

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY: WHAT DOES STAR WARS TELL US ABOUT ARCHITECTURE FOR GOODIES AND BADDIES?

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Abstract. This article summarises a study of the architecture of 12 Star Wars locations categorised by the moral status of their inhabitants: ‘good’, ‘bad’ or ‘neutral.’ Locations are analysed by five criteria: presence of greenery; texture and materials; colour; scale; and nature of design. It concludes that set designers consistently used very different design approaches for ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ The ‘dark side’ is typified by enormous, industrial, metallic and shiny structures. The ‘good side’ tends towards natural and vernacular architecture whilst maintaining human scale. The ‘good side’ also have a more sustainable approach to design. They are consistently more likely to re-use existing buildings and places. George Lucas and Star Wars’ set designers would appear to have intuitively understood the emerging literature on what makes for happy, sustainable and popular places and to have continuously identified this with the forces of good.

Keywords: *Film architecture, Star Wars.*

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Received: 14 January 2022;

Accepted: 30 January 2022;

Published: 28 April 2022.

1. Introduction

Iconic films serve not only as entertainment, but as credible points of emotional and moral reference for their millions of fans. The Star Wars series is a paragon of such motion pictures. In the same way in which successful films use music, films’ set designers need to capture and reflect our emotions, not just shock us. Good needs to feel and look good and honest and homely. Bad needs to feel bad. How have set designers achieved this? This brief study argues that in rising to this challenge, Star Wars’ set designers have intuitively done something important. There are serious implications for real life. More architects should do the same when trying to create buildings to be familiar and homely, not just things that unsettle or scare us. As the Star Wars character, Yoda, put it, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate ... leads to suffering.”

2. Relevance and existing literature

Few film franchises compare to Star Wars in the breadth, length and depth of their appeal.¹ Star Wars has been so popular for so long that a 2019 study found that 32% of men and 18% of women in the United States considered themselves to be avid Star Wars fans.² With the franchise worth \$70bn, it has been a consistent culture reference for over

¹Perhaps only the James Bond franchise has comparable appeal over several generations.

²[Star Wars - statistics & facts | Statista](#)

40 years. It now has fans of all ages from those who are young now to those who were young in the 1970s. Star Wars' themes are eternal: the struggle between good and evil (Campbell, 2008).

George Lucas has explicitly stated that he wished to make relevant to modern America, and by implication the modern world, the generic mythology of heroes and fairy tales. He has said that he was greatly influenced by the comparative mythology scholar, Joseph Campbell, particularly his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He explained to Campbell's biographer:

'The Western was possibly the last generically American fairy tale, telling us about our values. And once the Western disappeared, nothing has ever taken its place. In literature we were going off into science fiction... so that's when I started doing more strenuous research on fairy tales, folklore, and mythology ... It was very eerie because in reading *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* I began to realize that my first draft of *Star Wars* was following classic motifs... So I modified my next draft according to what I'd been learning about classical motifs and made it a little bit more consistent.' (Larsen S. & Larsen R., 2002).

In attempting to make myth relevant to the modern world, George Lucas was saying something about our institutions and our how we shape our human environments. He was attempting to speak to the choices we can make, the struggles we always face, and the values we can embrace, if we are good, or reject, if we are bad.

The set design of heroes and villains, of protagonists and antagonists, appears to have been very little studied from the perspective of the human response to architecture. One book-length study by the architect, Chad Oppenheim, of 15 villains' hideouts found according to one reviewer that baddies' 'lair generally share commonalities: They are pristine, awe-inspiring, high-tech, otherworldly, often impractical, and draw heavily on the tenets of modernism.' It found that;

'modernist, futuristic, and utopian architecture has long been associated with amorality. Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, sleek homes, equally minimal and extravagant, made of glass, steel, and concrete, have become the archetypal home for the idealistic recluse with dastardly ambition.' (Palumbo, 2020).

Writing from a very different perspective, the journalist and architectural writer, David Brussat, has made a similar observation in a 2021 blog, specifically referencing Star Wars:

'In the Star Wars series, the bad guys live in places like the Death Star, while the good guys (that is, the oppressed) on various planets live in different sorts [of] traditional villages, towns or cities.'³

³[Pop the "historicism" bugaboo | Architecture Here and There](#)

3. Analysis

Do filmmakers and set designers understand architecture better than many architects? My study of the 11 Star Wars films released over 44 years suggests that they do. I examined 12 Star Wars locations (some cities, some villages, some spaceships, some individual buildings). I categorised them as either:

- ‘Good.’ The home of innocents, harmless but kind planet-dwellers, or Jedi and their allies on the good side of the force. Examples include Naboo, every rebel base, The Lars homestead and Takodana castle;
- ‘Bad.’ The home of Sith lords, imperial facilities, First Order or actively malign raiders who kill for fun not just for food. Examples include the Death Star, Imperial Star Destroyers and the Scarif tower’; and
- ‘Neutral.’ Not actively evil or good but with the potential for good or ill to happen. Trading posts and the like. Examples include Nevarro, Mos Eisley and Jeddah.

I then analysed the locations by five criteria:

- Greenery. Were there trees and plants present?
- Texture and materials. Were there natural materials with texture (such as wood) or unnatural materials without texture (such as glass or metal)?
- Colour. Were there earthy or colourful tones or greys, silver or blacks?
- Scale. Was the location human scale (below four to five storeys) or was it bigger?
- Design. Was the design of buildings and structures naturalist and biophilic (emulating nature) or mechanistic?

These criteria were based on the discussion of architectural and urbanist features as set out in recent literature on popular, wellbeing-enhancing design (Boys Smith, 2016; Salingaros, 2017; Iovene *et al.*, 2019; Mehaffy *et al.*, 2020).

My findings are set out in table 1.

Table 1. Design attributes of 12 Star Wars locations

	“Good”	“Bad”	“Neutral”
<i>Greenery present?</i>	75%	25%	0%
<i>Natural materials?</i>	100%	0%	100%
<i>Shiny greys & blacks?</i>	0%	100%	0%
<i>Small, medium, large or enormous</i>	75% large, 25% small	100% enormous	25% small, 50% medium, 25% large
<i>Design</i>	100% traditional	100% industrial	75% urban, 25% traditional

4. Discussion of findings

What can we observe? Put simply, the bases of the good side of Star Wars' struggle between light and dark tend to be traditionally designed and rich in trees and greenery. The bad side's bases instead tend to be clad in metals and cold colours. The 'baddies' like using tall buildings to impose their power. Their star ships are minimalist and modernist. They are machines and they say they are machines. The goodies' buildings are usually wider than they are tall. They seem more friendly, less threatening, more organic and sinuous. Even their spaceships curve more. Even when they are grand, they remain modestly scaled with clear squares and streets. Look at the traditional domed palaces of Naboo.

So many people have watched, are watching or will watch a Star Wars film that the franchise is worth \$70bn. They must be saying something credible about the human condition and convincingly capturing what, in all our hearts, we know to be good or recognise to be evil. George Lucas imagined the empire as cold, heartless, mechanical, metallic – an entity of machines and military bases not homes. This is his perception of moral evil. By contrast he use traditional building techniques and patterns to make the rebel bases seem more friendly, homely and welcoming.

Humans fear the unknown. Research has shown that the stereotypical idea of a house, two windows and a door, resembles a human face to us (Sussman, 2021). Filmmakers probably have not read this research. But they instinctively understand it because they make use of it. The simplest Star Wars homes, such as the houses in Tatooine, are attractive and natural. However, the imperial plasticised rooms and hallways reflect the bare emptiness of outer space. Anyone, man or droid, would feel unsafe in such an environment, mirroring our feelings about the empire, as they clearly don't care about how anyone feels.

It isn't just the buildings that matter. It is also the context and surroundings. As we all know from the priorities of real estate: location, location, location. Rebel bases are often modestly set in forests, grassy plains, even next to a waterfall. These fantastic views often enrich the attractiveness of their physical structures. They nestle in their landscapes. Whether it is in the tropical forests of Ajan Kloss or the snowy landscapes of Hoth, rebel bases agree with their settings. By contrast, imperial bases have recurring themes of darkness. Even when set in a natural environment, such as the imperial base on Scarif, a beautiful tropical planet, they disfigure them. This imperial base is a huge, tall black imperial spike, menacing and corrupting, not unlike some of the skyscrapers we have today.

One more difference stands out between the architecture of the good side and the bad sides of the Star Wars force. The 'goodies' are environmentally friendly. The 'baddies' are not. All of the rebel bases are old buildings being reused to fit a new purpose. The best example is Yavin IV, the temple base of the rebels in the iconic first film. It is very clearly an ancient monument being used again. By contrast, all of the imperial buildings are very new, with sleek black or white surfaces. Their killer bases are often only just completed when they appear in a film (The Death Star was new). In short, as well as building brutally, the empire builds unsustainably. The best way to build an eco-friendly house is not to build one. Moving into an old house is much better for the environment due to the embodied carbon that is not lost. (It takes a modern more energy efficient house about 100 years to catch up with a Victorian terrace once you consider

embodied carbon).⁴ The empire is eco-destructive — even before you consider their unfortunate habit of blowing up planets.

3. Conclusion

The best films, even when they are set a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, tell us something about ourselves and our place in the real world. We recognise them to be true. This was certainly George Lucas's intention and Star Wars is so popular that it must do this better than most. Lucas's designers instinctively know what is good and what is bad. I wish that more architects and developers on planet Earth were building with the good side of the force and not creating places for Sith Lords instead of real humans.



Figure 1. Why are we creating buildings a Sith Lord would commission in modern London?
Cardinal Place, 100 Victoria Street

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my father, Nicholas Boys Smith, for suggesting this project, and for guiding my research and drafting. I would also like to thank my reviewers for improving the discussion of the existing literature.

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