

THE SON - BFDG DESIGN PRESENTATION

Production Designer - Simon Bowles
Set Decorator - Mickaela Trodden
Supervising Art Director - Caroline Story

Filmed - London and New York
Budget - Band 2 (£8.5m to £30m)
UK Release Date - 10th November 2022

The Son is based on director Florian Zeller's stage show, set in present day New York City. The biggest challenge facing the production was that the film had to be shot almost entirely in London, with a few days filming in New York State. The interior scenes would all be shot with either green screen or printed backings outside windows. To help maintain the illusion we are in NYC, I designed sets with windows as large as possible to include views of people walking and cars moving outside. I felt this was also important to remind the audience that the troubles this family are having is not isolated, beyond those windows there are thousands of others living, loving, crying, dying.

Being creatively involved in the stage plays move from London, Paris and now to New York was wonderful. Florian and I worked with script writer Christopher Hampton and the film's producers on researching the new lives of these characters in a new city. Florian, DoP Ben Smithard and I travelled to New York to set the scene for the loom of both the New York exteriors and interiors and exactly where they should be placed in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

The other creative inspiration that Florian and I used was speaking to our cast, two of whom knew New York very well; Laura Dern who was playing Kate and Hugh Jackman who played Peter. They brought another angle of information table as they are both parents so told us of their experiences of the work / family separation in a large American city.

Finding applicable New York locations in London was tough as we really wanted the architectural details to be as accurate as possible. While in New York I photographed reference images of apartment building stairwells, Brownstone living rooms and window, skirting & dado measurements. It was enjoyable to realise it would be tricky to make the correct mouldings using the UK timber charts. Much would need to be manufactured.

Also oddities for our set dec and props department such as the difference in height of light switches between UK & US and diameter of the red cast iron pipes which run up to the water tower on top of the taller buildings in NYC.

The colour and texture themes I set out for each character at an early stage were carried out through choices of fabrics, furniture, floor treatments, window dressing, lighting and character dressing elements.

It was important to Florian that the audience felt uncomfortable in Peter and Emma's apartment and welcome in Kate's home. This was achieved in Peter's by leaving areas of wall empty, using cooler neutral colours and overly self-aware choices of wall art. Kate's on the other hand was dressed with warmer tones contrasting with Peter's, creating an almost familiar environment for the audience.

This was an amazing project to design and I am very proud of the final movie which brings many audiences to tears in the final scenes.



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by Jort Van Welbergen

Lit concept render using Blender from production designer
Simon Bowles Sketchup models.



THE SON - Peter & Beth's Apartment - Simon Bowles - 2014

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Lit concept render compared to final set.



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by Jort Van Welbergen

Lit concept render compared to final set dressed by Mickaela Trodden.



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Hired NYC translite backing.

Polished concrete with shinier, worn area down the centre.



Layering of fabulous cushions.

Bespoke plaster brickwork sheets specially created for us to match the typical NYC repeating single row of headers and five rows of stretchers.

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Hugh often filmed against this blank brick wall to suggest he is being bricked up, enclosed, restricted by the events surrounding his character, the aim to make these scenes more visually uncomfortable.

Great deep views within the set to play with shadows.



Mixture of pictures from prop houses, individual artists, butterfly collectors and printed from stock libraries.

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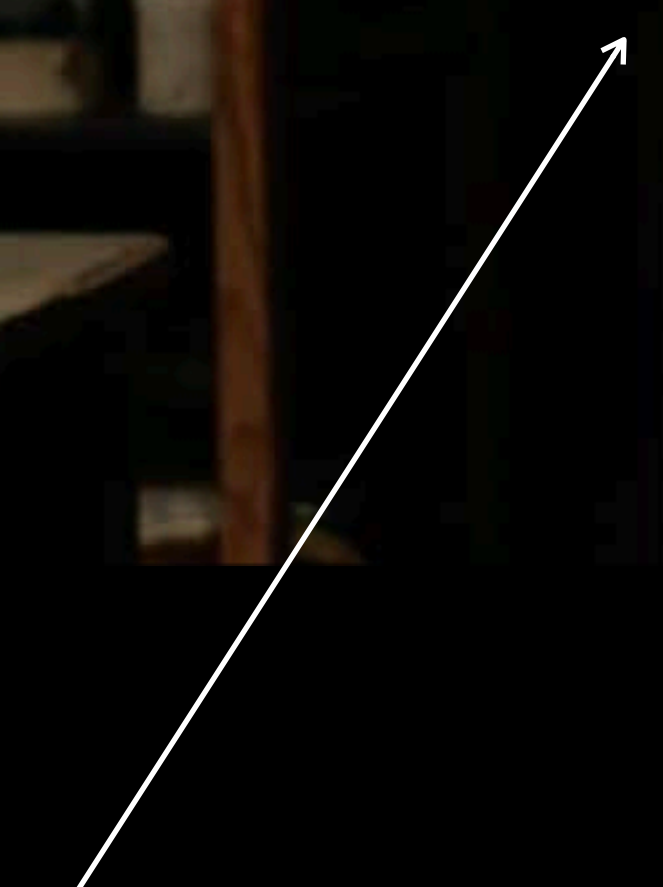
Tight colour palette of warm brick & wood, dark blue / black and green plants.



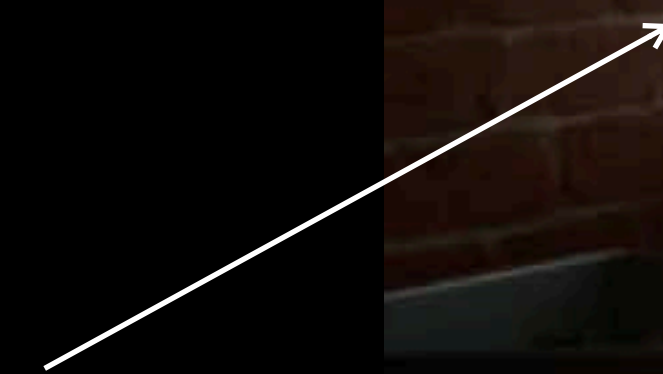
NYC grime sprayed onto window glass for authenticity but also helping the feeling of containment.



Cast iron pillars built into the set design to maintain the structural integrity of the apartment building.

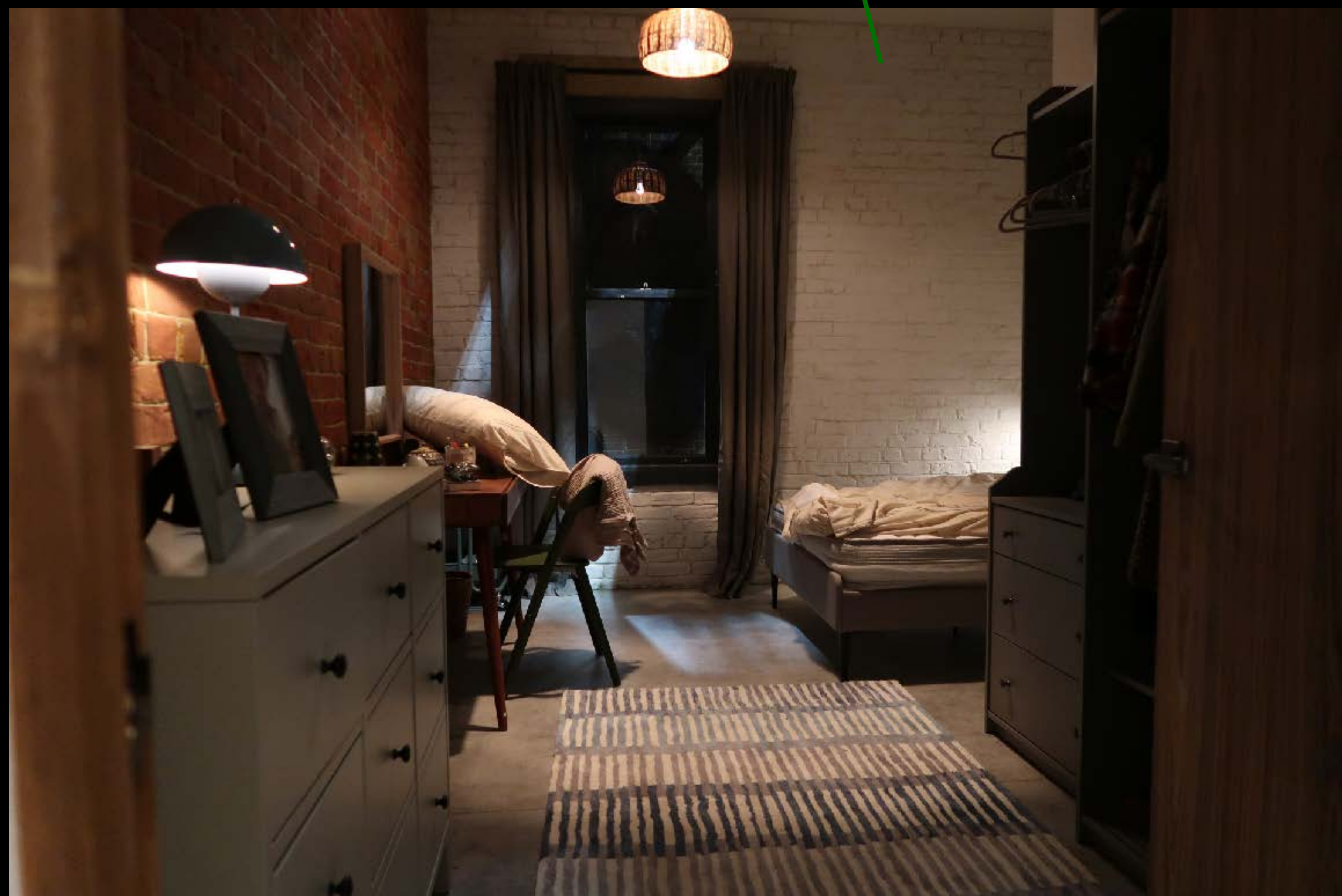
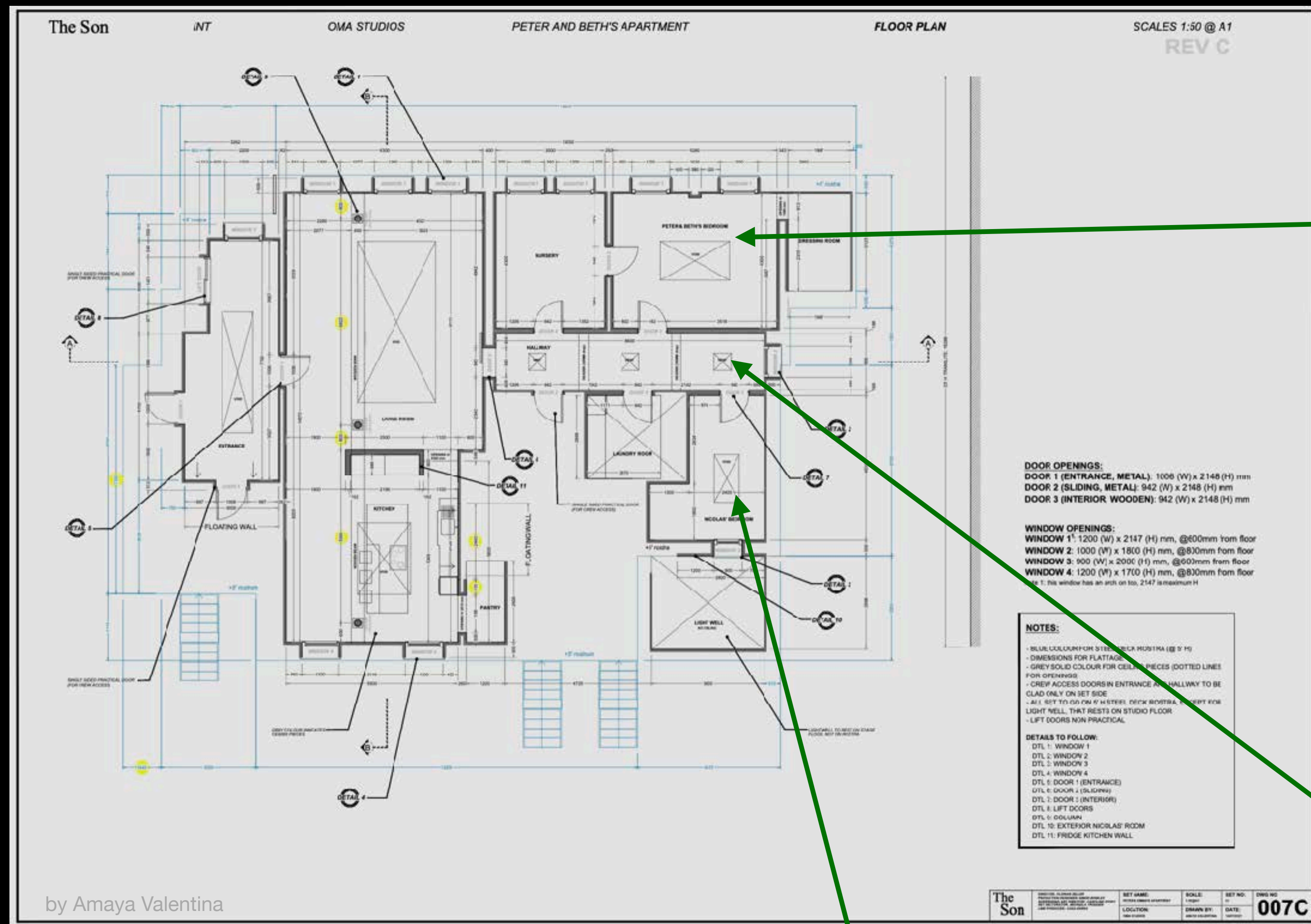


Blinds and sheers in all windows to be able to constantly adjust views and daylight. Example here for a moment of silhouette during a daylight scene.



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Other areas of the apartment set.



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Kate's apartment shot on location in London



Green tones were used in Kate's apartment set, sitting with natural wood and cream colours.



The door frames, dado rails and door frames were enlarged to represent the chunkier proportions seen in NYC.



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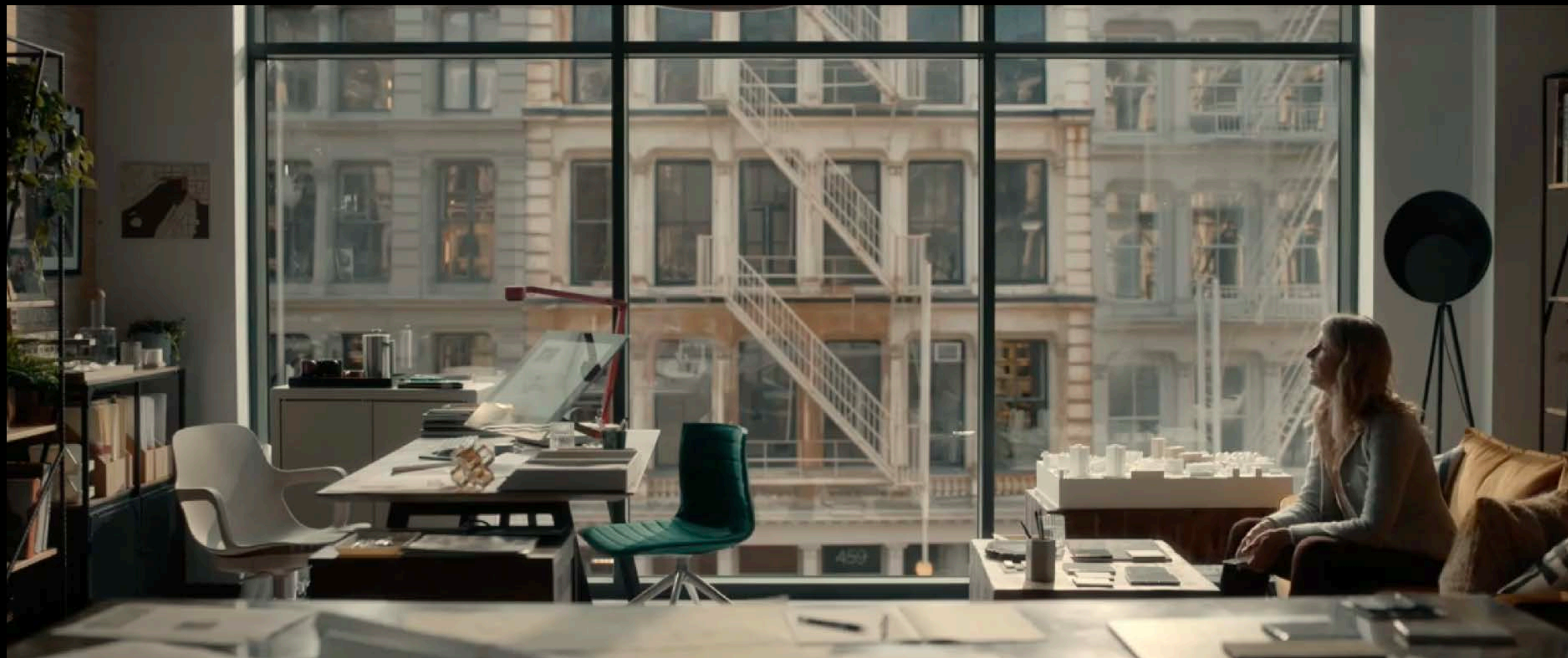


Kate's architects office set dressed with organic materials with black accents to contrast with Peter's office of glass & steel.



Sourced vintage grasses wallpaper.

Lots of fabulous graphics including family photos, book jackets, framed stills and architect CAD drawing on screens.



It was important to Florian and I that the audience do not question that we are in New York throughout the film.

I used large windows on sets like this to then add the correct view shot during our few days in NYC. The busy city views were especially important for the theme of this story, that these events unfolding in this one family are easily compatible to other families in the city.