

THE LIVING ROOM



BY CARLY REDDIN

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Carly Reddin is one of London's leading production designers. Very often, the sets that Reddin creates are bedrooms, offices and indeed living rooms, all of which she sees as an extension of character; an opportunity to expand on both a narrative and personality. Which got us thinking: what do our living rooms say about us? Who better to ask than Reddin herself?

TELL US HOW YOU GOT INTO SET DESIGN.

I was always artistic as a child and ended up studying art. I was planning to go to Central St Martin's for a performance course but the summer before I watched 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick), *Dune* (David Lynch) and *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam), all really surreal films and so I just became fascinated by these worlds that were created on screen. It was escapism into another space and time. It was always the really fantastic worlds that interested me most, simply because it takes so much imagination to think up those off-the-wall designs.

So instead, I went to Nottingham Trent University to do the Design for Screen course. I really enjoyed that and then went to The National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield and did an MA in Production Design for Film and TV.

TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CREATING A LIVING ROOM BASED ON A CHARACTER.

First of all, I have to figure out the characters by extracting clues from the script – the production Bible. Then I discuss the characters with the director and make sure we both have the same understanding of the characters' backgrounds, motives and essence. If I can, I talk to the actors and see if they have any input about the character and the setting.

Next, I'll find the location or build the set which the character will occupy. I'll consider how the space helps us communicate important qualities of the characters. The setting will signify whether the character has money (or not), his social situation, and whether he is creative for example.

Once the location or set is decided on, I consider what else can be done to express the character in the setting. For example, if a character is emotionally unavailable can I put up more walls? How can I add more layers between the camera and the character? How do the story's characters experience the space? I put together furniture and dressing mood boards which I think could be in his home, think about the books he would read and what pictures he would have on his walls, if any. Then I get out there and source everything at prop houses, shops, flea markets, and online.

Finally, we dress the set, and it all comes together, adding and subtracting pieces, finding the right balance that speaks to us while composing for the camera.

I'd usually think of the descriptive adjectives for the character and assign corresponding materials and styles. For example, if the character is cold, maybe glass, metal, and no clutter. Perhaps a more sterile environment which can be read as emotional emptiness. A friendly character might have sunny yellow walls, maybe more rounded furniture, not many sharp edges, happy, optimistic prints on the walls, and a lot of light in the room.

WHICH LIVING ROOM PARTICULARLY STANDS OUT OF THOSE YOU'VE DESIGNED?

On *Top Boy*, a lot of the characters live in small council flats, so for the living rooms it was important to distinguish between spaces so they could be easily identifiable as soon as you saw it. This meant we really had to differentiate and bring out the characters. So first you've got Dushane's mum, Pat; she's an older lady who belongs to the Windrush Generation.

For the Caribbean community, the living room was a place of pride because it showed off to others that they had made it, they'd come over to the UK and built a future for themselves and their children. It was also a safe place for entertaining because they couldn't go out to clubs and pubs due to the racial tensions at the time in the UK, so the living room is a really special retreat. It's a showcase for all your best things, your family photos, trinkets, music system, and from my research I saw that they really like glass ornaments, plastic flowers, lace doilies, things like that. It's very tidy and everything has its place. That room was quite warm as I wanted to make it welcoming for Dushane – a place he can feel at home.

Then you've got Lauryn and Jaq's. They're quite brash characters so I tried to make the living room like them – fun, colourful, loud and youthful with vibrant colours. The decor is unapologetically feminine so it's more like Lauryn than Jaq. A lot of the items are cheap, showing their socio-economic background. It's also cluttered, to show they're settled. →

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And then there was Dris' flat, which he shares with his daughter. He's tried to make it nice for her but it's still a bit of a bachelor pad. I think this space more or less reflects his interests: there is a big TV for playing games, music posters, a big sofa for chilling and smoking weed, and his record decks. This decor says he's hanging onto his past, his glory days. He's not in the best place mentally throughout the series and that is reflected in the fact that the place is quite dirty and disorganised. But we can see reminders of his daughter throughout the set dressing, there are toys and drawings. The pops of more vivid colour are usually the daughter's things. The rest is quite murky, blue and grey, darker colours. We used green to show that something's a bit off with his character, which can be seen later on.

WHAT DOES GREEN SAY?

Green can be used sort of like the wicked witch's green skin. Arsenic is green. In the film *Atonement*, they use a lot of green as it's associated with illness. The green in Dris' bedroom for example is a darker green. I just imagined him lying in bed a lot smoking weed, with the curtains drawn.

WHAT DO YOU THINK A LIVING ROOM GENERALLY SAYS ABOUT A PERSON?

I think it does reflect a person's personality, just like the clothes they choose to wear. If you look at a living room and how it feels, it can reflect how the person feels or what they're trying to communicate about themselves. So, for instance the colour (these are all generalisations); dark walls can often show off a more edgy or self-assured person, someone bolder and more forward thinking than someone who primarily uses creams, magnolias and pastels. I think the style of furniture in many ways can be described using the same adjectives you'd use to describe people's personalities: classic, modern, chic, traditional. Having said that, you might rent an apartment that already has furniture, or you have to go to Ikea because that's all you can afford. Equally, you might have lots of family heirlooms, but as I say, they're just generalisations.

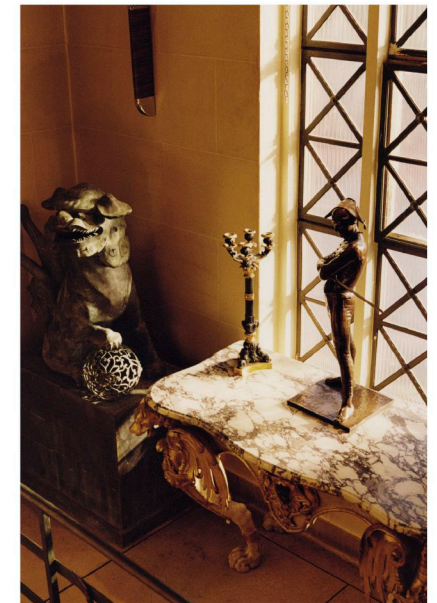
There's a pretty strong linear correlation between a balanced living room and a balanced human being. Cleanliness, and being able to keep a living space proper shows respect for yourself and for others. A messy living room says that this person's priority is not centred on living in a clear space. That could be because they are too busy with their children, they could be very relaxed, or they could feel out of control mentally, and this is reflected in their environment. As I said, you have to consider the whole picture and how all the elements work together.

Elsewhere, a bare space could be interpreted as a fear of commitment. Maybe you're indecisive and fear making an expensive design mistake, or maybe you're a bit of a commitment-phobe. Perhaps these people aren't committing to sofas or artwork because they haven't planted roots yet. Meanwhile, bookshelves crammed with mementos and trinkets can feel cosy and comforting to one person but claustrophobic to another. At the same time, a room denuded of all evidence of human presence may seem blissfully pure to one occupant and painfully antiseptic to someone else.

Your living room furniture arrangement may reveal how social you are and display your priorities. For many people, the focal point of their room is the television, and chairs will be arranged looking towards it. If this is the case, you'll be showing people that the priority for your living space is an entertainment space. Arranging the seating pieces to face each other over a shared coffee table makes conversation easy, and the table keeps drinks within easy reach. This communicates that you're a sociable person. Maybe there's excessive seating for the numbers of people that may come over.

IS THERE A LIVING ROOM WHICH YOU'VE SEEN IN FILM OR ON TELEVISION THAT YOU THINK DOES A PARTICULARLY GOOD JOB OF PORTRAYING ITS CHARACTER?

The Big Lebowski. Classic. I just love the Dude's bungalow, and his living room speaks volumes about his character. As we know, he's an unemployed, aging, bachelor hippy; he bowls as a hobby and he's very chilled, and a bit of a stoner. So his living room hasn't been repainted since forever, the walls are quite grimy, and the paintwork is chipped. The lighting makes it look quite gritty and seedy. All the furniture is mismatched and looks like he found it in a back alley. →





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But then, there is also a bit of modern California cool: his bamboo-style bar, a tulip chair which is a classic design, and then the Formica table and chairs, a reminder of his beloved bowling alley. You have the decked-out bar which highlights drinks are important to him. Then he’s got this really tatty, cosy chair which reclines literally horizontal, and that speaks to his character trait of being laidback. It’s not a sexy chair to look at but he’s totally unconcerned with that. Appearances don’t matter to him. He’s also got this traditional, worn rug which gets urinated on in the first scene, and all the accessories in the room just help to tell the story so well. There’s lots of bowling memorabilia and loads of books on the shelves which help communicate he may be a stoner, but he’s an intelligent guy. You’ve got takeaway packaging and a prominent dead plant in the corner which informs us that he can’t look after himself or others very well. There are lots of living rooms in films that are well designed or stylised but not so many that are messy. This is one of them. It’s great.

WHAT PIECES OF FURNITURE CAN BE PARTICULARLY HELPFUL?

What you choose to fill your room with often reflects your interests and what’s important to you. Lots of family photos lend to a nostalgic personality. If you’re passionate about something like travel, you may have souvenirs from your trips to remind you of your adventures. If you have a lot of candles, oil diffuser, perhaps you’re someone that appreciates self-care and down time.

As I mentioned, it’s more the accumulation and arrangement of collectible objects and their relationship to one another that paints a complete picture and gives an impression of a character, not an object by itself. That said, artworks on a wall can help to portray a character’s story. They can help to display a theme or they can express whether a character is more traditional or modern, liberal or conservative. The kind of chair you use can say a lot such as in the Big Lebowski. Even rugs. If you have a shaggy, long-haired rug maybe that can reflect that the character is slightly messy or unkempt. Meanwhile, a short-pile rug could reflect a tidy and well-kept person. Again, the rug by itself may not be a reliable indicator of personality but combined with the other elements in the living room you should be able to convey the personality of the character to the audience.

WHAT CAN A LIVING ROOM SUGGEST ABOUT A RELATIONSHIP?

It’s no different than any shared setting where more than one person inhabits a space. Each personality/character will have his own preferences, tastes and accumulated belongings. The question then revolves around how the space is shared, or the balance of how personality is applied. We can also think of the relationship as a character in our story, and trace how it changes over time.

A perfectly balanced couple’s living room would echo a shared identity, reflecting through the colours, furniture, layout, accessories and decorations how they feel about themselves and each other. If a couple are both film buffs for instance, perhaps they’ve focused their resources to a comfy couch and a large screen. If they are a relaxed and solid couple, I’d expect a rather harmonious space that reflects both their interests and few alarming colours or textures. If we can see one character dominating the space, it could suggest some imbalance in their relationship, like if a brute of a husband has an oversized comfy chair that is set more centred to the television than where the bullied wife might sit. It’s easier to pick up on these things if we get to see their other spaces, so then the audience can see more clearly how the private spaces compare to the shared space.

TELL US ABOUT WHEN YOU’VE USED FARLEY’S TO HELP BUILD A SET.

The first feature I designed was called Hello Carter. In the film, a guy called Carter goes to live with his grandmother in a well-to-do house in East London’s Stepney Green. His grandmother has travelled broadly, she’s lived a rich and varied life and she’s cultured. So we wanted to reflect this in the layered dressing of the living room. To offset the room’s traditional wood panelling and the marble fireplace, we went to Farley’s and hired antique furniture, textiles, oil paintings, period prints and water colours, silver and gold artefacts in the form of candle sticks, photo frames, ornaments, and little trinket boxes. We created a really personal set and it felt quintessentially English but with European and Eastern influences. I’d like to think it suited Carter’s grandmother perfectly. ■



