than do many permanent buildings” (Grey 33). As critics, architects, interior designers, and art directors gradually recognized this potential in the 1930s, they were merely following the lead of producers and

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studio executives. From nearly the advent of cinema, film makers were conscious of the central role that movies might play in American culture, transmitting social values and ideals and shaping public opinion and mores. This was particularly true with the introduction and enforcement of the production code and the worsening of the Depression in the early 1930s. As the decade progressed, movie makers increasingly created an on-screen world that deliberately simplified American life, both prescriptively and proscriptively, in order to mollify the distressed masses of the general public (Paine 22).

One of the most compelling ways to convey these social messages was visually through sets, props, decor, and lighting—through the very design of the film. Set design became, in effect, a quasi-character. It did not just accompany, but commented upon the action of the plot, reinforcing and promoting the vision of American society it depicted. This vision became even more convincing after technological advances in the 1920s enabled set design to move away from its theatrical origins toward more fully realized depictions of inhabited space. In the early days of cinema, flat-painted back-drops or three-walled “box” sets were the norm (Heisner 7). With the development of depth of field moving photography and panchromatic film stock, however, all objects within the shot remained crisp and clearly focused whether they were near the camera or receding in space. This meant that three-dimensional props would be read as three-dimensional on film. As a result, anything appearing in a shot—stairs, paneling, furniture, lamps or ashtrays—required a higher level of finish and detail than had previously been necessary. The effect of this was obvious, and visitors to the major movie studios began to note that set fixtures and furnishings were “genuine and of the best materials” (Grey 31).

It was around this time that American architects first expressed an interest in the movies; by the 1930s, according to some estimates, nearly ninety-five percent of all Hollywood art directors came from the profession (Erengis 222). While the number of architects working in film production was undoubtedly influenced by the contraction of

the building industry during the Depression, the profession’s attitude toward motion pictures was informed by more than the economic crisis. Beginning in the 1920s the architectural press gave increasing coverage to the growing film industry. Magazines such as *The American Architect*, *The Architectural Record*, and *Pencil Points* heralded motion pictures as an ideal field for architects given their spatial, structural, and aesthetic knowledge. They also argued that movies offered an opportunity for imaginative, even fantastic, architectural exploration since set design was unburdened by exigencies of program and construction (Carrick 444; Zeigler 547). While some members of the architectural community complained that their art would be sullied by the commercial impulses of Hollywood, most architects grasped the industry’s possibilities for career advancement and design innovation (Barnes 169). Of even greater consequence, however, the profession regarded the movies as an unparalleled opportunity for the edification of the American public.

Architects acknowledged that they were not the first to discover that movies possessed educational power, but they believed this had yet to be properly developed. Because movies were entertainment they might succeed where schooling had failed, and could demonstrate to the public what was good, correct, and beautiful in architecture and interiors (“The Architecture of Motion Picture Settings” 2; MacFarland 66). According to Harold Miles, art director and head of the Hollywood League of Architects, once such examples were widespread, movies would truly become “one of the most powerful sources of molding public opinion that civilization has devised” (Miles 544). Their impact was inevitable, or so architects wished to believe: the public would not only come to enjoy and appreciate good design at the movies, they would demand it in their everyday lives as well. This would have the effect of counteracting the depravities of taste that many architects regarded as a condition of modern life: “it is safe to predict that motion pictures will be an influence for the good of public taste in many lines of effort and in standards of living generally”

(Ziegler 546; Grey 33; Miles 544). Despite this early optimism, architects in Hollywood soon dispensed with their didactic ambitions for the movies, or at least refrained from public discussion of them.

With movies averaging between thirty-five and fifty sets per feature and studios producing close to fifty movies per year, often with five to ten in progress at the same time, the simple pressures of film production were at least partially responsible for this change. But so were the larger dynamics of the studio system as it flourished during Hollywood's Golden Age. The system in this period is generally understood as regulatory, in that all aspects of film production and distribution were completely under studio control (Gomery). At first glance, set design seems to be no exception; it was merely a single cog in the larger machine of the film factory. While art directors, and their draftspeople and set decorators, were solely responsible for set design, they closely coordinated their work with representatives from scripting, costuming, cinematography, and, of course the director. In addition, before construction could begin, set design was vetted by studio executives and publicity departments for potential schedule and cost overruns and for censorship problems, especially in the depiction of bedrooms and bathrooms (Laing 63 and Heisner).

The studios also sanctioned a particular "look" for their films. Paramount was renowned for its sleek modernity; RKO for its big white sets; MGM for its fashionable art deco; Warner Brothers for its urban realism (Albrecht; Mandelbaum and Meyers, Ramirez). To a large degree these looks were dictated by the types of movies each studio produced: gritty gangster pictures obviously required a different look than sophisticated comedies. But even accepting necessary distinctions between genres, the major studios each had a recognizable visual style, one that was promoted by the press and applauded by the movie-going public. It was in their contributions to this visual style—in their virtual establishment of it—that set designers were able to transcend at least some of the broader regulatory pressures of the studio system. As described by William Cameron

Menzies, an art director at United Artists, it was the responsibility of his staff to "picturize" the form and content given to them by other departments within the studio (Laing 64). This might seem as if art departments were merely following studio dictates rather than leading design decisions. However, because a film's form and content were so often "in amoeba," as one writer put it, set designers were called upon to visualize from the very beginning every aspect of the film (Laing 59). Thus, though they remained bound by financial and technical realities, the fact that they were, in essence, starting from scratch, meant that they were able to operate with a large measure of design freedom.

This freedom was equally informed by two other factors. First, as discussed above, motion picture set design was only just emerging as a discipline distinct from stage set design. Called upon to produce unprecedented designs, art directors were able to experiment widely, often with new materials and technologies. Second, architecture and design in the United States was at a cross-road in the period between the World Wars, with tradition and modernity in conflict as never before. Art directors were obviously aware of this cultural zeitgeist, but they were called upon to produce designs that were above the aesthetic fray as their work had to represent, as Menzies put it, "all periods and all nationalities" (Laing 64). As a result, they were able to push design into new directions, creating what amounted to a definable "Hollywood style." Unfettered by high art agendas and canons of taste, be they established or avant-garde, art directors created a free-wheeling eclecticism that borrowed liberally, and often simultaneously, from traditional and contemporary sources of architecture and design. In conflating historicism and modernism, this Hollywood style was the perfect vehicle for embodying the look of each studio and the most popular genres of the 1930s—from melodramas to screwball comedies to musicals.

In *picturizing* these genres through Hollywood style, art directors were bound by at least one additional mandate: their sets had to be "sufficiently authentic to hold carping fan mail to a

minimum” (Laing 59). Thus, the majority of their work was firmly grounded in present day America—or at least the glamorous, moneyed, and ultra-modern urban America that depression-era movie-goers wanted to believe existed somewhere. As MGM art director Cedric Gibbons described it, the studio art department was charged with the task of “creating an illusion of reality” by producing sets that attempted to duplicate a world the audience recognized (Gibbons 41). Quite often, however, audiences recognized the stylish world of penthouses, nightclubs, hotels, and ocean liners depicted on screen only because they had already seen it in another picture. In this way movie sets exposed many Americans to a wide range of contemporary design, much of which was simultaneously on display in the pages of shelter and decorating magazines and the showrooms of department and home furnishing stores.¹ Indeed, as A. B. Laing observed in 1933, in their “quest for realism” movie sets became “an unconscious trade propagandist, stimulating interest in many American products” (Laing 64). This was certainly the case with Gibbons’ work at MGM. This art direction may not have provided the American public with its *first* introduction to modern décor, but it certainly marked the beginning of a stylistic crusade that would stimulate Hollywood until the end of the 1930s (Wilson 101–15).

Beginning with *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), and its two sequels, *Our Modern Maidens* (1929) and *Our Blushing Brides* (1930), Gibbons created sets characterized by their spaciousness and rich Art Deco detailing (Image 1). Having visited the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratif et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, Gibbons relied so extensively on the interiors he saw there that he was actually accused of plagiarizing his designs (Erengis 226; Albrecht 90). While this seems an overstatement, the eponymous daughters twirl their way through entry halls, stairways, living rooms, bedrooms, and even a tree house, all filled with chevron-shaped wall sconces, huge vases, statues, sculptural reliefs, lacquered furniture, and highly polished uncarpeted floors. So overpowering were the



Image 1. Film Still from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928). Credit: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Roddy McDowall Photograph Archive.

interiors that a studio press release declared that “modernistic effects in furniture and architecture (were) being used with a vengeance” (Mandelbaum & Meyers 33). The impact of this was not lost on critics, who observed that Gibbons’ sets were “a startling revelation to decorators, architects, and housewives across the land” (Erengis 227). Such comments reinforced the power movies had to influence popular taste and consumption habits.

Gibbons’ designs for the *Dancing Daughter* series led to a proliferation of Art Deco sets in the late twenties and early thirties. Indeed, it seemed that studio art departments were churning them out at a rate that almost resembles mass production. Nonetheless, sets were usually dressed lavishly, and those of particular significance to the storyline were completed with an exceptionally high degree of finish.² For MGM’s *The Kiss* (1929), starring Greta Garbo, the lively Deco of *Our Dancing Daughters* gives way to a sleeker mode with glowing metallic finishes on the furniture and dramatic stripes on the floor. Equally dramatic is the monumental dining table providing both physical and emotional distance as it stretches between Garbo and her unloved on-screen husband. Designed by art director Richard Day, it is a sheet of thin black glass supported by short wide piers of stripped-classical profile. Day

placed the long, low table in the center of a vast dining room, its horizontal emphasis playing against the overwhelming verticals of the room's floor-to-ceiling windows.

Another Garbo vehicle, *Grand Hotel* (1932), won MGM an Academy Award for best picture, though its lavish Deco art direction was not even nominated. For the principal set, a hotel lobby traversed constantly by the movie's characters, designers Gibbons and Toluboff created a central circular space with a round reception desk. Black and white glossy surfaces dominate the lobby, especially in the geometric diamond-patterned floor. The floor, in turn, is reflected across the lobby in large expanses of glass held in place by an elaborate framework of metal bands. Finally, sconces, clocks, and signs are all harmonized into a lustrous whole, every detail of which is revealed to the audience by a dizzying array of camera angles.

In contrast to MGM high-gloss look, Paramount sets feature a warmer Art Deco that is more concerned with varied textures and materials. For *The Magnificent Flirt* (1928), Van Nest Polglase created a sumptuous bathroom with richly veined marbles, stylized shell and wave motifs, a ziggurat-shaped vanity, and diffuse light provided by slender torchères—all reflected in an enormous round mirror. At the time of the movie's release, studio publicity called the bathroom "the latest idea in interior architecture for the modern home," though it failed to explain how the modern home owner would fit such a palatial set into his or her standard bathroom dimensions of five by seven feet (Heisner 219). A publisher's office, designed by William Saulter for *Gentlemen of the Press* (1929) uses a variety of inlaid woods and contrasting dark and light finishes and veneers. With its striped window shades, chevron-decorated curtains, two-tone carpet, skyscraper-profiled bookcases, and zigzag/lightning bolt desk legs the office is clearly intended to occupy an upper floor of a Deco skyscraper not unlike the Chrysler Building.

Such skyscrapers often figured prominently in films as both form-giver and setting, playing a significant role in making these towers the era's preeminent symbol of modernity. In Universal's

Broadway (1929), designed by Charles D. Hall, the dance floor at the Paradise Nightclub was surrounded by three massive-stepped towers of glass and metal surmounted by facets of mirrored glass to form a canopy. Skyscrapers painted in extreme tilted-up perspective form the club's background. Meanwhile, the costumes of the chorus girls carried on the skyscraper motif. Their skirts were adorned with silhouetted city skylines and they wore miniature skyscrapers on their heads. Even more elaborate were the "living" skyscrapers that Busby Berkeley and Jack Okey created for Warner Brothers' *42nd Street* (1933). In the famous production number that begins with Ruby Keeler tap dancing on top of a taxicab, the dancers suddenly flood the stage, each carrying cardboard cutouts representing buildings on the New York skyline. As Keeler sings and dances her way up a center aisle of stairs the "buildings" now flanking her, sway back and forth keeping time to the syncopation of the music. The average filmgoer could hardly hope to reproduce the skyscraper settings they saw on screen. They could, however, reproduce the skyscraper motifs they saw on screen, as these began to appear in all manner of design, from wall paper to book cases to cocktail shakers.³

Even as movies with elaborate Art Deco sets were released, others were in production with sets of a chicly spare, "cleaner" style. Two years before Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson mounted their 1932 International Style exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Gloria Swanson hired an American follower of Le Corbusier to design the sets for her comedy *What a Widow* (1930). The Parisian villa architect Paul Nelson designed for Swanson's character is a thoughtful interpretation of Corbusier's houses of the 1920s. A large terrace and multi-level music room open off the central living space, defined only by free-standing walls, some containing strips of glass glowing with light. Ribbon windows provide views of the lush countryside, actually composite photographs of a landscape set into minimalist window frames. Tubular furniture, a neon sculpture, and a few cubist-inspired paintings complete the modern decor.



Image 2. Production still from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1931). Credit: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Roddy McDowall Photograph Archive.

If Nelson attempted to remain true to Corbusier's "cinq points" of modern architecture when he designed for the movies, most screen architects felt no such compunction. Not content to work in only one stylistic vocabulary, Cedric Gibbons combined what reviewers called "modernistic" (Art Deco) and "functionalist" (modernist) décor in his sets for *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1931) (Image 2). The luxurious penthouse Greta Garbo occupies is enclosed by walls almost completely given over to windows, with only the thinnest mullions defining the edges of the plate glass. A large white fireplace in the living room takes the form of a faceted block, with andirons in the shape of set back skyscrapers. Sculptures flanking the fireplace are graceful Art Deco nudes in the style of Paul Manship. The tubular chrome and upholstered furniture, casually grouped around the penthouse, appears to be based on a variety of contemporary designs, including those by Mies van der Rohe, Kem Weber, and Gilbert Rohde. Hans Dreier's sets for Paramount's *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) also present a collage of styles, and create an atmosphere of urbane sophistication and modern elegance. For one of the film's principal sets, a Parisian villa, Dreier

combined ample glass, circular stairways, white walls and abundant light in a typical International Style manner. Dreier furnished the villa with his own authentic Bauhaus furniture, which coexists on the sets with a series of Art Deco clocks. The clocks figure prominently in one of the film's memorable sequences as they mark the passing of time over an evening-long assignation. At the movie's release, Mordaunt Hall commented in the *New York Times* that "no more inviting example of 1932 decorations has been offered on the screen" (Hall n.p.), again emphasizing the acceptance of set design as interior design that could be reproduced off screen.

Further stylistic gyrations in on-screen design resulted indirectly from an improvement in the illumination of movie sets. The arc lights that were in general usage throughout the 1920s made the use of so-called true white in movie decor impossible, since that color appeared on film as a blinding glare. In the early 1930s, however, the development of incandescent lights for the movies meant that sets and props painted "true" white would register as white on film. The era of the "big white set" had begun. Once again, Cedric Gibbons was at the forefront of the newest fashion in movie decor. His sets for MGM's *Dinner at Eight* (1933), designed in collaboration with Hobart Erwin, inaugurated a style that quickly became known as the "white telephone look." Screen legend has it that their sets used eleven shades of white, not including Jean Harlow's platinum blonde hair (Mandelbaum & Meyers 34). These sets did not, however, exemplify the crisp clean whiteness usually ascribed to the modernists. Rather, they were flouncing and historicizing, a sort of bleached-out Art Deco without the stylizing motifs.

If Cedric Gibbons introduced the big white set, RKO's supervising art director, Van Nest Polglase, perfected it. The sets he designed from 1933 to 1937 for RKO's dance musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers represent some of the most lavish art direction of the decade.⁴ Whether a sparkling ocean liner, a posh London hotel, or a glitzy Manhattan nightclub, the dictum was always the same: make it big; make it white;

make it modern. But modern, as interpreted by Polglase and co-designer Carroll Clark, was usually a pastiche of stylistic elements borrowed from Art Deco, Streamlined Moderne, and International Style modernism with extra motifs thrown in from a range of historical periods.

The all-white Hotel Bella Vista of *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) is three stories high with circular balconies overlooking an esplanade wide enough to hold nearly one hundred dancers. Three Art Deco frescos of frolicking dolphins and winged horses enliven the hotel's façade and provide the main decorative elements. In a nod to the International Style, the lobby level has a glass curtain wall extending the length of the facade and broad horizontal bands of stairs. The stair treads project out past their risers so that they seem to float on air, not unlike Astaire and Rogers dancing before them. In contrast, Astaire and Rogers move at breakneck speed through Mr. Gordon's Dance Studio in *Swing Time* (1936). Here, Polglase and Clark designed a completely streamlined interior of chrome, plate glass, and bakelite with ubiquitous "speed" lines decorating nearly every surface.⁵ The speed lines perfectly match the fast-paced steps of the dancers. In fact, Astaire often developed his choreography with full awareness of the sets in which his and Rogers' dances would occur (Altman 245–46).

This was decidedly the case in *Swing Time's* "Never Gonna Dance" number in the Silver Sandal Nightclub, located "high above the heavens," according to the bandleader. Entering the club through mirrored doors that opened onto a circular platform, guests descended one of a pair of black high-gloss stairways that curved down toward the main dance floor. The band, situated directly beneath the entry platform, was seemingly suspended in air above skyscrapers painted illusionistically on the floor beneath them.⁶ To heighten the celestial effect, the walls and ceiling were painted with twinkling stars with glowing planet-like orbs as light fixtures on each table. The tables themselves were draped in gold lamé and cellophane which was also used to provide slipcovers for the chrome and leatherette chairs. The crinkled cellophane adds to the glimmering

atmosphere as it reflects and refracts the light of the club.

The most elaborate sets Polglase and Clark designed for the Astaire/Rogers series were for *Top Hat* (1935), whose entire second half takes place on the Lido in Venice. For this Hollywood-on-the-Adriatic, the designers combined two adjoining sound stages into one enormous two-storied, four-sided set. A winding canal with dyed black water wanders through the set, crossed by three bridges and surrounded by terraces and buildings raised ten feet off the ground. The bridges and buildings are embellished with oversized architectural details, reminiscent of those found on real Venetian buildings, but so flattened and abstracted that if they are part of any formal vocabulary, it is one of pure whimsy. A riot of pure white columns, capitals, pilasters, pediments, and moldings from every imaginable period (neo-classical, neo-colonial, Art Deco) are wildly juxtaposed across the immense set to produce a fantastic decor. Inside a resort hotel, Polglase and Clark reserved most of their decorative flourishes for the bridal suite, where much of the film's crucial action takes place (Image 3). The focal point of the suite is the bed, circular in shape, raised on a circular dais, and swathed in sheer diaphanous curtains. Frescos of a stylized lute and trumpet flank the bed chamber underscoring the theme of romantic/erotic love. The furniture is based on French Rococo but with



Image 3. Production still from RKO Pictures' *Top Hat* (1935). Credit: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Roddy McDowall Photograph Archive.

“cleaner” lines that the designers no doubt felt made it more modern. Most of it is placed informally about the room, resting on fuzzy throw rugs. The chamber is completed by a high-gloss bakelite floor so reflective that it almost reads as a post-Code substitute for a mirrored ceiling.⁷ The traditional/modern blend that Polglase and Clark achieved in their designs for the Lido and the bridal suite were characteristic of the big white set. While the level of excess it represented may have been a welcome distraction to moviegoers, and acknowledged as a filmic necessity for successful cinematography, critics sometimes complained that such aesthetic exaggeration left movies open to charges of bad taste and improper influence (Grace 47 and 56).

The multiple stylistic modes of the Astaire/Rogers series did not result from shifting aesthetics at the RKO art department, nor from specific plot requirements (the plots vary only slightly from movie to movie). Rather, they indicate the ability, and indeed the willingness, of set designers to exploit a variety of formal vocabularies, both modern and traditional, as if the whole history of architecture and design, up to and including the 1930s, was to be foraged through and raided at will. When Polglase designed the Hotel Bella Vista for *The Gay Divorcee* he carefully considered the visual impact of his “building,” knowing that it had to give an overwhelming impression of modernity. As discussed above, he employed a variety of stylistic devices that his 1934 audience would have taken as visual cues for “modern.” But the hotel only had to *look* modern to have the intended affect. Few people would have noticed that in massing and plan the hotel is more traditional than modern, with an insistent symmetry dictating its form (this is evident only in production stills and not in the film itself). In light of Polglase’s Beaux-Arts architectural education tradition, this is not all that surprising. But his work generally did not refer to any single actual building; rather it referred to many buildings. Likewise, his architectural forms are derived more from a broad interpretation of a host of designs, than from an actual transcription of specific plans and elevations.

Concurrent with this formal *paraphrasing* was another approach to set design that could be described as *literalistic* because of its reliance on exact quotations of details from actual buildings—occasionally with humorous results. When art director William Cameron Menzies used the Campanile of Toledo in a set design for a Spanish city, he found that McKim, Mead and White had beaten him to the punch: “As you know, Madison Square Garden in New York has copied this campanile, and so many people recognized it and asked what Madison Square Garden was doing in the picture, that I had to change it” (Heisner 5). To locate an image of his Toledo campanile, Menzies was able to turn to his studio research department. Art directors in the 1930s relied on these departments as they contained a library of contemporary art and architecture magazines, books, and photographs, all of which provided valuable source material for their sets. But relying so extensively on secondary sources tended to make movie sets both simplifications and exaggerations of the architecture on which they were based. Of course, because fantasy was as important as realism this was generally irrelevant.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the design of the Emerald City for MGM’s *Wizard of Oz* (1939). Designers Cedric Gibbons and William A. Horning ransacked the studio’s research collection until they found a small photograph of a sketch executed in Germany that “looked like test tubes upside down . . . like some strange thing we had never seen before” (Harmetz 214). Historians have concluded that the sketch was most likely Bruno Taut’s “Crystal Mountain” from his 1919 volume *Alpine Architecture*, and this seems plausible as the drawing’s crystalline forms are appropriate for an emerald city (Heisner 91). Several interior details of the Emerald City also appear to have been lifted *in toto* from sources Gibbons and Horning might have found in MGM’s research collection. The corridor to the Wizard’s throne room, for example, bears striking resemblance to the upper gallery of Gaudi’s 1890 School of the Teresian Nuns and to a hallway in his 1904 Casa Battlo. As the

Wizard of Oz neared completion, photographs of the movie's sets were sent out by MGM to architecture and home-decorating magazines (Harmezt 213). Whether it was images of the Emerald City or Dorothy's Kansas homestead that studio publicists hoped would be printed is inconsequential. More important is the fact that they considered design magazines a forum for introducing their studio's latest sets.

Throughout the 1930s when architecture, interior design, and home decorating magazines featured movie sets it was usually to discuss the beneficial effect that movies were having in the United States in furthering the cause of good design. Movie studios, it was reasoned, with their highly trained personnel, well-equipped research facilities, and discriminating art departments, represented the "highest contemporary standards of design." Furthermore, with their technical and artistic resources, studios were "perpetual laboratories of experiment" whose skillful use of new materials and methods rendered a great service to the design professions (Cutts 16 and 18 and Laing 64). As noted above, in the 1920s many writers commented on the potential of movies to influence public taste and standards of living. A decade later, they concluded that this potential had been realized because public taste had, indeed, improved. Such critiques always made clear exactly which portion of the public needed its taste improved in the first place. According to Henry W. Grace, President of the Society of Motion Picture Decorators, "every shop girl in the nation" had benefited from the "educational boon" of the movies. By Grace's account, movies had "opened new vistas to the average American," which meant that even shop girls could aspire to the manners, homes, and clothes of the "luxurious rich" (Grace 44).

Allen W. Porter, cited as an expert because of his position as a film curator at the Museum of Modern Art, felt that the movies' "mass education in decoration" took a more subtle form, as the "average middle class movie-goer is subconsciously moved to duplicate" the interiors he or she sees on the screen. He described the use of modernist furniture in *Susan Lenox* as follows: "Even the most stubborn die-hard, witnessing Garbo ex-

ploiting the merits of a tubular chair, can be made to see its features more readily than if the same chair were encountered in Bloomingdale's" (Porter 58). Hardly subconsciously, by 1942 *House Beautiful* was actively encouraging its readers to observe "the work of distinguished decorators" found in movie sets. Careful study of movie interiors "executed with exquisite taste and discrimination" would reveal "valuable ideas" that movie-goers could adapt in their own homes ("Why the Movies are Influencing American Taste" 37).

That movie interiors were, indeed, serving as "patterns for homes of tomorrow" was supposedly indicated by the tremendous amount of fan mail that studios received. According to numerous writers, these letters requested photographs, sketches, blue prints of whole houses, and specifications of the smallest decorative details (Cutts 16 and Laing 63). How many fans actually changed the design and decor of their homes in response to the movie sets they had they had seen on screen is unclear.⁸ But even the *desire* of the movie-going public to mimic movie architecture can be read as a barometer of fashion, or as one writer put it, as a "sure-fire symptom of the way American taste in homes is trending" (Shearer 218).

The fact that art directors occasionally designed "real" architecture undoubtedly added even more glamour to already popular screen architecture, especially since most of the houses they designed were for movie stars or other high profile members of the film industry. Ginger Rogers lived in a house designed by Van Nest Polglase, who also designed most of the movies in which she appeared. In the late 1920s, Cedric Gibbons designed a house for himself and his movie star wife, Delores Del Rio. Labeled an "architect of the Functional persuasion" by a contemporary writer (Cutts 18), Gibbons built a house of steel, concrete, and glass which has been described as the "Villa Stein gone Hollywood" (Goldberger 24). Fueled by Hollywood gossip and fan magazines, the public often associated movie stars with their on-screen personas. Thus, living in a house designed by a set designer further

conflated reality and the movies, making it even more difficult to figure out if art imitates life or if life imitates art.⁹ Only rarely did writers acknowledge that the extravagances of movie sets (or Hollywood houses) were hardly practical, much less affordable, for most Americans. Edwin Turnblad, writing in 1937, realized that many sets went beyond the “livable aspects of practicality” when they were dressed with “cellophane drapes or glass venetian blinds.” Nonetheless, he concluded that the “stylized modern” of Polglase was much in vogue, judging by the number of inquiries the studio received from designers and the general public alike (Turnblad 9).

House Beautiful, for its part, did distinguish between movies that presented fabulous but “unsubstantial” sets (read modern) and those that offered a “climate of reality,” that is traditional forms (“Why Movies are Influencing American Taste” 36). By 1946, when the magazine published the “most popular” movie sets of the last 20 years—determined by the amount of fan mail they received—not a single fully modern set was included. There was no Art Deco, no Streamlined Moderne, no International Style. Instead, author Lloyd Shearer presented sets that were “Traditional” but which, in his view, drew upon the “functional Modern.” The modern beast “of which Americans used to be so frightened” had been tamed at last, by none other than the great screen modernist himself, Cedric Gibbons. His sets for MGM’s *When Ladies Meet* (1941) were an eclectic blend of Early American and a florid neo-Rococo, exemplified by a table lamp with a white china Pomeranian base and a mass of ruffles and fringe for a shade (Image 4). Shearer welcomed the merging of old and new that he perceived in the sets: “Modern has been stripped of its starkness, given heart and traditional charm” (Shearer 219). That Gibbons would deliver the death blow to the very Hollywood style he had helped create is not surprising. Always on the cutting edge of fashion, Gibbons had been careful to keep his sets one step ahead of ever shifting modern styles. Aware of increasingly conservative trends in American design magazines, Gibbons turned purposefully to a more traditional stylistic mode for



Image 4. Production still from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s *When Ladies Meet* (1941). Credit: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Roddy McDowall Photograph Archive.

When Ladies Meet. If it is true, as *House Beautiful* asserted, that the sets broke all previous fan mail records, Gibbons’ *new traditionalism* was right on target.

It is important to note that however much the vagaries of taste informed this on-screen stylistic shift there were other factors at work as well. Some historians have observed that American design in this period was influenced by fashion and contemporaneity to the exclusion of morality or social norms (Gebhard 62). This might have been true for most of the country, but Hollywood played by other rules. Beginning in the late twenties and continuing into the thirties, motion picture set design was directly influenced by broader social considerations. It was a relationship that could be summed up by two fairly simple equations: modern equals bad; traditional equals good. If *good* meant honest virtue, loyalty, and fidelity, *bad*, at least in Hollywood’s vernacular, was subject to as many interpretations as *modern*. While stock melodramas equated modern design with sin, immorality, and even the extremes of inhumanity and evil, the modern interiors of screwball comedies tended to reflect the zany, reckless, and usually irresponsible nature of the wealthy people who inhabited them.

Even as *Our Dancing Daughters* provided many audiences with their first taste of modern movie decor, no 1928 movie-goer could have missed the unmistakable meanings implied by the use of that decor. As a *New York Times* reviewer noted, the bold Art Deco sets were immediately associated with the carefree existence of “the wild young people of this generation”—whose whose antics usually involved “cocktails, flasks and mad dancing” (Amberg 84). Of course, flasks and mad dancing went hand-in-hand with loose morals, and before long sex was firmly a factor in the modern/bad design equation. When the *Times* reviewed *Our Blushing Brides*, two years later, their reading of Art Deco sets had become more explicit: “All three girls yearn for the trappings that make for a comfortable life, and the two who sacrifice their hall rooms for modernistic settings must pay the piper” (“Salesgirls,” n.p.). To avoid “paying the piper” movie characters, women of course, usually had to sacrifice their “modernistic settings.”

This is especially true in *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*. Susan’s gleaming penthouse, paid for by her wealthy (and corrupt) politician lover, is clearly a sign of her moral decay—the “fall” of the title. Her “rise” can occur only when she leaves behind sleek modern surroundings for a dumpy cabin in a South American jungle. Only then will Susan find true love with a poor but honest engineer played by Clark Gable. Such drastic architectural contrasts, as between the lofty penthouse and the earthbound cabin, were a mainstay of melodramas throughout the decade. In *The Women* (1939), for example, Norma Shearer’s virtuous, upper-class housewife occupies a Connecticut mansion whose country comfort and rustic charm perfectly match her breeding and manners. In contrast, the milieu of Joan Crawford’s working-class “salesgirl” is the perfume counter in a Manhattan department store. The Streamlined Moderne store, frequented by a succession of straying husbands, provides the perfect setting for the sexual conquests Crawford believes will aid her climb up the social ladder. When she finally attains money and position, Crawford’s character seems to spend most of her time in a

lucite bathtub furnished with satin pillows and a white telephone—clear signs of her of immorality and her bad taste.

In Universal’s *The Black Cat* (1934) Bauhaus-inspired architecture provides a sinister setting for the mad architect/devil worshiper played by Boris Karloff. His modern mansion replaces the horror film standards of creaking doors and dark shadows with decor of a more ominous nature: glass brick, bakelite floors, metal staircases, and Breuer chairs. The Streamlined Moderne architecture of *Arrowsmith’s* (1931) McGurk Research Institute in New York at first seems to positively signify modern science. By the end of the movie, however, it becomes clear that this pristine orderliness is merely a cover for sterile antihumanistic values that place pure science above people. Likewise, the modern industrial complex represented by *Dodsworth’s* (1936) automobile factory shifts from a symbol of authority, power, and success to one of isolation and loneliness. In the end, *Dodsworth* leaves it behind, moving to a rustic and very un-modern Italian villa where he finds true love with an unpretentious American divorcee.

The screwball comedy had its own particular brand of moralism, usually reinforced by the use of modern decor. The opening scenes of *Topper* (1937), for example, are used to establish the carefree and purposeless life of the ultra-rich couple played by Cary Grant and Constance Bennett. They drive their luxurious streamlined coupe from Art Deco nightclub to Moderne hotel to Bauhaus apartment, drinking champagne all the while. Their one occupation seems to be to persecute and ridicule a stuffy banker whose main faults might be the Beaux-Arts bank where he works and the neo-colonial house where he lives. After a fatal car accident, the couple may not enter heaven until they atone for their earthly sins—though this is accomplished by introducing the banker to the good life they themselves have left behind.

Two on-screen couples did manage to escape the moralistic design equation of the 1930s. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers sang and danced their way through one modern fairy tale romance after

another. The big white larger-than-life sets were not needed to signify good or bad, because everyone was always good. The situation of Nick and Nora Charles of MGM's *Thin Man* series was slightly more complicated. Whether in their Richard Neutra-style San Francisco townhouse or Hollywood-style New York penthouse, Nick and Nora exuded modern sophistication, underscored by white, glass-filled surroundings and an ever-present cocktail shaker, usually streamlined. Unlike many of their on-screen contemporaries, Nick and Nora's wealth and modernity had no negative connotations. If Nora was a bit zany (like many movie rich folk), it was tempered by Nick's gumshoe smarts (he was a regular joe who had married into money). The expected architectural contrasts always served to put the Charleses in the best possible light. In *After the Thin Man* (1936), the Victorian mansion of Nora's upper-crust family was played for laughs; it was stuffy, moribund, and boring, especially when compared to Nick and Nora's ultra-modern abodes.

In the movies of the late thirties and early forties, traditional interiors slowly outnumbered modern ones. By the middle of the decade, the eclectically modern Hollywood style of the thirties was distant memory. If the sets and the stories changed, the message stayed the same—honest virtues were still the American way, but rich people and fallen women were no longer needed to bring the point home. In many ways, RKO's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is a paradigm of the traditional values and small town virtues Hollywood espoused in the forties. Soda fountains, offices, and single family detached houses have replaced the nightclubs, hotels and penthouses of an earlier on-screen era, as World War II vets readjust to civilian life. Myrna Loy, hardly forty years old, but relegated to frumpy dresses and graying temples, is cast as the understanding, always supportive, wife and mother. She moves, ever graceful in her flowered apron, from workaday kitchen to Ethan Allen living room, reciting her lines capably, but somehow detached as the plot unfolds around her. The attentive viewer will occasionally notice a sparkle in her eyes and a pert look on her face and imagine her casting a back-

ward glance toward the Hollywood of the 1930s, when glamorous actors occupied fabulous interiors that were simultaneously up-to-the-minute and utterly unrealistic—just the thing to distract Depression-era audiences and help them imagine what they might consume when the hard times were over.

Notes

1. Ironically, if audiences had a point of reference for what they saw on screen from the "real" world, even that had likely been modified by a visit to the local movie house, as newsreels throughout the decade announced the construction of the Empire State Building or the arrival of the *Queen Mary* and the *Normandie* in the Port of New York.

2. It is not my intention in the discussion that follows to analyze movie sets in detailed formal terms; this has been done elsewhere, notably in Donald Albrecht's *Designing Dreams*, and need not be repeated here. Rather, I have chosen to discuss a representative sampling of movie sets to illustrate stylistic shifts over the decade.

3. See for example, Ruth Reeves' Manhattan wall paper, 1930, Paul Frankl's Skyscraper Bookcase, 1927, and Norman Bel Geddes' Manhattan Cocktail Set, 1937.

4. The films in the series are *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), *Swing Time* (1936), and *Shall We Dance* (1937).

5. Studio art departments made ample use of the era's most popular building materials like plate glass, glass brick, chrome, and bakelite. In 1936 *California Arts and Architecture* suggested that manufacturers of building materials should consider the film industry a prime market for their products, concluding that "a sizeable town of homes" could be built from materials used by the film industry each year. See Edwin Turnbladh, "Motion Picture Studios as a Market for Building Materials," *California Arts and Architecture* September 1936: 33.

6. Cinematography reinforces this illusion. Our first view of the nightclub is a close-up shot of the painted skyscrapers; the camera pulls back quickly giving the impression that we are traveling upward at high speed until we emerge far above the tops of the skyscrapers below, into the "heavenly" atmosphere of the Silver Sandal.

7. The Hollywood Production Code, drafted in 1930, was finally enforced beginning in 1933. It seems likely that *Top Hat's* queen-size bed only made it through the censors because it was located in a bridal suite.

8. Exact copies of Tara were built in towns across the country after the release of MGM's *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and after RKO's *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) at least one exact copy was built in Kansas City, but these are extremes.

Fashion mavens like Brendan Gill and John Saladino have written about the influence of movies on architecture and design, concluding that, by and large, the influence has had more to do with attitudes than actualities, though Saladino claims that he now has a penthouse apartment and a penthouse office because "they represent the quintessential Manhattan life" that he first experienced in the movies of the 1930s. We should all be so lucky. See John Saladino, "On Decorating & Design: Imitating Reel Life," *House Beautiful* October 1987: 15.

9. In 1941, Allen Porter bemoaned the fact that more of the “film folk” in Hollywood didn’t live in houses based on designs from the movies. Too many of them, he complained, lived in houses that were “endless adaptations” of California bungalows and Spanish villas. Even those who were not “in flight from the Twentieth century” were living in houses of “eccentric modernism, tasteless in detail.” See Porter 60.

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