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Ken Adam (b. 1921) developed set designs for seven of the early James Bond films and a number of other important works. Goldfinger (1964) is among the most famous of these films, and Adam’s designs have since made film and design history, featuring in a number of influential exhibitions and publications.

Adam’s life as an exiled German Jew, who studied architecture in London and who flew for the RAF during the Second World War, means, as Petra Kissling-Koch’s suggests in her exploration of Adam’s work, that these designed spaces of (evil) power as the hideouts of Bond’s antagonists can be understood directly in relation to Adam’s historical context and biography.

This paper offers a close examination of Adam’s designs, paying particular attention to the development of the Bond series through Dr No, Goldfinger and You Only Live Twice, and the ways in which Adam’s work makes visible a historically and contextually informed relationship between architecture, power and the representation of evil.

While the cinematic representations of the spaces of evil – especially in the Bond franchise – evolve and alter over time, Adam’s work is important for, at least, two reasons: first, Adam’s designs concretely associate in popular culture the relationship between modernist architecture and specific articulations of power. Second, Adam’s designs foreground set design as a site of narrative detail, rather than merely being the place within which the narrative occurs. While these monumental sets were designed to function within an “evil” role and therefore use an architectural language already associated with specific articulations of power, Adam’s set designs also make visible a version of modernist architecture that was attractive and which may have strongly influenced the general public’s perception of modern architecture.

Adam’s promotion of modernist architecture through the medium of film establishes a template for the representation of the spaces of power within the spy genre that are, themselves, so powerful that they quickly become the de-facto blueprint for subsequent representations.
Introduction

Ken Adam became possibly the most prolific film set designer of the 20th century. His work, fascinating for architectural historians, has been the centre of growing scholarly attention. David Sylvester showed the exhibition Moonraker, Strangelove and other celluloid dreams: the visionary art of Ken Adam at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1999.1 Alexander Smoltczyk’s biography on Adam followed in 2002, comprehensive and detailed while staying relatively vague in terms of architectural interpretation.2 A recent exhibition in Berlin, Bigger Than Life (2015), showed many of his drawings and the development of his film gadgets. The accompanying publication, edited by Boris Hars-Tschachotin and others, contains valuable, if necessarily cursory, interpretation of Adam’s notion of modernist architecture.3 Petra Kissling-Koch’s dissertation Macht(träume – a title creating a pun of the reading of “spaces of power” against “dreams of power” – is an exception to this rule and has presented in-depth analysis of Ken Adam’s sets against specific aspects of architecture of power.4

One of Adam’s most famous film sets may have been the War Room in Dr Strangelove (1964), directed by Stanley Kubrick. However, working with a strong and controlling director like Kubrick forced Adam to the point of a nervous breakdown. He realised that his freedom to design was greatest when working with less forceful directors.5 Thus, he was able to say, with regards to the James Bond series: “No film script restricted me. I could just invent something and someone would write it into the script.”6 In fact, it was not only the freedom coming from the director but also from the script that allowed Adam to act out his imagination: “The Bonds were a lucky chance for me. In no other movie could the production designer develop such influence, since there wasn’t any story, everything was design! Later, we ran out of the Fleming stories. That only improved the movies.”7 Combining, to his advantage, the different threads that fate had thrown onto him, his career might well be epitomised by the sets he made for seven of the early James Bond movies.8 Because of limited space, in this paper we concentrate our analysis on Dr No (1962) as the first Bond film, Goldfinger (1964) as the ‘centre’ or brand-shaping film, and elements of You Only Live Twice (1967) for a reading of the further development of the filmic architectural language of Adam.

Ken Adam – An Unusual Biography: Refugee, Architecture and Planes

Klaus Hugo Adam was born in Berlin in 1921. He was the son of Fritz Adam, a wealthy Jewish businessman who owned the S. Adam sport- and fashion department store at the corner Friedrichstraße/Leipziger Straße, one of the most prominent addresses in Berlin. Klaus Hugo was one of four children. The family lived in 8 Tiergartenstraße, not far from Potsdamer Platz, where Klaus Hugo grew up in a historicist building, ornamentally overloaded both on exterior and interior.9 As traditional as Fritz Adam might have been in this regard, as modern he was at other times: he intended to have a new building erected for the family’s department store in 1928. For this he asked Mies van der Rohe for a design – a photo shows a model of a modernist glass box of seven stories. Mies wrote to Fritz Adam: “You need advertisements and advertisements again. Walls of frosted glass. In the evening, it will be one huge mass of light, and you can add all the advertisement you wish. Your building needs to […] fit with our modern times and to people that represent these times.”10 Fritz Adam, however, shied away from Mies’ radical design and decided for Peter Behrens. But the Great Depression stopped any building from happening, and the family realized much earlier than others that politically things were going to go very wrong. In late 1933, Fritz Adam was interrogated by the Gestapo and only when a former employee, who was now a member of the SS, intervened, did Adam go free. The family left Berlin for London in April 1934.11

The Adams came to live in Greencroft Gardens in Hampstead where mother Lilli set up a boarding house that became an intellectually and culturally stimulating meeting point for political refugees – and even more: “My mother’s dining room was like a university to me”, Ken Adam said later.12 Here, in Hampstead, was Wells Coates’ Isokon Building
Goldfinger Revisited: James Bond set designs by Ken Adam as modernist spaces of power

(1934), an apartment complex and one of the first modernist buildings in Great Britain. Maxwell Fry belonged to a circle of architects in this area, so did Walter Gropius (having left Germany but did not move to the USA yet). Ernö Goldfinger's House 2 Willow Road of 1939 was around the corner. So when Adam began his studies at the Bartlett School of Architecture, he had already been exposed to the few examples of modernist architecture in England. Jana Scholze quotes Adam: “I only heard about the Bauhaus in England and despite I never studied the Bauhaus to properly follow them, my approach was reasonably modern.”

When, in 1940, all German, Austrian and Italian men of the right age for military service were interned by the British government, Ken Adam was spared internment because his work for an architectural firm had been declared of strategic importance. This enabled him to apply to become a pilot. He was accepted by the Royal Air Force, although he was not naturalised. Until the end of the war, Adam flew British bombers against German aims. Together with his studies of architecture, this extreme experience equipped Adam with the knowledge – and perhaps the mind-set – necessary for his work on the James Bond sets.

Relationship Between Film Set and Story

It is important to remind ourselves that film and stage sets, whilst using and responding to architectural principles and inspirations, are never meant to be experienced as completed objects in the real world. As Juan Antonio Ramirez makes clear, they are usually built in fragments to facilitate ease of shooting and production, are rarely orthogonal, often mobile, fragmentary and elastic (for ease of use and reuse) and often hyperbolic, removing some details and exaggerating others. This means that Adam’s designs function within the diegesis – the story world inhabited by the characters and within which the narrative occurs – as largely realistic pieces of architecture and design, unlike for example, the sets of Hermann Warm who designed The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and other early Expressionist films where the sets function as external representations of character interiority. Thus the realism of mainstream western cinema of this period hinges on the pro-filmic construction of sets that work best when they do not draw attention to themselves. William Menzies notes that set design can function negatively, where, for whatever reason, it distracts the viewer from the narrative and, equally set design can contribute to narrative. However – and this is a mark of Adam’s skill – Menzies notes that, on rare occasions, set design can become “the hero of the picture,” providing insight into the wider concerns of the story and its characters whilst also adhering to the primary dictate of believability. Adam’s sets provide a means for the films to discuss and represent power within their designs in ways that are comprehensible to film audiences, within the demands of the film narratives, and as objects of specific historical and cultural periods conforming to the demands of their contexts.

The question for us, then, is not just what is Adam doing with his designs for these first few Bond films, but how and why? Adam’s designs, as we shall demonstrate, are meant to be awe-inspiring and, at times, overwhelming, but it is worth remembering that our experience of these designs – as audience members – will always be impacted upon by the experience of each film’s characters as they experience them too, not as designed elements but as pieces of architecture within their narrative worlds.

Dr No

The Bond style we now immediately recognise did not emerge fully formed into the franchise. Certain elements had to develop and evolve first before settling into place; consequently Dr No uses modernist architecture throughout, combining existing buildings with Adam’s sets. Even at this early stage, Adam is at work distinguishing between types of power – modern or passé – in their relation to architectural expression, so that even if the moral assessment of that power has yet to be confirmed and settled upon by the film’s protagonists and the franchise’s audiences, it is still possible for the films to indicate the power of the modern to be used for good or ill through their linking of modernist design to a sense of the sublime, a point we shall explore in more detail below.

In the film’s opening sequence, we see a modernist building in the back of the image, across River Thames, realising in the next cut that we are at MI6. Within the building, a generous radio communications room has a Jacques-Tati-like crisp and light modernist interior of light grey, green and brown. However, while Moneypenny’s antechamber is
relatively bland modern, M’s office is “nicely” British traditional – but much less exaggerated than in later films. Already, these short sequences have compared the seemingly modern exterior and working spaces of MI6 to the traditional, perhaps antiquated office of MI6’s chief. In comparison, Bond’s own apartment is decorated in a not entirely coherent ensemble of furniture that, on the one hand is traditional, tastefully elegant with a slightly ‘oriental’ touch, possibly signifying somebody who has travelled, and on the other revealed to be a somewhat odd mixture of furniture pieces: in his oversized and relatively empty main room, three prints of historic automobiles sit over a very big TV set which is hidden behind the door. This subtle hint that Bond does not (yet) know style is supported by the fact that before, Bond has already made a ‘style’ mistake by wanting the Beretta pistol, which was pointed out to him by M as being a “women’s gun” – the wrong gun. Later films will provide Bond with far more confidence with issues of style and décor, but here he appears as a figure awaiting modernisation.

Bond then travels to Jamaica for his task, where Adam has used Kingston Airport’s beautifully designed modernist airport building. The camera takes a perpendicular view into the hall to emphasise the horizontal organisation of the double-height space and the triangular-roof pergola. Yet a further comparison can be made between this modernist space and the British embassy sequence, which uses the colonial Government house in Kingston. Adam makes no attempt at matching the exterior, in order to make the sequence consistent. Instead of using the British Colonial, the interior seems much more US-American colonial. The ambassador’s office is oversized, with an invented grand staircase to the right, flanked by Corinthian columns, six steps down into the huge office, a motif he will come to use many times and which helps him create grand entrances into the space, while further historicising the kinds of authority (and world view) wielded by those at home in these spaces.

One of the highlights of this film’s set design is the entry room of Dr No’s hideout in which Prof. Dent, Dr No’s collaborator, is led to receive a deadly spider to kill James Bond. Here, Adam makes use of the circular top-lit oculus roof opening – cross-barred in this case – for the first time: a distinctive moment in which strongly elementary geometrical forms of French revolution architects such as Louis-Etienne Boulée or Claude-Nicolas Ledoux provide the set with a sense of the sublime, reflected in the terrified demeanour of Prof. Dent. Another of Dr No’s hidden gems is the space into which Bond and Bond-girl Honey Ryder (Ursula Andress) are led to ‘rest’. This setup of a hotel-like underground guest room, designed as strict and unbroken modernist space, has been shaped by Adam into a complex sequence of smaller spaces, with mirrors reflecting and augmenting the sense of endlessness of the space, thereby continuing to suggest both the extent of No’s facility and his access to the material resources.

Dr No’s private rooms work as pinnacle and antithesis at the same time. They appear as a melange of New Mexico/ American South-West flair, containing a messy combination of old and new furniture, with modern elements and traditional pieces of art (and a fireplace designed to, somehow, work 200 feet underwater). On first impression, revealed through the Bond-as-prisoner promenade that, like the villain’s monologue, would become an oft-repeated feature of these films, they appear more like an inhabited ruin than a finely designed space. Further, the indication of a gap between the bottom of one of the set pieces and the studio floor speaks to both the designed portability of the set piece and the speed at which the production was made.
However, as the scene progresses, a reverse shot of the same set makes far more aesthetic sense of Adam’s design sensibility, which leads one to suspect that the above-described discrepancy between the two contrasting views of the same set might be intended to indicate that people seeing Dr No (through his space) see madness – where, in reverse, he himself sees order. As far-fetched as this might first seem, Dr No himself refers to such a view as a self-designed “unique feat of engineering” only half a minute later.

The monumental structures that surround the nattily dressed villains create a complex visual aesthetic that extends beyond the architecture and into other onscreen elements, costumes and objects. James Bond, for example, might have his bespoke suits from Savile Row, but Dr No wears a remarkable Bauhaus-inspired garment that is anti-establishment as much as it is a signifier of the comprehensively modern. Yet, least we equate Bond with the stuffy establishment of London gentlemen’s clubs and tradition, he – as befits a mediating figure – also utilizes the gadgets and technologies of Q Branch and drinks that most modern and anti-establishment of cocktails – the vodka martini, shaken not stirred.

Finally we see Dr No against the aquarium that both personifies and exemplifies his delusion of grandeur. Yet, this moment, which narratively indicates his interior characteristics and his access to material wealth is also – pro-filmically – cheaply constructed, insofar as it is a rear-projection of aquarium fish, and which must be explained to us by the characters (“the glass is convex, ten inches thick, which accounts for the magnifying effect”) in order for it to function appropriately in the narrative. The final space of the film then goes back to straight modernism – a power plant inside the underground place of Dr No, using elements of Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture such as his Taliesin West angled columns.

Thus, while at first glance, it might appear that the set design continues the binary thinking of its narrative, and of the Cold War environment that surrounded the production and reception of these films, one notices that Adam’s designs seek to explore a more complex and interesting ambivalence about the relationship between political and military power and its various visible forms.

Goldfinger

Goldfinger represents a unique set of tensions as a commercial artefact, in receipt of a large budget and with an overt mandate to make a uniquely British secret service agent attractive to a North American market. As a result, Adam’s sets reflect a far more ordinary world – an important point because the more ordinary the world, the less it needs to be explained to an audience. Auric Goldfinger, our titular villain, is similarly far more straightforward than Dr No, whose own backstory is an odd mélange of miscegenation and racist tropes. Instead, Goldfinger is a German bullion thief, living on a horse farm in Kentucky and employing an all-blonde troupe of female flying aces as part of his plan to attack Fort Knox and contaminate the gold reserves with a dirty nuke.
While Goldfinger’s commercial mandate might have stifled some of the film’s design freedom in favour of comprehensive narrative intelligibility, Adam is able to further develop his critique of power at the level of set design. Where M and Moneypenny’s offices in Dr No were competing spaces of bland traditionalism and faux-modernism, by Goldfinger these spaces have lost all trace of the modern and Adam is content to equate the power wielded by MI6 in its headquarters with a cozy drawing-room sensibility that seems, in comparison to the lively designs of the antagonist, paternal, bland and exhausted. This critique of MI6 shifts slightly with the concrete bunker of Q’s laboratory which, while more compact than the other enormous sets of Dr No and Strangelove, resembles them enough to confirm Adam’s desire to link these aesthetics with the technologies of violence and with the role modern design plays in demonstrating a modern outlook or world view. It seems that power, represented through technology, cannot be expressed any other way than through modern or modernist means.

Interestingly, Goldfinger’s own Kentucky stud farm also mixes the modern with the traditional, meaning that the clearest continuation of Adam’s desire to aestheticise power in this way comes with the Fort Knox set design which combines an authentic reproduction of the Fort exterior with an imagined representation of the Fort’s interior. With the actual plans of the Fort’s interior a state secret, Adam was free to design to suit the narrative and franchise requirements, resulting in what looks, on-screen as a mixture of brutalist poured concrete and the beautifully lit gold-filled alcoves that extend beyond the frame into off-screen space. This ingenious invention takes up the spatial complexity and verticality of Gianbattista Piranesi’s Carceri drawings of the 1740s.

Beyond this, what Goldfinger’s design also does is suggest and hint at the presence of a diegetic world beyond that being represented on the screen. In this Adam continues the trajectory started in Dr No, designing the on-screen space in such a way as to suggest that the extent of the villain’s base or hideout extends beyond that immediately shown and that, therefore, the power wielded by these villains is similarly extensive and potentially limitless. However, with an increased budget, the slightly rough-around-the-edges aspect of Dr No’s design is gone; instead there is a weight and presence to Adam’s designs that works in the film’s favour, lending a realism to the diegesis.

For example, midway through the film and as a brief respite from the narratively odd cat-and-mouse game that he and Bond have been playing, Goldfinger receives delegates from various branches of the American Mafia to his Kentucky stud farm, itself both a marker of a particular kind of bourgeois ideology and an opportunity to compare traditional Southern architecture with a more recent barn complex that carries elements of Frank Lloyd Wright’s design language used for Taliesin West. The interior of the barn includes the large reception area where the Mafia delegates are met and entertained and a linked control room. Goldfinger then engages in that most important of Bond villain actions – what The Incredibles (Brad Bird, 2004) would later refer to as “monologing” – using a revolving snooker table which contains a control panel on its underside and which, in turn, brings up from beneath the floor a diorama of Fort Knox and which also reveals a large wall-mounted photograph. All of these props are needed to explain to his Mafia funders his audacious plan (which, at this stage, does not reveal the nuclear option). Bond, having escaped his captors in a
different part of the farm, makes his way into the space underneath the pool room and, in a now-hilarious cinematic moment, emerges in the middle of the diorama, peeking out of the Fort Knox model at entirely the right moment to hear Goldfinger’s monologue. What is important here is the fact that Adam’s design includes this under-space, filled with hydraulic pistons and the other machinery Goldfinger uses to produce his diorama – and later to kill off the entire Mafia cohort. So while this sequence is edited in order to serve the narrative point being made – Goldfinger’s plan and Bond’s listening to it – once again the design makes clear the villain’s access to the kinds of resources and expertise necessary to make such a space a functioning reality and which therefore suggests the extent of his reach, both in a material and ideological sense.

You Only Live Twice

You Only Live Twice is the fifth in the franchise and, noticeably, the first to shift the franchise’s representation of ‘good’ power towards the modern end of the spectrum, linking NATO to the kinds of cinematically spectacular spaces that had previously been the domain of ‘evil’ alone. The film’s plot concerns the disappearance of both North American and Soviet space missions, kidnapped by one of the Bond franchise’s most famous villains, Ernst Stavro Blofeld (Donald Pleasance) in a SPECTRE-funded attempt to start a Third World War, operating out of a converted volcano – a trope that is now a staple of parodies of the spy genre. Because You Only Live Twice is primarily set in Japan, it remains unclear in the film for quite a while whether the Japanese parties Bond encounters are ‘good’ or ‘evil’ and it could be argued that the country is presented, initially at least, as a force that could potentially be a threat to Great Britain, having sided with Germany in the Second World War. Regardless, now that the Bond franchise’s various characteristics have been tested and established, the series can luxuriate in the fact that the audience can look forward to, and know what to expect from, a Bond film.

Adam’s access to increasingly larger budgets is revealed in the scale of the film’s set pieces, which, in turn, reveal the slowly shifting representational structures we have been discussing.22 As mentioned, NATO is associated with the kind of spectacular modern design previously the domain solely of the films’ villains. We see the NATO delegates gathered, incongruously, inside a converted RADAR dome which echoes the kinds of ocular structures previously mentioned, while adding a bow to Buckminster Fuller. M, the head of MI6, remains firmly associated with the visible signs of an increasingly out-of-touch view of the world: heavy books, heraldry, a historic ship model, historic paintings and historicist furniture, even the most ludicrous, a fireplace – while based in a submarine! – but this really is the only marker of the kind of antiquated vestiges of power Adam has been critiquing in the Bond series. Now we are placed in a world – modern Japan – that is seemingly as ambivalent as Adam’s own views of power and modernity. Indeed, Bond’s entry into Tokyo works so well because of the contrast between his appearance as frogman on the dark lonely seashore – cut – Tokyo’s city lights and architecture, representing one of the technologically most advanced places globally. Therefore it is not out of character for Tiger Tanaka, the Head of the Japanese Secret Service, to reside in a Brutalist office. Bond gets his slide-entry into Tanaka’s office, which is underground, a wide space with Brutalist raw concrete
walls and ceiling; and only when the two men welcome each other with the code-word does the viewer realise that this here is not the villain’s hideout. The space contains glistening spherical monitors, brown leather furniture, including a high back Oxford chair by Arne Jacobsen.

The other space that Adam imbues with architectural significance is the Director’s room in Osato Chemical Factory – with the overall building being a modernist high rise slab with a distinctive disc-like observation deck. Here, Bond is faced not only with a bouncer he has to get rid of but spatially with an unbelievable combination of low wooden ceiling (beams of light pine), light Japanese screen walls (through which one man throws the other) and a polished wood and marble floor. A Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair and other, fitting black leather furniture, Japanese sculptures and a dried-up tree sculpture are combined. Here once again, Adam splits the floor level slightly by raising parts of the space by the height of a foot. He does this often, and it usually helps to give the set spatial focus.

For Adam, the sublime is designed to overwhelm the characters (and to surprise us), all in order to suggest how both thoroughly modern the Bond villains are, and to indicate their level of material wealth and power. His hideouts, caverns, interiors of volcanoes, often combined with large oculi as only window to the world, recall exercises of architects such as Louis-Etienne Boullée, who replaced classical language of architecture with oversized simple geometric figures: Boullée’s most famous design, his Cenotaph for Isaac Newton, brings characteristics of the sublime into architecture.
The rocket launch, hidden in the volcano – one of Adam’s most famous sets – thus merges modernist elements with notions of the sublime: the (artificial) crater lake which, when opened, turns into a magnificent huge oculus from which the villain attempts to control the world, combines Brutalist raw concrete with rock-face and modernist interior elements, such as free-running staircases, one of which runs over about 30 steps without landing and without any handrail. Thus by the time we reach the end of You Only Live Twice, with the possible escape of Blofeld and the destruction of the volcano base, we have reached, also, the high-water mark of the kinds of discourse we have been discussing. Later Bond sets designed by Adam would continue to be spectacular and often awe-inspiring, but the films themselves would begin the slide towards cliché and, then, self-parody. Adam’s last Bond film was Moonraker (1979) with Roger Moore as Bond.

Conclusion

Ken Adam arrives at the Bond franchise with both a biography and a design aesthetic that grants him a particular insight into the ways in which power can be both mobilised and represented. It is no surprise that a pilot, from arguably the most technologically advanced arm of the military, will be particularly attuned to the relationship between modernity, power and technology just as, equally, his personal history and his experiences in Germany and England will make him alert to the dangers of remaining tied to tradition and conservatism in the face of a modern, technologically adept power used for evil. As a result, his set designs for the Bond films, offer a close examination of, first, the manner with which he is able to articulate his concerns about modernity, power and, especially, evil and also the ways in which this articulation changes as the franchise evolves and the contemporary world itself changes. His comprehensive exploration of power and modernity is more complex and ambivalent than the ‘good versus evil’ narratives his designs occur within. Adam’s on-screen architecture, the manner with which they are revealed through cinematography, lighting and editing, mean that these sets provide for a more nuanced understanding of power. Adam, we contend, is not saying that the modern is evil: instead we argue that Adam is exploring the possibility that evil is modern and that for evil to be successfully resisted, the powers of good must themselves become as modern as their opposite if they are to survive and succeed.

Endnotes

3 Boris Hars-Tschachotin et al. (eds.), Bigger Than Life. Ken Adam’s Film Design (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2014).
5 Smoltczyk, Welten des Ken Adam, 91-111.
6 Smoltczyk, Welten des Ken Adam, 134.
7 Ken Adam, as quoted in Smoltczyk, Welten des Ken Adam, 131.
10 Letter Mies van der Rohe to Fritz Adam, quoted after Smoltczyk, Welten des Ken Adam, 43.
16 Before the camera – i.e.: that which is filmed.
17 Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 35.
19 Dr No, directed by Terence Young (1962; Santa Monica, CA: MGM/20th Century Fox, 2015), DVD. 1:24:15.
20 Dr No, 1:24:20.
21 Smoltczyk, Welten des Ken Adam, 144.
22 Dr. No’s production budget was USD $1,000,000, Goldfinger’s was USD $3,000,000 and You Only Live Twice had a budget of USD $9,500,000. “Box Office History for James Bond Movies”, http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/James-Bond#tab=summary, (Accessed on February 16, 2016).