

# Architectures on Screen: The Narrative Role of Architectural Models

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore different examples of architectural model usage in recent fictional series. Architectural models function for architects as both a design tool and a presentation tool. For this reason, models constitute an important part of the architectural design process and architectural education. Accordingly, in fictional productions in which practicing architects are placed at the centre, architects are usually shown using models. In addition, the literature acknowledges that some directors use architectural models instead of actual buildings in wide-angle shots in films.

Beyond these uses, architectural models have another field of use, which is addressed in this study: the depiction of architectural models made and used by non-architect, ordinary people in films or television series. This third type of usage, which is less discussed in the literature compared to the other two, constitutes the main focus of this study, which aims to contribute to filling this gap in the existing literature.

The methodology of this research is Qualitative Visual Analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Within the scope of the study, a sample consisting of five fictional films and television series released between 2021 and 2025 was selected. As a result of the analysis, it was understood that the architectural models used accompany the narrative at crucial stages of the plot, such as moments of conflict and resolution, and at times represent the characters and their relationships with space. While the models are used for different purposes in each production, it was observed that various materials such as wood, cardboard, plastic, and cake were employed. In this respect, these models differ from conventional architectural models.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Architectural Models, Representation, Cinema.

## 1. Introduction

Architectural models are important tools for the architectural profession. Architects do not develop their design ideas solely through drawings and sketches; they also use preliminary working models to conduct various processes of trial and error. In this sense, the model is primarily a tool for thinking. Later, architectural models are also employed during the stage of presenting the final product to clients or competition juries. These “finished” models do not represent reality itself but rather its representation. In this respect, they can be regarded as concrete outcomes of a process of abstraction and interpretation. Such models may also be used in exhibitions to disseminate various ideas, in which case they can once again be considered as tools of thought.

Through all these modes of use, architectural models have constituted an important part of architectural practice throughout history. The earliest examples of architectural models in visual culture appear in wall paintings, frescoes, and mosaics. In Istanbul, in the inner narthex of the former Church of the Chora Monastery (today the Kariye Mosque), a mosaic dated between 1316 and 1321 depicts Theodoros Metokhites, the founder of the church, presenting a model of the church to Christ seated on a throne [1]. In Early Christian and Byzantine art, patrons or benefactors are sometimes depicted in mosaics and frescoes holding a model of the church in scenes of presentation. Such scenes are particularly found in apse mosaics and wall paintings [2].

An architectural model image from a later period can be found in one of the miniatures of the *Sûrname-i Hümâyûn*, prepared between 1582 and 1588. These miniatures, which depict the circumcision festivities organized in 1582 by Sultan Murad III for his son, Prince Mehmed, were produced by miniature artists working under the supervision of Nakkaş Osman. Known as the *Surname-i Hümâyûn*, the work was written by İntizami, and the manuscript preserved today in the Topkapı Palace Museum contains 427 miniatures [3]. In these miniatures, architects are depicted carrying a giant model of the Süleymaniye Mosque during a procession held at the Hippodrome in Istanbul, attended by guilds, soldiers, and representatives of foreign states [4].

As these examples demonstrate, architectural models, which have occupied a significant place in architectural practice for thousands of years, have also been an important component of art and visual culture. This study, however, focuses on the use of architectural models in the history of cinema and television. For this reason, relevant studies will be examined in the related research section of the paper.

## 2. Related Research

Architectural models function for architects both as a design tool and as an active component of production and sharing. There is a substantial body of literature addressing the importance of architectural models. The book *Architectural Scale Models in the Digital Age: Design, Representation and Manufacturing* is among the key references in this field [5]. This study discusses issues such as representation and architectural culture through the history of scale models, while focusing on the continued importance of models in the digital age.

Benay Gürsoy emphasizes the significance of model-making in architectural design for architects' understanding of spatial relationships and scale, and draws attention to the ability of models to facilitate transitions between scales and to trigger the materialization of intuitive thinking during the design process [6]. Reşad Şükrü Çoban, on the other hand, explains how architectural models are used as tools of persuasion for clients, illustrating this through examples from the history of modern architecture [7]. Şevval Gökkılıç, in her study addressing both physical models and digital models, underlines that despite increasing digitalization, physical models continue to be important due to their contributions to bodily experience and spatial awareness [8].

When examples of architectural model usage in cinema are examined, two main modes of use become apparent:

1. As products of professional practice in films featuring architect characters, similar to real-life architectural practice; *The Fountainhead* (1949) and *Inception* (2010) can be cited as examples of this use.
2. The use of models instead of real buildings or urban environments in representing architecture or the city; *Metropolis* (1927), *Goldfinger* (1964), and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) may be given as

examples.

Although not extensive in number, studies addressing the use of architectural models in cinema examine this dual relationship from various perspectives. In her article *Reading of the Architectural Identity via Cinema*, Havva Alkan Bala investigates how architect characters are represented in films and conducts scene analyses through architectural models [9]. In the 2023 book *Modelling the Metropolis: The Architectural Model in Victorian London*, Matthew Wells [10] explores how the urban fabric and spirit of the Victorian city were reconstructed through models for the film *Metropolis*. Finally, in *The Architectural Essay Film*, Penelope Haralambidou examines films as an experimental tool for constructing architectural narratives, focusing on the relationship between architecture and cinema [11].

Beyond these two modes of use, there are also productions that exemplify the making and everyday use of architectural models by non-architect individuals. This study focuses specifically on this mode of use.

### 3. Method

The aim of this study is to discuss the purposes of architectural model usage through fictional productions such as films and television series that exemplify the making and everyday use of architectural models by non-architect individuals.

The methodology of the study is Qualitative Visual Analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Within the scope of this research, a contemporary sample consisting of five fictional films and television series released between 2021 and 2025 was selected. The first production examined in the study is the Italian film *The Catholic School*, released in 2021. The second production, *All the Light We Cannot See*, is a United States produced miniseries released in 2023. Similarly, the third production to be examined is also a miniseries, *The Residence* [12], produced in the United States and released in 2025. The fourth production is a Spanish television series titled *The Snow Girl (La chica de nieve)*, which was broadcast over multiple seasons. The final production examined is another recent miniseries, produced in Canada and released in 2025. The sample of the study is listed in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1: Case study**

Title	Year	Country	Media Type
<b>The Catholic School (<i>La scuola cattolica</i>)</b>	2021	Italy	Film
<b>All the Light We Cannot See</b>	2023	United States	Mini Series
<b>The Residence</b>	2025	United States	Mini Series
<b>The Snow Girl (<i>La chica de nieve</i>)</b>	2023–2025	Spain	TV Series
<b>Wayward</b>	2025	Canada	Mini Series

### 4. Results

In the findings section of the study, the findings regarding the purposes of architectural model usage within the narrative structure of the series will be presented. It was determined that a model is used in each of the five productions examined. These models and their significance within the narrative structure will be presented under the headings below.

#### 4.1. The Catholic School (*La scuola cattolica*)

This film is a cinematic adaptation of the novel *The Catholic School*, which recounts the Circeo massacre that took place in Italy in 1975. The film portrays the families and social relationships of students attending an all-male Catholic school in Rome. The narrator of the film, a male student

attending the same school, introduces the school and its characters one by one at the beginning of the film. During this process, when he visits his classmates' homes, their houses and families are also introduced.

While the film questions themes such as religion, authority, family, and morality, it focuses on the contradictions that each family embodies within this system. In one of these scenes, the home of the narrator's friend Arbus is shown. A giant model, which is an exact replica of the house they live in, is presented as having been made by Arbus's father, a university mathematics professor, for Arbus's sister.



**Figure 1: The model in Arbus's house [13]**

In this scene, the narrator looks through the windows of the model, which is shown as completely closed, and tries to explore with curious eyes what is happening inside. The narrator's inquisitive gaze, observing and examining the family, mirrors the curiosity of the viewer.

When the model is shown again later, the seemingly perfect families have been fractured due to the conflicts that emerge in the development of the narrative; the secrets people conceal are revealed, and honesty and morality become subjects of questioning. Accordingly, the model is also opened up: its panels are removed, its interior spaces are exposed, and the doll figures inside are shown being cut with scissors by an angry young man.

Although this model functions as a dollhouse within the film, which is set in the 1970s, the building's façade and the rigid language of the wooden material symbolize the heavy and authoritarian structure of the Catholic school and the institution of the family as represented in the novel.

#### **4.2. All the Light We Cannot See**

*All the Light We Cannot See* [14], like the first work examined, is adapted from a novel bearing the same title. Set during the Second World War, the story focuses on the ways in which the main characters in France resist the Nazi occupation, with Marie-Laure LeBlanc as the central character. Marie-Laure LeBlanc is a visually impaired young girl who takes refuge in her great-uncle's house during the Battle of Saint-Malo in 1944.

During this period, a large wooden city model is shown inside the house. Marie's father, Daniel, builds a wooden model of the city of Paris so that his daughter can learn and understand the city despite her visual impairment. Through this model, Marie perceives the buildings and streets of the city by touching them with her fingers, while her father explains these streets and structures to her. When Paris is occupied by the Nazis, Marie and Daniel relocate to Saint-Malo, and this time Daniel constructs a model

of Saint-Malo to help Marie become familiar with her new environment.

Within this narrative framework, the architectural model is constructed as a means of introducing the surrounding environment to a visually impaired character. As in the first film, the model functions as a tool of spatial representation within the father-daughter relationship, carrying meanings related to the father's act of presenting and explaining the lived world to his daughter.



**Figure 2: Wooden city model [15]**

#### 4.3. The Residence

*The Residence* is a detective story inspired by the book *The Residence: Inside the Private World of the White House*. The series investigates the murder of a staff member working at the White House in the United States. Following the murder, a female detective is invited to the White House, where she conducts interviews with all personnel living and working there, including the President of the United States, in an effort to determine who committed the crime.



**Figure 3: Edible cake model of the White House [16]**

In the series, one of the murder suspects is the White House pastry chef, and in the third episode the murdered character is shown together with the pastry chef in front of an edible cake model of the White House. The Swiss pastry chef had created a one-to-one gingerbread house version of the White House ten months before the murder for the New Year celebrations. While the front façade of the model is completely closed, the rear façade is open; without an exterior wall, the interiors of all rooms are fully visible, with each room's distinct architectural character shown together with the people who use it.

The figures representing people are also edible and crafted from materials such as liquorice and gummy candy, closely resembling their real-life appearances. The murdered character is even depicted with a small, scaled knife inserted into their back.

By presenting the model without exterior walls, the series adopts a perspective that parallels the detective's post-murder effort to become familiar with the rooms and the people in order to solve the crime. This approach contributes to the viewer's exploration of the building, its rooms none of which are identical and its characters by rendering the building transparent.

In addition to this physical model, the series also employs a digital model of the building. The digital model similarly presents the entire structure without exterior walls from the viewing angle, using a transparent visual strategy that makes the whole building visible.

#### 4.4. The Snow Girl (*La chica de nieve*)

*The Snow Girl* is a series that focuses on criminal cases investigated by a female journalist character. The second season of the series is adapted from Javier Castillo's novel *The Soul Game*. In this season, the events revolve around an elite high school called Los Arcos. One of the suspects interviewed in connection with the investigated crime is Andrés Garrido, the principal of this school in Málaga.

When police detectives enter the school building and step into the principal's office, they discover an architectural model of the building. In the model, the building is made of cardboard, while the students are represented by plastic figures, using materials that are typical of contemporary architectural model-making practices.



Figure 4: Model of Los Arcos School [17]

Within the series, the school functions as a key setting in the narrative. As interviews are conducted with both the principal and the students regarding the deceased and missing characters, the building itself, its spatial organization, and the long-standing relationships among its occupants and alumni become central to the investigation. By depicting the principal as someone who observes the building from above and governs and directs the students, he is symbolically portrayed as playing god, akin to the leader of a religious cult.

Here, the moral choices of both an educational authority and a religious cult are questioned. Similarly, when the detectives first enter the principal's office, they examine the model in detail. As a result, the model represents far more than a hobby through which the principal spends his spare time.

#### 4.5. Wayward

*Wayward* depicts Tall Pines Academy, an institution to which teenagers facing various forms of difficulty are sent by their families. Over time, it becomes apparent that the academy and the surrounding town are entirely composed of members of a cult. A police officer investigating the murders and disappearances that occur at the school, along with two girls who have been forcibly sent there by their families, collaborate in an attempt to escape.

In the final episode of the series, after successfully escaping from the school, the main character Leila and her friends enter a house to obtain food and clothing. Throughout the series, Leila is portrayed as a rebellious character who has experienced conflicts within all the communities she has belonged to since childhood, particularly her family, and who harbours a strong need for belonging and affection. In this house, Leila notices a model depicting an ideal suburban home, complete with a smiling, happy mother, father, and child in the garden an idealized family scene.

The model is not displayed openly but enclosed within a glass case. This presentation enhances its exhibition-like quality and reinforces an impression of isolation, perfection, and inaccessibility. The model reminds Leila of the deep need for belonging that lies beneath her rebellious exterior and that she has always felt internally, leading her to abandon the escape and decide to return to the academy.



**Figure 5: The model of idealized home and family [18]**

Therefore, in this case, the model functions as a turning point that facilitates the resolution of the character's transformation and conflicts, marking the transition to the concluding phase of the narrative. The model represents not merely a house, but the fundamental human needs for love, security, and

belonging that emerge from birth. Leila, a character who has long struggled due to unmet needs for love and belonging throughout her life, ultimately finds her sense of home within Tall Pines Academy the very institution she had consistently resisted.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined five contemporary film and television productions and identified models representing one city, one school, and three residential buildings. Among these residences, one depicts the White House, the home of the President of the United States; another represents a classical villa in Rome; and the third illustrates a typical detached American suburban house common in the Vermont, New England region, characterized by its wooden cladding and veranda.

**Table 2: Architectural models**

Title	Model Type	Model Material	Presence of human figures
<b>The Catholic School</b> ( <i>La scuola cattolica</i> )	Residential model	Wood	Yes, toy
<b>All the Light We Cannot See</b>	Urban model	Wood	No
<b>The Residence</b>	Residential model	Gingerbread / cake	Yes, edible candy
<b>The Snow Girl</b> ( <i>La chica de nieve</i> )	School model	Cardboard	Yes, plastic
<b>Wayward</b>	Residential model	Plastic	Yes, plastic

The findings indicate that the models were constructed using different materials (Table 2). In *All the Light We Cannot See* and *The Catholic School*, the city model and the Roman villa are depicted as wooden, in accordance with the historical periods portrayed in the narratives set in the 1940s and 1970s. In *The Residence*, a Swiss-German pastry chef creates an edible gingerbread house model of the White House for Christmas, reflecting a Central European tradition. This practice of constructing edible houses from cake or gingerbread has been a widespread cultural motif since the nineteenth century, notably associated with the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*. In *The Snow Girl*, laser-cut cardboard model-making techniques commonly used in contemporary architectural practice are visible. Finally, in *Wayward*, the model depicts a typical American house made entirely of plastic.

With the exception of one model, all include human figures: in one case represented as toys, and in others as edible confections or plastic figurines. The intended users of the models vary: they may function as a dollhouse for a young girl, as a tactile tool enabling a visually impaired individual to understand their surroundings, as a ritual and exhibition object associated with Christmas celebrations, or as a leisure activity pursued by adults as a hobby.

Overall, the most significant aspect of these models is that they exemplify the use of architectural models in everyday life by non-architects, without the presence of architect characters or references to professional architectural practice. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by addressing the underexplored representation of model-making in films and television series from this perspective.

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