

ARCHITECTURE AND FILMS

Architecture and films are both sensorial and led by the visual sense above all else – and because of their emotional and visual power, architects are naturally attracted to films and filming.



Metropolis 1927

Frank Lloyd Wright is known to carry a movie camera occasionally and seen to film events at Taliesin, where he had his studio, home and school. Unfortunately little remained of Wright's film footages. Films as compared to architecture have much less constraints on the imagination, as for example, props in the films need only be temporary with much less requirement for exactness, as studio manipulation can conceal the blemishes. These days, physical props are replaced by digital

constructs, which give even greater scope for the imagination with no compulsion towards physical construction.

Primarily films have moving parts and parts in films move, as compared to architecture, which is static most of the time – hence the term, 'movies' as the phenomenon is frequently termed. Both would have their own terms of references and these references do cross occasionally albeit rarely. Films occasionally use architecture to arrive at greatness but

architecture does not require films to reach its heights. Architecture has much less scope for transfiguration than films – for example films can be shot in black and white to capture sadness or brooding scenes whereas architecture cannot escape the colours of reality. Wide-angle lens can further exaggerate image-capture in films whereas architecture is limited by what the eye sees in its natural state. Films can further be speeded up, compressed or pulled longer and the films can be framed in television format or elongated 'cinemascope'.

In many films, architecture plays major parts either as significant backdrop or even as the film's central focus. Very recent blockbusters like 'Inception', 'Transformers Age of Extinction' and 'Guardians of the Galaxy' and many other recent cinema successes demonstrate this. The science fiction genre and comic novel adaptations are particularly strong in the use of fictionalised architecture. The influence of architecture on films could also largely be due to designers with architectural background finding themselves in the film industry, where their work could be more quickly realised (and with less constraints) than in the real field of architecture. In the flat environment of the film industry, young designers find themselves in familiar surroundings, often an extension of the design studio where the computer screen looms large in recent times. In the film industry, architectural constructions are an exaggeration of reality – capturing moods and fiction instead. For example, in films, architecture can be made to look sadder and more forlorn than in reality by the way frames are used together with variances in lighting, tonality and sound. Conversely, the two art forms are quite different – although they sometimes cross, it would be strange if architecture and film can be compatible. It leads to the question then – to

what extent can film represent architecture?

There are many films about cities, and in these films, cities become like film sets for the films. With reference to its close vocational proximity to photography for example, which is a still version of the film, someone once suggests that photographers are more like hunters, whereas the filmmakers are like bird watchers – and the architect straddles in between to become either one or the other, or both. The photographer hunts for the right instance to capture the moment, whereas the filmmaker watches the whole day, watching people moving in and out of something an architect has built, and he looks back to find moments of significance. Neither one of those two can change the animal that is being hunted nor can the new bird change the territory. Neither of the two methodologies can change the way architecture is being built.

In a way there is a kind of competition between architecture and film, which is not found between literature and film. Literature is a proven platform to make films, which provides an added visual dimension to literature. However, filmmakers are known to have learned from architects. Well-known early Hollywood director, Nicholas Ray ('Johnny Guitar', 'Rebel Without A Cause') was an apprentice under Wright and received a Taliesin Fellowship from Wright. Ray expressed that he learned the use of the horizontal from Wright. The 'cinemascope', which gives movies a broad horizontal format was something that he could have learned from Wright's emphasis of the horizontal – Ray was known for his mastery of the 'cinemascope'.

Films could likewise contribute to the perception of architecture. The movie 'King Kong' (1933) made the Empire State Building even more famous and gave credence to the perceptive power of vertical, tall, expressionist buildings and a purpose for them – to be symbolic. On the other side of the coin, architecture could enhance perceptions in movies. One of the most versatile buildings used for movie backdrops is the Ennis House by Wright, which provided the backdrops for movies from the action genre to horror to science fiction, serving at least twenty-four Hollywood movies over the years, including



PlayTime 1967

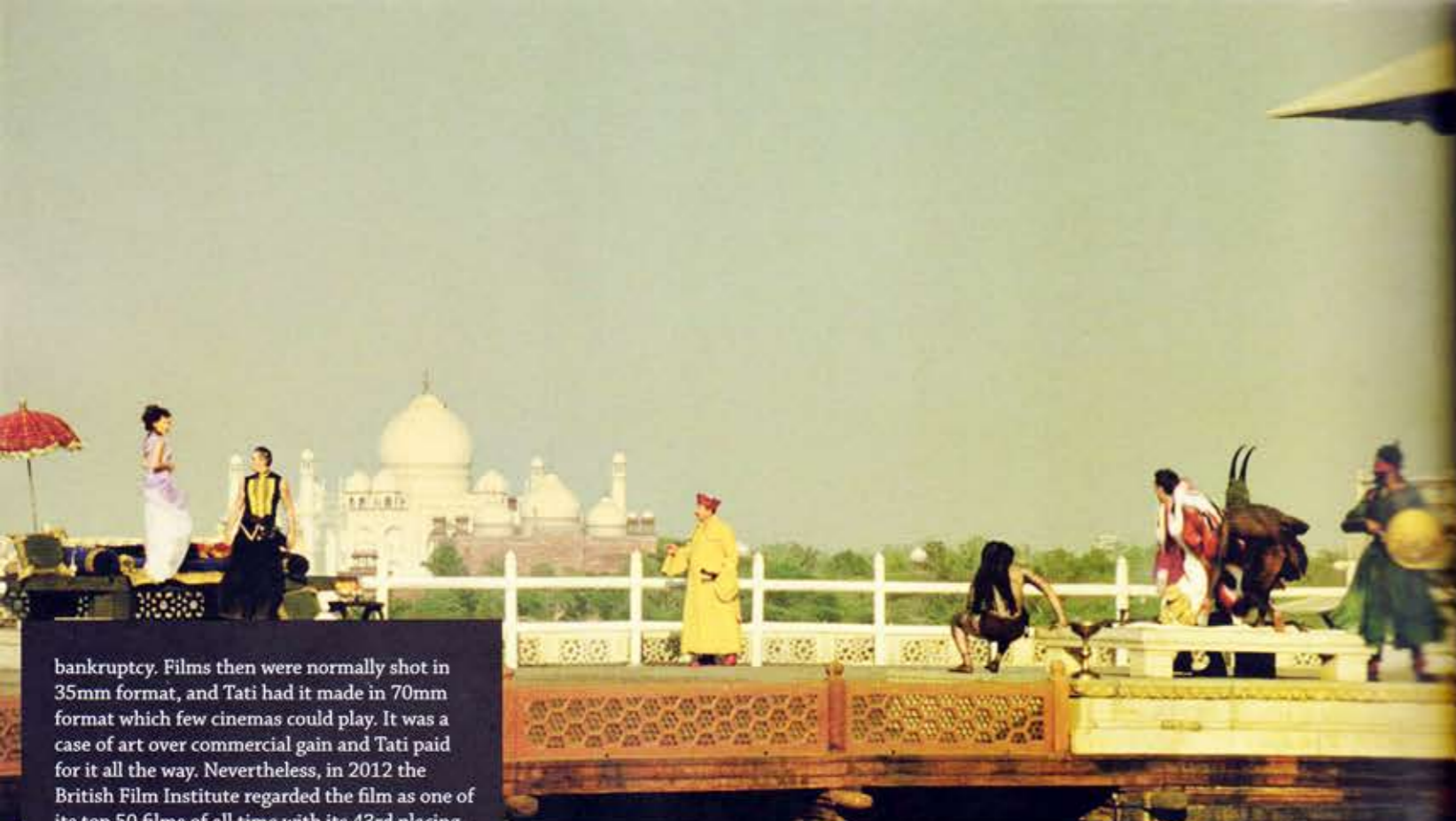
'Female, aka The Violent Years' (1956) to 'Terminal Man' (1974) to 'Blade Runner' (1982) to 'Karate Kid 3' and 'Black Rain' (1989) to 'Rush Hour' and the 'The Replacement Killers' (1998) and several more. Wright's other later building, Marin Civic Center actually defined the movie, 'Gattaca' (1997).

Several 'art films' revolve around architecture. In 1964, the French director Jacques Tati constructed a huge stage for the film 'Play Time', at the then enormous cost of 17 million francs around the tenets of modernism, with the film largely a commentary about the set, that is, on modernist architecture. The set required hundreds of construction workers to construct along with its own power plant. Budget crises and other problems stretched the

shooting schedule to several years, including an additional 1.4 million francs in repairs after the set was damaged by storms. The film was completed in 1967. Tati's rationale for such a huge expenditure on the set was that the cost would be no more than engaging a major film star like Elizabeth Taylor or Sophia Loren, which he would have been right. Budget overruns forced Tati to take large loans and a personal overdraft to cover an ever-increasing production cost. Having spent such a huge amount on the set Tati did not hire a major actor but instead took on the main role as Mr Hulot. The film was a satire of modern architecture and an early 1960s parody of modern life; but without a plot and being emotionless, the film became a financial failure and Tati soon filed for



Metropolis 2001



bankruptcy. Films then were normally shot in 35mm format, and Tati had it made in 70mm format which few cinemas could play. It was a case of art over commercial gain and Tati paid for it all the way. Nevertheless, in 2012 the British Film Institute regarded the film as one of its top 50 films of all time with its 43rd placing.

Another architectural film which was made with a huge personal investment was 'The Fall' (2006) by Tarsem Singh. He remarked that he was determined to make the film according to his own vision, and paid members of the cast and crew on equal basis rather than in a typical Hollywood fashion where actors and 'stars' are pre-eminent. This emphasis unfolded itself in the film, where the sets and locations, as well as the architecture sometimes overshadowed the actors and even the script. The film was a great visual feast, with minor literary support and forgettable acting. The film was made over a period of four years and incorporated footages from twenty different countries. The power of the aesthetics comes through clearly in the setting, accompanied by crisp architecture and costumes. It is a film that slowly grows on the audience, if the audience cares enough to sit through early presumptions over an offbeat storyline. It could safely be assumed that it is a kind of film that is made for the visually empathised audience.

Architecture films are a rare commercial success, although a few are known to have made significant impact. One of the cinema's earliest indulgences on architecture, 'Metropolis' (1927) made a huge impact on the science fiction genre, being the first feature length film of the genre. It was also the most expensive film made when it was released in 1927. The film was first influenced by architecture: in an interview, the director, Fritz Lang reported that, "the film was born from my first sight of the skyscrapers

The Fall 2006

in New York in October 1924". Describing his impressions of the buildings of New York, he said that, "the buildings deemed to be a vertical sail, scintillating and very light, a luxurious backdrop, suspended in a dark sky to dazzle, distract and hypnotise". It is not surprising that Fritz Lang's father was an Austrian architect (Anton Lang). Fritz Lang studied civil engineering and later, art.

The film was thought to be influential in popularising 'Art Deco', as a stylistic movement. Before the release of the movie, it was merely a fringe movement in architecture. It also created an urban style for the science fiction genre, influencing science fiction films long after its time. For example, films like 'Blade Runner' (1982) and 'Fifth Element' (1997) could be traced directly to the influence of 'Metropolis'. Even the series of Batman films, those directed by Tim Burton in the 1980s-90s and the ones by Christopher Nolan in the 2000s could be traced to the 'Metropolis' lineage.

While many films were made with architects as main characters, arguably, the one that made the greatest impact on the architects' perception of themselves was 'The Fountainhead' (1949), based on a novel by the philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand, which was first published in 1943. For several decades, the film was popularly played in architectural schools as a kind of

narcissistic entertainment. Academics may argue otherwise, but the film could possibly be the greatest influence on the way architects saw themselves in the 1950s and 1960s, as the heroic moral crusader against the corrupt corporate world. Older architects today still speak occasionally against corporatism although practice says otherwise. It could also possibly explain the advent of the pervasive International Style of the 1950s and 1960s, which actually was the style of the movie's heroic architecture, and was the period when architects threw out any semblance of tradition. Rand, who also influenced the script for the film, insisted that the style of architecture in the movie followed the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, "and only Frank Lloyd Wright". Any architect having watched the film would have observed that the architecture portrayed was far inferior to Wright's actual work. Wright was approached but turned down offer to design the set's architecture, and it was improbable for anyone else to emulate Wright's work. The set's architecture was actually designed by Edward Carrera, a trained architect but not a practising one. Rand was to complain that his designs were copied from "horrible modernist buildings" and judged them to be "embarrassingly bad".

Although popular and famous among architects at the time, like most architectural



Inception 2010

films, this one too failed at the box office, taking \$400,000 less than its production cost of \$2.1m, which was a huge difference at the time. The public's adverse reaction to the film as compared with the architects' affinity for it perhaps reflects the dichotomy between the public's perception of architects and the architects' perception of themselves. For example, the Los Angeles Times said that the film would not "catch the interest of what is known as the average movie audience - whoever they may be nowadays". The Daily Worker deemed 'The Fountainhead' to be "an openly fascist movie". The trade magazine Variety called the film "cold, unemotional, loquacious (and) completely devoted to hammering home the theme that man's personal integrity stands before the law", etc.

Just like the French film, 'Play Time' (see above), the film created its own legacy which was only appreciated with hindsight many

decades later. In a recent reappraisal, the film has a score of 83% on the review aggregate website 'Rotten Tomatoes'. Having an even higher rating than say, 'Fifth Element', which was a greater box office success among films with a large component of architecture. The film's elevated stature now could be due to its entertainment value rather its critical acclaim as the protagonist, played by Gary Cooper is still highly implausible, as Howard Roark, supposedly modelled after Frank Lloyd Wright - Cooper still seemed more plausible with a pistol than a set square and a drawing pencil and, after all these years he still looked too old to play a young headstrong, aspiring architect. There is just no way of saving the miscast.

Films and architecture contribute to the enhancement of each other's art form, more so for film than for architecture, as there is no limit how architecture can be expressed in

films. However, architecture has its limits as it engages real spaces and physical limitations; not to mention real contextual, social and cultural issues as well as economic boundaries and construction capabilities. Architecture as expressed in films are more often than not, just forms of expressions to provide mood and visual anchors. They provide impressions that are not necessarily correct, buildable or historical. They are just feeders for the imagination. For example, in 'The Fountainhead' the protagonist's architecture was meant to be revolutionary and exemplary of greatness; but critically, the architectural sets that were designed by a less than good architect were just as mediocre as the rest of it; but caught in the script the average audience is made to believe that what was offered was representative of great architecture. On the other hand, Tarsem Singh's 'The Fall' provides a great architectural setting, but with all the rest of the film being such a chore, not many would want to watch it anyway, probably not even architects. Even the highly acclaimed 'Blade Runner' with all the right formulae was not a commercial success. There are many other films that centralise architecture that did not work well with the audience (too many to bother mentioning), neither are documentaries about architecture or architects are found appealing to the general audience. Therefore like Jacques Tati or Tarsem Singh, architectural film-making is a compulsion that is made out of zeal for subjective satisfaction and to accomplish an ambition.

In Asia, possibly the most accomplished film interpretations of architecture are found in Japanese animation films and there are many, and they are getting increasingly sophisticated. Among the films most passionate about architecture among animated films is 'Metropolis' (2001), which was based on the 1949 manga created by Osamu Tezuka, which in turn was inspired by Fritz Lang's 1927 film. The Japanese 'Metropolis' is quite a visual treat for the architectural novice and the architectural detail and forms take the original Lang's film to the stratosphere. However like most architectural centred films this one too was a financial let down. ❧

Blade Runner 1982

