

interiors

MAGAZINE



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designing 24

Production designer Carlos Barbosa reveals the science behind the art

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No scripts had been written when I was asked to design the eighth season of *24*. The story would be set in New York City, based around a nuclear disarmament treaty being negotiated at the United Nations between the U.S. and a fictionalized Islamic Republic. The Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) was to be revived, and would need to be re-imagined: this is all I knew. Having such limited information was incredibly liberating. I had designed the set for the *24* pilot, so I understood the needs of the program. The show is fueled by a blistering, relentless tension that exists between the characters and their surroundings. Every environment is immersed in that sense of urgency and shaped by palpable anxiety—this mood compelled my concept, as the design had to express emotion and drama in an intense, scripted setting, so my choices were inherently different from those made for a private residence or hospitality project. Also knowing that I would be creating sets for the series finale inspired me to push the design into a completely original realm.

By opting to place the new CTU underground at the southern end of Roosevelt Island, directly across the East

River from the United Nations complex, I wanted to evoke the defensive, medieval notion of a moat. With the space now subterranean, it fostered a new contrast: the experience of entering CTU would require one to completely disappear from society, yet at the center of the facility was a 24-foot-wide screen displaying views from satellites, street cameras, television broadcasts, data and information—the biggest window to the world. This screen was essential in tracking the passage of time. Going below street level was a defensive strategy considering that in previous seasons CTU had always been attacked. Having CTU always watching from within gave the writers and characters unlimited scenarios to explore.

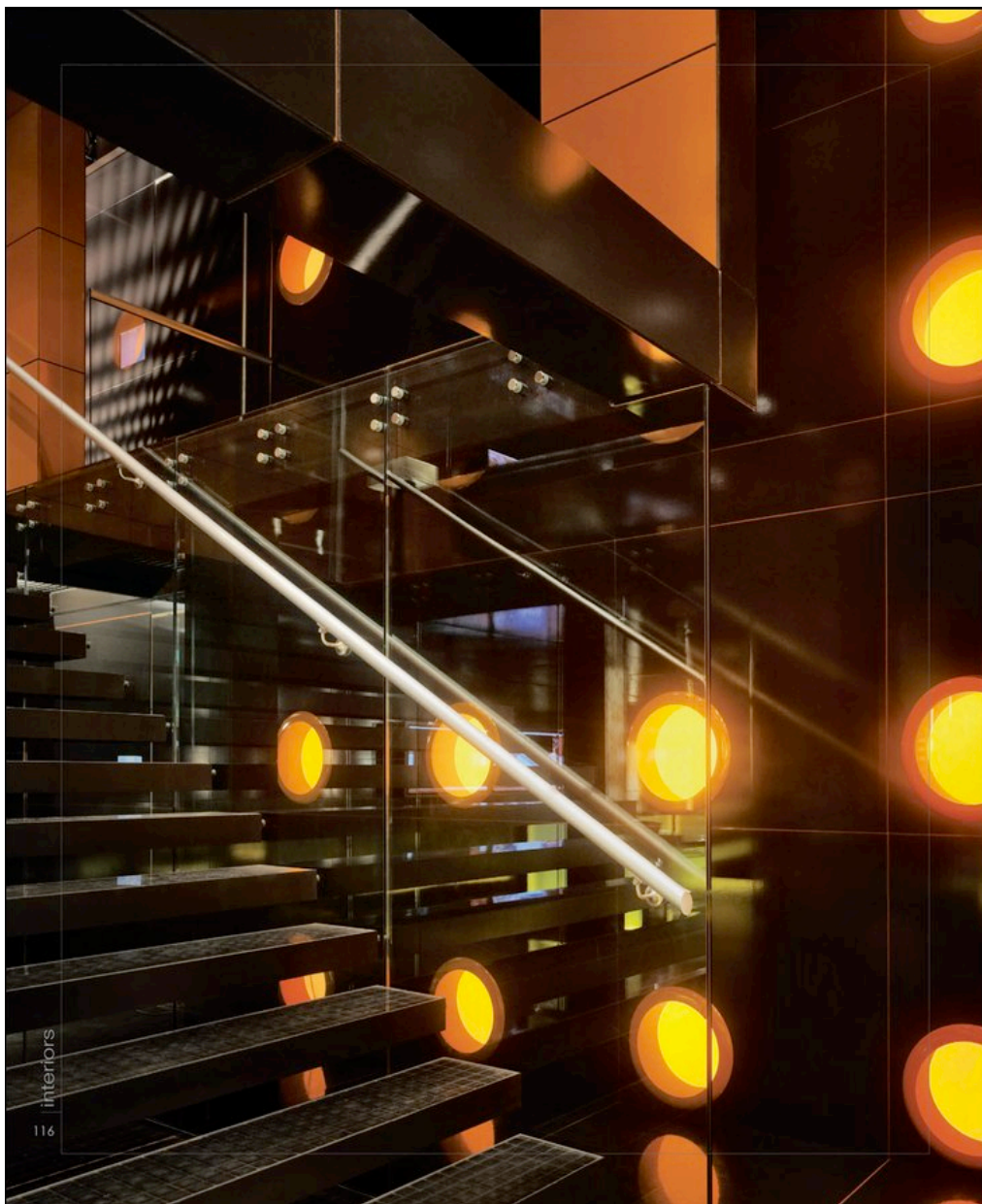
With the momentum and energy of the plot, it was important to me that the each set of *24* sustain that sense of vitality, and not recede. While devising a concept for CTU, I considered one question: How would a paranoid superpower react in the face of terrorism? I found the perfect answer to be a grid. When you want control over any element, having a rigid grid to organize everything gives the illusion of total control and order, a perfect system for the Counter



Terrorist Unit. The grid is also a signature of Richard Meier's work. While the all white elements and the Neo-Corbusian forms of glass and enamel give his architecture a natural, elegant effect, I felt that the linearity was a good element to embrace and reinterpret. The grid for the floor, ceiling and walls is composed of 4-foot squares. I used the same construct to organize all graphic elements and computer screen displays. [The math used in designing CTU is based on the number 24.]

As a state-of-the-art facility, the interior of CTU was to be completely minimal and devoid of any object not having a practical use to the job—no family photos, art, or decorative plants allowed. Only the latest technology, personnel and information were to inhabit the area creating a minimalist architecture of maximum efficiency. A glossy white cylinder was used as the interrogation room. The idea behind this design choice was to create a space that would put the mind of the person to be interrogated in a blank setting, no exterior stimulation, no hard edges, and bright white light to create a state of limbo. Lighting is crucial to the atmosphere of an interior, so I consciously created illumination with the





final objective of giving the Director of Photography an environment that could be shot in the style of 24 (a handheld camera to capture long walk-and-talk scenes) and in any direction without having to continually re-light. Bold and sharp wall fixtures were recessed and spaced to create a rhythm of light and dark, while smaller fixtures were placed at the intersection points of the ceiling grid as an accent. Glass partitions for the workstations glowed softly within their own environments, and task lights were mounted on a perimeter track to punctuate the working surfaces—I wanted everything to harmonize the overall light envelope.

For the United Nations set, my inspiration was a very direct line to the Mid-Century Modern architectural style used by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, the designers of the original complex completed in 1950. Part of the thrill of being a designer today is drawing from the profound work of such visionaries to reference in our own designs. If we look at Niemeyer's Congress Building in Brasília, it is obvious to see his influence in the conception of the UN complex for the show. The "bowl" shaped element served

as my inspiration in the design of the ceiling in the Council Chamber set. All the components, details, finishes, furniture, colors and textures were drawn from the original complex and reconfigured to serve the needs of our production. With this set, it was important to cast a more formal tenor, which was appropriate for a building devoted to politics and diplomacy. To give this space a connection to history, the set was organized around an exterior plaza, featuring a Monument to Peace composed of two sections of the Berlin Wall suspended inches above the water surface as to appear to be floating. The design of the guest suites for diplomats and dignitaries had roots in the same Mid-Century Modern style of architecture. Upgraded elements were added to provide a more contemporary look and to visually set it apart from the rest of the complex.

Creating an alternate reality, but one that exists in an artificial world where there are no natural ambient characteristics, is the essence of production design. A metaphoric place of space, color and light—the combining of these elements, for me, has been an extraordinary journey through the art of production design ■