# BETWEEN NATURALISTIC AND THEATRICAL: CONTRAST NARRATIVES AS CONTEXT-BASED SPACE EXPLORATIONS

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### **Abstract**

The study explores contrasting narratives and the intersections between them as the basis of context-based space exploration. Narrative approaches demonstrate possibilities of creatively expanding the design process with its values on imagination and storytelling. Yet, with the focus of stories as the basis of narrative exploration, discussion about its relation to context is often limited. This study introduces the exploration of contrast narratives by exploring the intersection between the naturalistic and theatrical conception of space presented in Tim Burton's 1990 film titled Edward Scissorhands. The close relation of a film to imagination provides possibilities for a more rich and extensive spatial design. The results of this study demonstrate the contrast narratives depicted by differing colours, proportions, and conditions of space throughout the film. Intersections between narratives exist through interactions between characters that are repositioned from one narrative to the other, highlighting how users coming from contrasting contexts may adapt and appropriate new spaces in time. The idea of contrast reveals the contextual relations between narrative, space, and time, demonstrating a potential basis for developing a context-based architectural design method.

Keywords: contrasting narratives, contextual design approach, naturalistic, theatrical, film

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### Introduction

This study aims to explore the notion of contrast narrative as the basis of context-based space exploration. The narrative exploration projects a relationship between space, place, and time. This study explores such inquiry by investigating the narrative development of architectural space in a film's setting. A meaningful spatial narrative describes a space-time relationship that spans the past, the present, and the imaginative future (Nathania & Wahid, 2022). Such relationships enable humans to feel more involved and become an important part of the space (Coates, 2012). Through narratives, the interpretation of space can be deeper and exist in a variety of ways, as demonstrated in the naturalistic and theatrical conception of space discussed in this study.

The narrative begins with a formation of stories developed through various intermediary media and delivered through storytelling (Ryan et al., 2016). This study discusses the changing space and place experiences and perceptions annotated in narratives within some forms of media, which affect the conception of space. People have subjective differences in interpreting certain spaces because architecture is designed as spatial storytelling to mediate human knowledge about the world (Lyu, 2019). In the course of a narrative, the conception of space can be interpreted and reinterpreted differently.

In particular, the study discusses how the contrast of narratives constructs possibilities of different space conceptions in Tim Burton's 1990 film Edward Scissorhands. This film has two different narratives on its characters and spatial settings that contrast with each other. The exploration begins by discussing narrative and architecture as a form of discourse, followed by an investigation of narrative as a way of building different contextual interpretations of space in a narrative. The study then explores the naturalistic and theatrical conception of space in the Edward Scissorhands film, discussing further how the form of mediation that occurs in these two conceptions of space demonstrates the existence of contrast narratives. The study discusses how contrast narratives have the potential to be used to generate different understandings of context as the basis of the design approach.

### Narrative and architecture

The understanding of narrative in architecture values forms of media that contain a spatial and temporal context. Driven by the study of linguistics, forms of media that depict the narrative can be monomodal or single-channel communication (such as a book); or instead exist in a multimodal form (multichannel communication), like a film that engages both vision and hearing (Markova & Kalinov, 2018). Each of these forms is appropriate for various contexts and narrative strategies (Markova & Kalinov, 2018).

Architecture, alongside other forms of media such as films, novels, and games, generates representations that provide particular stories to tell (Clear, 2020; McNeil, 2023).

Nevertheless, when it comes to architecture, the storytelling approach is often delivered with the focus of creating grand but superficial statements, thus overlooking the interaction between users and the design (Baker, 2023). In recent years, some architects have recognised this concern and set guidelines for how architecture can better integrate a much deeper sense of the narratives, drawing comparisons with other forms of media (Clear, 2020). The narrative of architecture is rooted in the way the stories are conveyed, which is intricately linked to the observer's (or narrator's) vantage point, the precision and vividness of representation, and the intended message's orientation (Szpakowska-Loranc, 2019)

The general narrative unfolds through events, along with the characters and places in the story. The narrative media often demonstrate fictional elements, giving the impression of escapism from reality so that it becomes a subject of interpretation for the audience, which later creates an existence parallel to reality itself. Bringing such fictional elements, including events, characters, and places, tests the physical reality as the narratives can 'fictionise' our environment by highlighting the explicit 'reality' (Coates, 2012).

In architecture, the idea of narration aims to convey meaning from the object to visitors, although not necessarily in a continuous plot, but may exist in a random sequence of meanings. Frequently, communication of meaning through subtle forms can be recognised better by the public rather than through outright communication. The narrative reflects the development of human society as a basic way for human to make sense of and communicates socially with the world (Kang et al., 2021). The postmodern world depicts the notion of narrative in its capability to interpret events that have been experienced by humans about a particular place (Coates, 2012).

The distribution of narratives occurs through character elements as the centre of different forms of media (Eder et al., 2010). Figures such as Harry Potter in both its fictional book and as a film character or Paddle Pop as an icon of an ice cream brand are examples of characters that become aspects of a strong narrative dissemination. Usually, by remembering the character, the audience may provide a depiction on what are the various contexts embedded in the character, be it a place, other characters, or any important historical events.

### Narrative as context-based approach

Context refers to something that connects the whole form of various parts, like how words form a meaning within a sentence (Depraetere, 2019; Parry, 2015). In architecture, contextualism responds to the surrounding environment by appreciating what already exists. Architecture which exists as something that violates harmony with the surroundings makes it appear in contrast with its surroundings. In contextual thinking, the design must emerge in a current and contemporary way. At the same time, the necessity to position the new design between its past and future context is important (Sanghvi, 2017). Contextualism

is the core of the built environment, where architecture exists as a tool for expressing culture, reflecting the fascination and concern for the current time (Sanghvi, 2017).

To become contextual, the building must respond to the whole rather than being an entity in itself. The contextual coherence of a building has influences towards its surroundings, which can enhance, degrade or have a perceptible effect on the overall architectural character of the surroundings. Context is not an element of design; instead, it organises design elements and principles which will create a building in context. Combining various parameters if used with a deep understanding of the surrounding environment enables the old and new parts of the environment to string together (Sanghvi, 2017).

Architecture gives influence and meaning through narrative, as architectural elements assemble the stories which respond to the environment and program functions. Coates (2012) sees narrative as a subsidiary of architectural context and use, stating that buildings are invested with narrative content from architects in a way that can only be conveyed through space. The application of narrative in the architectural design process provides potential theoretical and practical contributions, as it offers new ways of approaching the entire design process, from comprehensing the site to addressing past works and developing creative propositions. Narrative supports the creation of real and imaginative architectural designs, whereby places are designed to support, develop, and tell stories, creating the overall architectural narratives (Di Mascio, 2021).

Architecture constantly has something to convey, whether it is a story about functionality, authority, or ideology of our built environment that embodies the socio-cultural values of the people in a spatial-temporal (time and place) context (Pallasmaa, 2014; Parcak, 2019). Restoring and adapting an existing structure creates sequel stories to the existing context, preserving the legacy (Di Mascio, 2021). Narrating spatial dynamics of the space mediates the relation between different spaces and addresses how the space performs to assist activities (Wahid et al., 2021).

Narration can be an additional tool in simulating architecture (Coates, 2012). Alongside the development of technology, our world today can be simulated in tangible and intangible forms, creating a virtual space experience, where the experience transcends the tangible and intangible boundaries. The narrative approach enables possibilities to translate such experience across different means of technology, therefore enriching the overall spatial experience.

# Reading the contrasting narratives of Tim Burton's Edward Scissorhands: Between naturalistic and theatricality

As discussed, this study focuses on reading the spatial narrative of Edward Scissorhands film, which is directed by Tim Burton and uses two contrasting narrative forms in its stories. Such twofold narratives are not common, as other films generally use only one form of narration. In reading the narrative, this study focuses on how the elements of *mise-en-scène* are

organised to construct the meaning of the film. Mise-en-scène is an expression of all the visual aspects that construct a film, from the setting, sets, and properties, to actors, costumes, and lighting; which coordinate the scene into one through design and composition (Corrigan & White, 2015). Through such reading, this study concludes how contrasting narratives bring a new understanding of narrative as a context-based design approach.

### Naturalistic narrative

Edward Scissorhands was a gothic reinterpretation of Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life (1946), where both films feature outcast characters in society. The film effectively exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy present in society by highlighting the perpetual nature of its inherent problems, acknowledging the existence of both good and bad individuals. However, director Tim Burton skillfully disguises the film's cynical undertones, preventing the audience from fully realizing they are watching a critique of society.

The story is set in a 1950s or 1960s neighbourhood, characterised by the iconic American bungalow style (Odell & Le Blanc, 2005). In making a naturalistic film set representing the real condition of a community settlement in the 1950s or 1960s, the filming was conducted in Tampa Bay, Tinsmith Circle. The location becomes the setting in this narrative, providing a socio-historical-geographic relationship as the main place that builds this film (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tinsmith Circle, Lutz, FL 33559, Tampa Bay, United States of America (Image by authors)

The architectural expression of its house design uses a traditional style house which is used in most settlements in the Central Regions of Florida, including Tampa Bay, at that moment. The house style refers to the colonial revival design, comprising the bungalow type and multiple gable roof models combined with the Polynesian gable roof (Figure 2).

In expressing the narrative, this film develops a series of scenes to provide a realistic picture of what is happening in society during the 1950s or 1960s in an iconic way. For design purposes, the houses throughout the complex were coloured in pastel colours of blue, pink, yellow, green, and cream so they looked monotonous. Based on the car's movement in the scene between Peg and Edward, the pattern of the residential area is interpreted, to create an illustration in Figure 3.

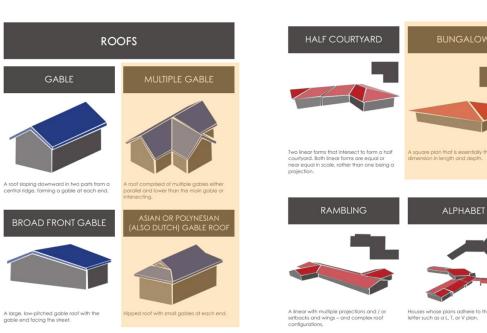


Figure 2. Architectural expression of house design in Florida according to the University of Florida's Historic Preservation Program, College of Design Construction and Planning, 2019 (Image by authors)

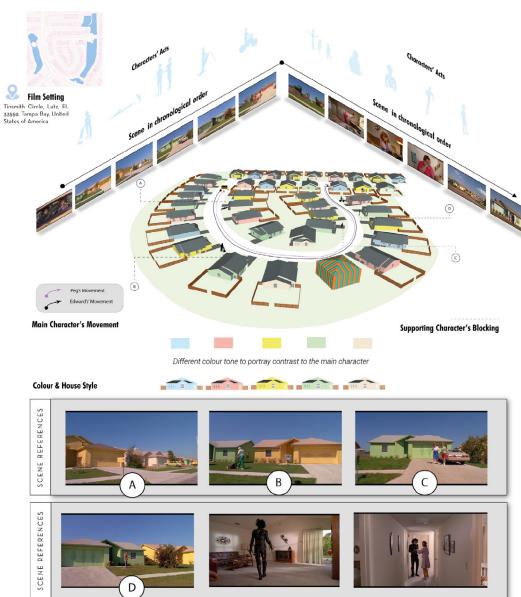


Figure 3. House set design based on a real set of Tinsmith Circle as a naturalistic setting (Image by authors)

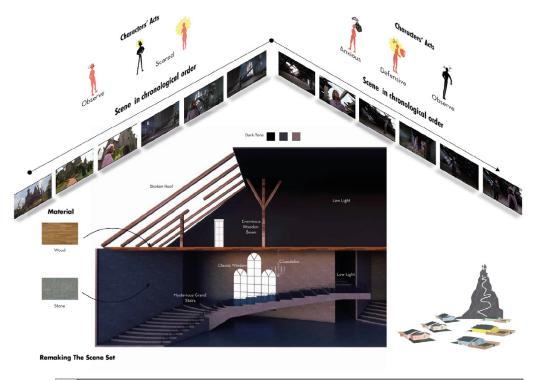
Emphasising

Contrast in

Colours and Proportions Activities that occurred in the scene were also annotated, from children playing in the front yard and the backyard, woman cycling, old man cutting grass, women gossiping, and woman watering plants. There is an emphasis on the scene being portrayed naturally, evoking the meaning of life that occurred at that moment so that the audience can imagine the environment and the people's conditions accurately. In this film, the director organises the *mise-en-scène* elements so the audience seems transported to a past lifetime setting, giving a nostalgic impression.

# Theatrical narrative

The theatrical narrative in the film is mainly presented in portraying the character of Edward, who lives in a gloomy castle. From where he lives, it can be assumed that Edward is a character that is mysterious and different from a normal person which previously have been depicted in much more colourful environments. The absence of material, colour, and pattern variances creates a monochrome palette of grey towards



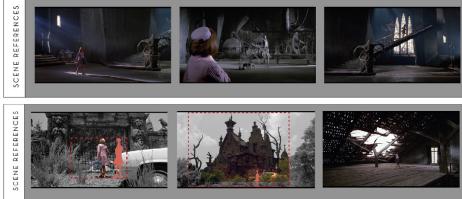


Figure 4. Theatrical scene setting of Edward's castle (Image by authors)

the overall scene, which is the main experience towards this castle (Jain & Banerjee, 2021). The following passage creates a description towards the overall colour tone and materials used in the castle where Edward lives. Figure 4 is an overview of the set designs which presents an image of Edward's residence.

In the plot sequence, Edward's castle is shown before the character appearance himself, so that the building creates an initial perception to the audience about Edward as a character that will be told from this film. The use of colour and material in the setting gives the audience an initial impression that the owner has abandoned this place as it seems uninhabited. There are lots of cobwebs that have not been cleaned, the ambience is rather spooky, and there is minimal access to natural light, thus it can be assumed the room is rather damp. In addition, the castle is filled with some odd parts, such as abandoned mechanical devices and some broken building elements.

Based on the narrative understanding where the character exists as the bearer of the narrative, in this film, Edward's character carries a strong meaning of his environment. In the film's plot narrative, the character depiction of Edward is presented after previously introducing the monotonous normal society setting in a naturalistic technique. Through such narrative technique, Tim Burton tries to build the audience's fantasy by presenting the figure of Edward as a creature created by a scientist. On the other hand, there is also an implicit meaning of the character as someone who is ostracised because of societal differences.

The narrative about Edward gives connotative meaning in the real world that is subtly conveyed; that cannot be examined straightforwardly when watching the film. Tim Burton gives idea of depicting this character in an imaginative way as part of a fantasy, making the audience unable to realise they are watching a film about social critique. Such an imaginative approach enables easier and more entertaining acceptance towards the social critique as the main meaning of the film's narrative.

# Contrast as contextual aspects in narrative architecture setting

In this film, several scenes show some contrast between naturalistic and theatrical elements. To begin with, there is a contrast in the use of dark and light colour tones in both narratives. These two tones intersect when Edward, a theatrical character, is in a naturalistic setting. One of the scenes that shows the intersection of naturalistic-theatrical contrast is when Edward first enters the Boggs family house and feels a new space after living in the old castle. There is a conflict that arises due to differences in characters and settings. The presence of this contrast indicates the boundary that separates the characters from the setting. The contrast between the separate narratives triggers interactions between characters and their surrounding environment in interpreting the space (Figure 5).

As a character, Edward has no experience living in an environment inhabited by other humans. He can explore new

things in the inhabited environment, while at the same time feeling afraid of things less familiar than his previous life in the castle. In terms of proportions, the room is made with a ceiling height that is quite short compared to the height of Edward's character and compared to his previous place in the castle. This significant difference creates a dramatic effect so that we can feel how this room has quite an intimidating effect on Edward.



Figure 5. How theatrical character acts in the natural setting of Boggs' house (Image by authors)

In one of the scenes, Edward is depicted trying to explore Kim's room (Figure 6). As in the previous scene, Edward's character can be seen trying to act like a human, but there is always something that limits Edward, which results in various events where he injures himself and destroys objects around him. The contrast becomes increasingly clear when the existing properties represent the opposite of the emptiness depicted by Edward's personality within the castle. The situation gives an idea of how strange Edward feels, as well as being amazed to see so many things in Peg's room that he has just recognised.

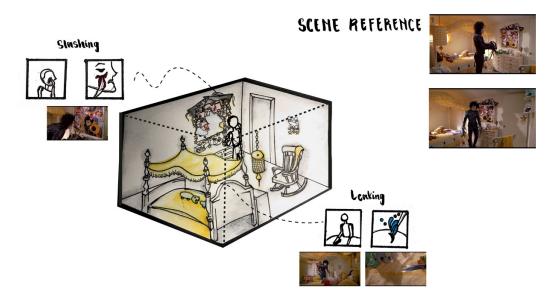


Figure 6. Theatrical characters navigating the naturalistic setting of Kim's bedroom (Image by authors)

Another contrast scene is when Peg Boggs arrives in Edward's castle and gets a new spatial experience when approaching Edward (Figure 7). Proportion is an important part of this scene, how Edward's large castle with its high ceilings and Peg's character have very different proportions. Peg feels scared and worried when she has to be in a room like Edward's castle. Indirectly, this castle's existence reflects its original inhabitants' character. The difference between Peg's self-image as a natural character in a theatrical setting of the castle room shows a form of contrast. In this scene, Peg's character tries to adapt to the environment she has just discovered by continuing to explore and adapt to the environmental conditions of Edward's castle.

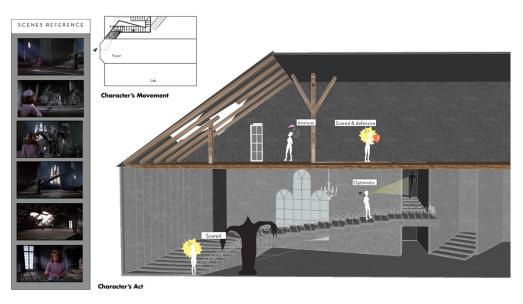


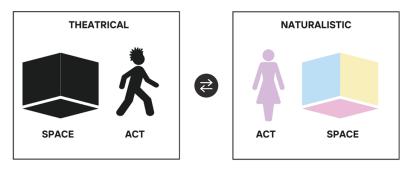
Figure 7. How character from naturalistic narrative acts in the theatrical Setting (Image by authors)

# Narrative contrast on the conception of space

Based on reading the film setting and how the characters move in a narrative space that contrasts with themselves, we can see a picture of the contrasting relationship between them. Contrasts between narratives and their characters give an impression of instability, expressed by the relationship between space and the characteristics of its users (Figure 8). When the narrative presents the naturalistic situation, this contrast happens when characters from the theatrical narratives present in a naturalistic setting. The theatrical character becomes an inappropriate entity that does not fit the existing naturalistic setting.

Likewise, when the narrative presents a theatrical situation, the contrast of narratives happens in the presence of characters from a naturalistic narrative in a theatrical setting. The characters in this setting will later act in a space that is rather artificial and parts of a certain fantasy. The characters will try to adapt to new spatial conditions and create stability in the order. The separation between the setting and the characters demonstrates the intersection between different narratives, where the appropriateness of characters with their existing setting can be clarified. The occurrence of contrasting narratives happens in the film when a particular existence of a character wants to be emphasised with its disconnection with the setting (Figure 8).

Users of space react to the designs created, and therefore, design is not necessarily limited to the suitability or appropriateness of its users. Users experience adaptation where space exists in an unsuitable or inappropriate way. When someone as a user looks different from the existing room conditions, it provides meaning to the overall experience, where the person's presence in such space is highlighted. Contrasting design elements in appropriate portions provides different experiences so that people as users may navigate and adapt. When Edward enters a monotonous environment, something unstable is created. Still, through these changes, Edward and the other residents can evolve and experience something new, demonstrating how users are not just stuck in one situation but reproduce the architecture. In dynamic human life, this instability is a natural thing.



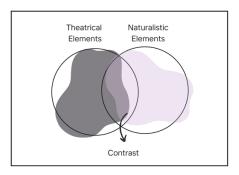


Figure 8. Theatrical and naturalistic elements intersecting relationship (Image by authors)

Contextual factors in a built environment can change over time. Time in a narrative is an important aspect of how people move and adapt to a space that occurs at a certain time. Changing thoughts and perspectives or the changing environment significantly alter how people live and adapt. It is possible that adaptation actively responds to the narrative dynamics of life that continue to change over time.

# Conclusion

This study explores contrasting narratives as a way of depicting the differing narratives and their intersection as the basis of context-based space exploration. Exploration of such narratives is done through *Edward Scissorhands* film which contains contrasting naturalistic and theatrical narratives. From such a study, it is revealed that humans' suitability in space is not necessarily a preconceived condition of the design

process. Instead, the intersection between contrasting naturalistic and theatrical narratives demonstrates adaptive meaning when different characters are placed and interact with differing settings of the narratives.

The dynamic interaction that occurs between space and human action as a form of adaptation encourages the creation of sustainable scenarios through time. The aspect of time in the narrative is also important to convey the meaning of adaptation to a space so that adaptation is led by the moments and duration of time in experiencing the space. In this sense, spatial adaptation is not directly driven by the user, but through growing and continuous navigation of the space through an extended period of time.

The narrative depiction in this film also shows that the meaning of a place is shaped by users' presence in context, as the users have interpretations, needs, and traditions that influence the context in a design. Narrative in architecture tries to provide another meaning about space beyond a mere structural object. The contrast of narratives position the socio-cultural values of society in a spatialtemporal context, where users from different background interact with new context and further adapt to the space. The intersection between contrasting narratives projects possibilities of spatial scenarios that celebrate instability and growth, both from the actual (the current) and the future, or from varying human perceptions, needs, and traditions. As a knowledge, contrast narrative has the potential to be further developed as a context-based design method. Future research may discuss such development, through design intervention that celebrates intersections between different environmental and cultural contexts.

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