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The House as a Character: The Role of Set Design in the Film *I'm Still Here*

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Abstract
When watching a film, the setting often goes unnoticed, serving merely as a backdrop to the story. However, in certain works, space takes on a much more prominent role, becoming a character in its own right. This is the case in *I'm Still Here* (Walter Salles, 2024), a film that explores the impact of Brazil's military dictatorship on a family. Carlos Conti, the production designer, materialized the film's environments, imbuing them with emotional depth. This study focuses on a key setting in the film: the Paiva family home. Drawing on theoretical insights from authors such as Gaston Bachelard and Juhani Pallasmaa, the analysis reveals how the house evolves alongside the characters. Initially, a home where happiness overflows through the windows; by the end, a space where the absence of life seeps through the walls.

Keywords: cinematic space; production design; set design; home; I'm Still Here

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Introduction

Numerous films have been made over the years about authoritarian regimes, yet it is still possible to tell these stories in fresh and genuine ways. By concentrating on a specific moment, event, or character, it is sometimes possible to capture the essence of an entire historical period, leaving a lasting impact on the audience. Walter Salles, in adapting the book *I'm Still Here* (2015) by Marcelo Rubens Paiva, created a feature film that will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the most significant works in Brazilian cinema history. The film, based on a true story of a wife and mother who is suddenly forced to cope with the "disappearance" of her husband during Brazil's military dictatorship, was praised by both critics and audiences worldwide. Among the film's many nominations and awards, its nomination for Best Picture — an honor rarely bestowed on non-American films — and Best International Feature Film at the Oscars stand out.

Despite Fernanda Torres' remarkable performance as the film's protagonist, this study focuses on another form of performance — one that often goes unnoticed by the audience, but whose absence would be deeply felt: the setting of the Paiva family's home in Rio de Janeiro,

which accompanies the characters throughout much of the film. Production design, although one of the key cinematic tools for materializing a film's universe, remains an underexplored area in academic research. The design of a character's home influences not only the atmosphere of the scenes but also how we perceive the individuals and understand the narrative. As architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2017) states, the enchantment of cinema is directly tied to our "ability to enter an imagined or remembered space" (p. 53). According to the author, "the streets and places described in literature, painting, and cinema are so saturated with emotion and so real that they are as tangible as houses and cities built in stone" (p. 69).

This study posits that the Paiva family home transcended its role as a mere setting and became a character in its own right, experiencing along with the family their moments of joy, anguish, and, ultimately, the sorrow that envelops both the characters and, by extension, the space itself.

I'm Still Here

In the early 1970s, Eunice (Fernanda Torres) and Rubens Paiva (Selton Mello) lived with their five children (Vera, Eliana, Ana Lúcia, Marcelo, and Maria Beatriz) in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro. During this time, Brazil was under the control of an authoritarian regime established in 1964 and in power until 1985. Eunice, a Literature graduate, married Rubens, an engineer, when she was 23. Rubens was elected federal deputy for the Brazilian Labor Party

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

(PTB) in 1962, but his mandate was revoked after the 1964 military coup, prompting him to go into self-exile in Europe. Upon returning to Brazil in 1965, he resumed his career as an engineer but continued to maintain connections with other exiles.

One day, Rubens is taken by the military and disappears. The family must then cope with a new reality and with the uncertainty surrounding the whereabouts of their father. In this story, Eunice is the central figure, who seeks to reinvent herself and support her children. The character tries to hide the reality from the children, pretending normalcy amid mourning. Significant time jumps depict the protagonist as a lawyer and human rights advocate, focusing on her quest for the Brazilian government's acknowledgment of her husband's assassination. The narrative ultimately reveals an elderly Eunice (Fernanda Montenegro), surrounded by her children and grandchildren.

National and international critics acclaimed Walter Salles' work, praising several aspects of the film, including screenplay, cinematography, musical score, production design, and especially Fernanda Torres' performance as Eunice. The actress won the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Drama and received an Oscar nomination for Best Actress. As film critic Bilge Ebiri (2025) noted, the actress:

> …never quite allows us to witness her fully breaking down, save for a couple of heartbreaking moments that pass, strikingly, in flashes. It is a marvelously internalized performance, and one that we cannot tear our eyes away from. She keeps the whole picture grounded in an emotional reality that's all the more

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

> heartbreaking for its subtlety. The more she perseveres, the more we understand her fundamental helplessness in the face of such unimaginable cruelties — and ours.

According to the actress, filming the feature felt akin to making a documentary, as everyone involved strived to act as naturally as possible. Torres explained that the actors spent a month living on the set of the Paiva family's house, which allowed them to portray their characters authentically and underscores the significance of the residence in the narrative. The actors had time to prepare, find the best way to represent each family member, and establish the interactions between them (Sony Pictures Classics, 2025).

Salles, having spent some time with the Paiva family as a teenager, was able to merge his own memories with those of author Marcelo Paiva (the son of Eunice and Rubens) to bring the story to life. The director recalls the extraordinary vitality of the Paiva household, which was always open to both the street and their friends. For Salles, the Paivas embodied the idea that living itself was a form of resistance in an oppressive society. However, the family's dynamics are suddenly and violently disrupted, forcing them to cope with an absence and reinvent themselves. The director aimed to emphasize the stark contrast between the joyful, lighthearted moments before Rubens' disappearance and the ensuing anguish and darkness (Collider Interviews, 2024).

According to Salles, he intended to invite the viewers to become part of the family, to

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

experience their emotions, and to be deeply moved by the absence of one of its members. To achieve this, he aimed to use all cinematic tools in a natural, organic way. For example, the director was keen on avoiding exaggerations in the cinematography, performances, or costumes (Collider Interviews, 2024). Torres notes that portraying the 1970s was particularly challenging, as the images could easily resemble commercials from that era. Salles made it clear to the team that he did not want the film to feel like a "fashion show" (Sony Pictures Classics, 2025).

The feature was shot on 35mm film because, for Salles, the film stock added a crucial texture to the images. The grain contributes to the overall texture, enhancing the sense of authenticity and nostalgia. The scenes were filmed in chronological order, a rarity in filmmaking, allowing the actors to more intensely capture the emotion of each moment. According to Torres, during filming, they felt the absence of Selton Mello and the sunlight streaming through the windows after the character's kidnapping (Collider Interviews, 2024).

I'm Still Here is a heart-wrenching film that delicately portrays the story of Eunice and her loving family with profound sensitivity. As Robert Daniels (2025) states, "it is immersive and unhurried, and quietly devastating, taking viewers into the origin of a void left in a wife and a mother." The film depicts the devastating impact of a person's disappearance, as it prevents the closure of a cycle. Furthermore, it serves as a poignant reminder of the essential

need for truth and justice and underscores the immense value of our freedom.

Set Design

Every audiovisual narrative unfolds within a space, even if that space appears empty. As André Gaudreault and François Jost (2009) argue, it is impossible in cinema to dissociate action from its spatial context. Therefore, it becomes evident that the way this space is designed and conceived directly influences how the story is perceived.

According to Jane Barnwell (2022, p. 12), set design "has gradually gained acknowledgment as a pivotal storytelling device with the potential ability to communicate layers of conceptual nuance and detail." The professional responsible for creating the diegetic space is the production designer. C.S. Tashiro (1998, p. 3) explains that production designers "supervise the overall 'look' of a film, working in close collaboration with directors, cinematographers, and their own staffs. Designers are expected to have a thorough knowledge of a film's setting, from the basics of architectural style to the shape of a cufflink."

One can observe that the production designer's work is intrinsically linked to the director's role, to the point where the boundaries between their creative contributions can often become blurred. While the notion that the designer is responsible for the sets is easily understood, Barnwell (2005, p. 118) points out that "it is more difficult to come to terms with

the fact that he might compose every angle that is subsequently shot, since at first sight this activity appears to encroach onto the creative territory of the film's director."

In the production of a feature film, the production designer typically begins working with the director well before filming starts, as they are responsible for envisioning how the film's world will be brought to life. Once the required sets are identified, a decision is made between building them in a studio or shooting on location. Each option presents its own advantages and disadvantages. Studio-built sets offer greater control over variables such as weather, ambient noise, and electrical logistics. However, concealing the artificiality of a studio environment can be challenging, whereas location shooting often provides a more authentic atmosphere. As stated by production designer Alex DiGerlando (2016), the less artificial a set feels, the more freely actors can engage with it, and the more flexibility the cinematographer has to explore the space through camera movement.

Set design involves deliberate choices regarding shapes, colors, materials, and textures. According to DiGerlando (as cited in Schwartz, 2019), although the role may resemble that of an architect or interior designer, the production designer does not build for the future. Instead, they must consider everything that has already occurred within the space up to the moment the story unfolds. In other words, the memory embedded in that space — what has been lived and

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

experienced there — must be considered. Every decorative object, a scratch on the floor, a stain on the table, or a kitchen utensil contributes to the filmic image and, ultimately, to how the audience interprets the narrative and responds emotionally to it. In fictional works, very few elements are placed in a scene by chance.

In discussing the relationship between humans and architecture, Pallasmaa (2017, p. 98) emphasizes that "to experience a place, a space, or a house is a dialogue, a kind of exchange; I position myself in the space, and the space accommodates itself in me."

> We interact with a building: we meet it, approach it, confront it, our bodies relate to it, wander through it, and use it as context and condition for objects and actions. Architecture directs, provides, and frames actions, perceptions, and thoughts. And, most importantly, it articulates our relationships with other people and with human institutions. Architectural constructions materialize and solidify social, ideological, and mental order (Pallasmaa, 2017, p. 96).

Among the various buildings featured in a film, one of the most commonly depicted is a character's residence, and numerous films have used domestic spaces as their primary settings. From Victorian mansions to brutalist buildings, and from compact apartments to suburban houses, the design of the home plays a crucial role in shaping character development and establishing the atmosphere of the scenes. Barnwell (2022, p. 11) notes that, functionally, houses are expected to provide shelter, warmth, and comfort. "Conceptually the home is often considered a reflection or expression of self, closely entwined with identity and belonging leading to distinctions between inside and outside, dirt and cleanliness, safety and danger that

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

have shaped the built environment."

Geraint D'Arcy (2019) argues that domestic space facilitates intimate interactions between characters that, while private, play a significant role in revealing broader social structures and communal dynamics. As a private, familiar environment, the home allows for narrative development and emotional exchanges among a close-knit group of characters. When designing a character's home, production designers must consider who inhabits that space. Questions such as: "What time period is the narrative set in? What is the family's social class? What are the characters' professions? How many people live in the house? What are their ages? What are their tastes?" all contribute to determining the environment. According to Brazilian production designer Thales Junqueira (as cited in Butruce & Bouillet, 2017, p. 151):

> …the environment is not only the space where the film's actions take place but also a set of messages that contribute to constructing a personality and a situation, a map whose contents help the viewer understand who those people are and what they live through, even if they do not remember the details that make up the setting or even notice them. It is the environment that brings information about who inhabits that space ... The furniture and objects that inhabit a certain place are structured in a symbolic and subjective way. They are an overlay of times, affections, and memories, traces of those who live there. I think creating a set is a job of cartographic invention.

Thus, the setting can act as another character, conveying a wealth of information through images (with the desired intensity set by the production designer) that is often not communicated through dialogue. This information can be factual or relate to the characters' emotions and desires. Furthermore, the setting often functions as a metaphor, enhancing the

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

depth of the audiovisual work. In this sense, the setting is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the story, reinforcing and even amplifying the emotional and symbolic layers of the film. This is particularly evident in *I'm Still Here.*

The Paiva Family's House

I'm Still Here tells the story of a high-class family living in a privileged area of Rio de Janeiro during the 1970s. Near their home, there is soft, white sand, a warm, clear sea, and green mountains in the background. For several minutes, the viewer accompanies the characters through this space, which feels like a refuge amidst the chaos of the bustling city. The dictatorship looms in the background, subtly present through the military helicopters flying over the beach, trucks driving through the streets, and news reports on the radio and television. Despite the constant presence of the military, the family members live happily and harmoniously in their large, comfortable home.

Gaston Bachelard (2000) explores the concept of the house as a deeply symbolic microcosm, linked to memory, imagination, and our innermost being. "The house is our corner of the world. It is, as it is often said, our first universe. It is a true cosmos. A cosmos in every sense of the term" (Bachelard, 2000, p. 24). In a similar vein, Pallasmaa (2017) notes that "even in the absence of a concrete home, the homes of our memory and imagination structure our experiences. We do not confront the cosmos unprotected and without mediation" (pp. 90–91).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Bachelard argues that the house is not merely a physical space but also a psychological, emotional, and poetic one that holds and evokes memories and dreams. According to the author, the house is the "vault of memories" and a starting point for poetic imagination. Every corner, room, or object can awaken reveries, dreams, and reflections. For him, the house shapes our perception of the world and serves as a "cradle" for our imagination.

> Before being "thrown into the world", as the hasty metaphysics suggest, man is placed in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, it is a great cradle. A concrete metaphysics cannot disregard this fact, this simple fact, as it is a value, a great value to which we return in our daydreams. Being is immediately a value. Life begins well, it begins closed, protected, swaddled in the lap of the house (Bachelard, 2000, p. 26).

To faithfully represent the Paiva family's residence, located on a quiet street near Leblon Beach, Walter Salles decided to use a real location rather than building the set in a studio. According to production designer Carlos Conti (as cited in Urbim, 2025), "the initial idea was to film the scenes at the Paiva family home in a studio. But Walter ended up deciding that it would be better to adapt a real house and use it as a set."

During the research process, production coordinator Camila Ferreira collected details about the original house, distributed flyers throughout the Leblon neighborhood, requested access to the project from the city hall, and visited the building constructed on the site. She also relied on the help of researcher Antonio Venancio[1] and the memories of Salles himself. After extensive research, they selected a house with a structure similar to the Paiva family's, located

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

in the Urca neighborhood and facing Guanabara Bay, thereby facilitating the inclusion of beach scenes (Rodrigues, 2025). The Urca house was very modern but in need of extensive renovation. When Salles asked whether the house would work, Conti (as cited in Urbim, 2025) replied: "If the owner allows us to destroy the house, yes." The production designer explains that renovating the house ultimately involved almost as much work as building everything in the studio.

Conti (as cited in Raffs, 2025) states the following:

> I didn't want it to be a showroom of the time, but a house that really looked lived in. When I visited the empty house, I had my first inspiration. So, we started drawing before we began the preparation, to get an idea of the proportions and placement of the furniture inside the house. My assistant and I spent almost all our time in the house, supervising the work of the builders and painters.

Conti, alongside the art team, searched for period references in magazines, books, and real houses, while revisiting the memories of the Paiva family. The siblings Marcelo, Vera, Ana Lúcia, Eliana, and Maria Beatriz helped them recreate the rooms more accurately. "One of them described the office, with a blue sofa where the father sat and a red one used by the mother during backgammon games. These details were important in creating the atmosphere of the house," the production designer reveals. Conti explains that each sibling remembered the house in their own way, with varying details, yet they reached a consensus. He highlights that, although it was enriching to speak with everyone and weave their memories together, each person's recollections served only as a starting point. For instance, they had to consider issues

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

of space, camera movement, and the number of people each room could accommodate. Consequently, the team had to take certain creative liberties (Raffs, 2025; Urbim, 2025).

Conti highlights the work of Tatiana Stepanenko and Paloma Buquer (art producers) and Laura Shalders (prop producer), noting that with their collaboration, "it was possible to do something that is every production designer's dream": filling the set with objects that constitute the residence, even in areas that do not appear on screen. Conti states that he and Salles believe it is important for actors to be on set and to have this kind of immersive experience. In the case of *I'm Still Here*, this approach is even more relevant, as the objects serve as elements of memory (Urbim, 2025). "From the clothes that appear when the wardrobe is opened to the books that fill the office shelves, everything was thought out down to the smallest detail," Conti emphasizes (Raffs, 2025). This meticulous attention to detail plays a crucial role in transporting viewers to the era depicted in the story.

> In all the settings in the film, whether in the Paiva family home in the 1970s or in Eunice's apartment in the 1990s, if you looked on a table or opened a drawer, you would find a lot of things — recreated photos, personal documents belonging to each character, crossword puzzle magazines from the time. Next to the record player was a real record collection. The kitchen had dishes, the wardrobes had... clothes (Conti as cited in Urbim, 2025).

According to Conti (as cited in Urbim, 2025), "one of the greatest compliments I have received is that there is no sense of distance. You don't watch a period film, you enter that era. You are invited into that house, to live with that family. It takes a lot of work to achieve this

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

natural effect." As Ferreira emphasizes, the goal was to capture the welcoming atmosphere described by those who had known the family's home (Rodrigues, 2025).

In order to render the location even more similar to the Paiva household, four months of work were required. The walls of the facades were lowered, some rooms were reconfigured, and the appearance of the walls was aged (Dias, 2025). The house has architectural characteristics typical of Brazilian middle-class homes from the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by a spacious floor plan, high ceilings, and large windows. The building has two floors. On the first floor, there is the living room, dining room, kitchen, Rubens' office, and the maid Maria José's room. On the second floor are the bedrooms of the couple and their children. The backyard is grassy and full of plants.

Pallasmaa (2017) discusses the "ingredients of a home". According to the author, a complete concept of home consists of three types of mental or symbolic elements:

> Elements grounded in a deep biocultural and unconscious level (entrance, roof, fireplace). Elements related to the personal life and identity of the inhabitant (sentimental objects, belongings, family heirlooms). Social symbols aimed at conveying a certain image or message to outsiders (symbols of wealth, education, social identity, etc.) (p. 29).

In the Paiva family's house, elements such as solid wood, an ornate iron door, hammered glass, and hydraulic tiles contribute to a warm, family-friendly atmosphere. The wooden slatted panel, the warm tones on the bedroom walls and curtains, black-and-white photographs,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

children's toys, the record player, and the comfortable leather armchair all help to convey the story of a vibrant, affectionate home. Notably, the armchair is the Mole, an icon of Brazilian design created by architect Sérgio Rodrigues in the early 1960s. The informality and comfort of this piece provide a striking contrast to the authoritarian atmosphere of the time. Laura Raffs (2025) reveals that most of the furniture in the residence was acquired from antique dealers specializing in Brazilian design, with much of it crafted from rosewood. Certain pieces were designed and constructed by the art team, including Eunice's dressing table.

Pallasmaa (2017) recalls the following words from poet Noël Arnaud[2]: "I am the space where I am." For the architect, "a home is a collection and concretization of personal images of protection and intimacy, which allows someone to recognize and remember their own identity" (p. 20). The experience of home thus includes "an incredible range of unified mental dimensions, from those related to national identity of being a member of a specific culture, to dimensions involving unconscious desires and fears" (p. 23). "Our home is the refuge of the body, memory, and identity. We are constantly in dialogue and interaction with our surroundings, making it impossible to separate the image of the self from its spatial and situational context" (p. 98).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

An important element in the Paiva family's home is the foosball table. Its significance becomes clear when we observe its placement: in the house's entrance hall. This is an unusual location for such a piece, and it highlights the importance the family placed on moments of joyful relaxation. The twelve-year-old son, Marcelo, plays foosball with his father and, surprisingly, also plays (unaware of the unfolding events) with one of the agents who remains in the house after Rubens is taken for questioning. This scene adds a layer of sadness, as it trivializes a cruel event, exposing the casual, indifferent attitude with which the military carried out their actions. More than through visual memories, the foosball table immerses us in the house through tactile and auditory sensations. We can feel the friction of our hands on the handle, the weight of the ball as it hits a player, and hear the ball circulating around the table. Additionally, the foosball table serves as a subtle reinforcement of the "Brazilianness" of the film, set in the "country of football".

The presence of books (in large numbers), records, and works of art reinforces the family's intellectual nature and their connection to critical thinking, a key element in understanding the conflicts faced by the characters. Among the paintings on the walls, notable works include pieces by Rubem Valentim, a Bahian artist who sought to honor Brazil's black heritage, and *Metaesquemas*[3] by Hélio Oiticica, one of Brazil's most renowned visual artists, where blue

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

rectangles dance across a white background. In the teenage daughters' room, posters of movies, bands, and albums like *Tropicalia and Panis et Circensis*[4] — recorded by acclaimed Brazilian musicians — adorn the walls. A striking figure is the poem-banner *Seja Marginal Seja Herói*[5], a work by Oiticica created in the late 1960s, which became a symbol of resistance against the military dictatorship.

D'Arcy (2019) claims that spaces which primarily reveal information about the individual, rather than the broader social world, serve a character function. Private spaces, in particular, belong directly to a character and may be entered, observed, or intruded upon by others, allowing both characters and viewers to gain insight into that individual. These spaces, like the kids' room, are often shaped by personal objects and décor, which visually communicate a character's tastes, preferences, and identity, thereby contributing to their narrative development.

For Pallasmaa, the house is not merely a physical space; it is an environment that shapes perception and serves as an extension of the bodies of its inhabitants. Architecture, according to Pallasmaa (2011), articulates:

> …the experience of being part of the world and strengthens our sense of reality and personal identity; it does not make us inhabit worlds of mere artificiality and fantasy. The sense of personal identity, reinforced by art and architecture, allows us to fully engage with the mental dimensions of dreams, imaginations, and desires (p. 11).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The Paiva family's house functions like a living organism, changing as the story unfolds. In the first act of the film, the house seems to resonate with the characters who dance in the living room, play foosball, and indulge in eating soufflé. Initially, the house is always open. Characters come and go in a continuous flow, much like the beach wind and sunlight. It is a warm space that invites the viewer to share in the family's joys. We feel the sea breeze on our skin, smell the food prepared with care, and hear the laughter, music, and the sound of the waves.

The home is, therefore, not a "simple object or building, but a complex and diffuse condition, integrating memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present" (Pallasmaa, 2017, p. 18). Pallasmaa (2017) argues that home cannot be constituted in a single instant; it is instead "a set of rituals, personal rhythms, and daily routines" and, as such, "a temporal dimension and continuity, being a gradual product of the adaptation of the family and the individual to the world" (p. 18). The author views the house as a space imbued with emotional and historical significance, advocating for an architecture that does not prioritize vision alone but engages all our senses, enhancing our sense of materiality and bodily memory. As Pallasmaa (2011) explains:

> …the experience of home is structured by distinct activities — cooking, eating, socializing, reading, storing, sleeping, having intimate acts — and not by visual elements. A building is found; it is approached,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

> confronted, related to a person's body, explored through bodily movements, and used as a condition for other things. Architecture initiates, directs, and organizes behavior and movement (p. 60).

From the moment the military enters the family home, the windows, curtains, and doors are closed, and the space takes on the atmosphere of a prison. Eliana comes running from the beach and asks her mother: "Mom, why is the house closed up?" (38'39"). Even after the military departs, the house remains shut. In one scene, Eunice asks Maria José to lock the gate, and Maria José replies that she does not know where the key is. This moment highlights the abrupt shift in how the family relates to their home. The house ceases to be a safe and welcoming space, and fear begins to seep in through the cracks. It is also telling that the open pedestrian gate will later become a source of further sorrow for the family, as it allows the dog Pimpão to be run over. Another striking detail is the changing role of the curtains. At first, when they are open, their orange color brings warmth and joy to the rooms. However, once they are closed, that same color adds to the overall darkness of the space.

Conti expresses satisfaction with the choice of curtains, noting that the team had carefully considered how the windows should be closed when the military arrives. "It could not be a window that was too difficult to close; it could not have complicated shutters or blinds for the guys to fiddle with. It had to be a quicker action to match the effect of their arrival. It had to be

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

curtains." Consequently, they rebuilt all the windows in the room to accommodate large, floor-to-ceiling curtains, which are drawn immediately upon the agents' entry (Urbim, 2025).

In a memorable scene, as Rubens prepares to be taken away by the dictatorship agents, Nalu (Ana Lúcia) takes a white dress shirt from her father's wardrobe and puts it on. "Where are you going, all dressed up like that, huh?" (33'42") she asks. Smiling, Rubens replies that he is going to help the gentlemen downstairs. Nalu kisses him and adjusts his collar and tie, and he casually says goodbye: "I will be back soon, sweetie." "Okay," she answers. This is their final moment together.

According to Bachelard (2000), the interior of the wardrobe represents an intimate space, not accessible to just anyone. Its very function carries meaning: indiscriminate storage of objects indicates a weakness in inhabiting. Within the wardrobe, order prevails not merely as a geometric arrangement but as a domain shaped by memory, reflecting and preserving the family's history. In line with this, Pallasmaa (2017) emphasizes that "a wardrobe is a center of order that protects the entire house from uncontrolled disorder. Wardrobes, closets, and drawers represent the functions of hiding and removing, storing and remembering" (p. 30). Together, these perspectives underscore how the wardrobe functions as both a physical and emotional

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

space, mediating familial bonds. Later, Nalu opens her father's wardrobe again and puts on his shirt, breathing in the scent in his collar to feel close to him.

As Bachelard (2000) explains, the house is a place of security, protection, and intimacy. He describes the home as a "primordial refuge," a space where we feel welcomed and shielded from the threats of the outside world. Similarly, Pallasmaa (2017) argues that the house should serve as a sanctuary that safeguards us from danger — a place where we can reconnect with our inner selves. However, this refuge can be invaded by external forces and transformed, no longer functioning as a home but becoming a symbol of rupture. In the context of the film *I am Still Here*, this transformation is clear.

Barnwell (2022) emphasizes that the domestic setting is not only closely intertwined with character and narrative but also frequently becomes the very space that transforms, signaling shifts within the narrative arc. Although the home may evoke notions of family and shelter, the author notes that it can equally function as a claustrophobic prison or a site of exclusion, a dwelling in which multiple perspectives coexist and where boundaries are continually blurred and renegotiated. The idea of the domestic space as a safe and secure structure embodying traditional family values can be subverted when the home is "used to trap characters and function as a site of anxiety and disturbance, which is often the case during periods of social

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and political upheaval…" (Barnwell, 2022, p. 70). As D'Arcy (2019) argues, when unexpected characters enter the domestic space or when unusual events unfold within it, these settings can generate powerful dramatic effects.

The Paiva family's house begins as a space of warmth and comfort, but as the dictatorship asserts itself, the home loses its role as a sanctuary. It becomes a constraining environment and a physical reminder of absence, grief, and violation. In this sense, the house approaches what Amedeo D'Adamo (2018) defines as an antagonistic space: not through overt hostility, but through its progressive withdrawal of warmth, openness, and emotional safety.

In several scenes, Eunice is shown looking out of windows, gazing at the beach from her bedroom, and the street from her living room. As Pallasmaa (2017, p. 33) points out, "the window, and especially the act of looking out from the house window to the yard or garden, is an essential and poetic experience of home. One can feel a strong sense of home when looking out from the private, enclosed space." These moments emphasize the emotional significance of the act, highlighting Eunice's deep connection to her surroundings and the silent introspection that arises from within the domestic space.

Besides the windows, another significant architectural element of the house is the front door — a threshold crossed countless times by the children as they run and play, by the agents

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

who forcefully enter, and by Eunice when she bids farewell to Rubens. The film's most iconic scene takes place right in front of this doorway: Eunice and her five children pose for a photojournalist after Rubens' disappearance. The photojournalist instructs them to remain serious, not to smile, to convey their grief. "We will smile. Smile!" (97'05") Eunice replies.

For Bachelard (2000), the door is a poetic object that can give concrete form to intimate states of the soul, such as hesitation, desire, security, and freedom. The door functions as a liminal space that articulates the passage between interior and exterior, intimacy and exposure. Each gesture of opening or closing a door corresponds to a transformation of the subject, so that life could be narrated as a succession of doors crossed, closed, or desired. The door, thus, not only organizes space but also reveals the existential depth of everyday gestures. Pallasmaa (2017) also reflects on the symbolism of the door, stating that "a door is, at the same time, a sign to stop and an invitation. The front door resists the body with its own weight, ritualizes the entrance, and creates an anticipation of the spaces beyond it" (p. 103). He further explains that "a suitable door both protects and invites, serving as a mediator of gestures of welcome and privacy, courtesy and dignity" (p. 104).

In the single moment we see Eunice truly "break down" in response to the horrific events, she is alone in the bathroom. It is the only room in the house devoid of warmth. In this space,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

we feel her deep sorrow and her desperate desire to wash away the dirt from her skin physically, perhaps also attempting to cleanse herself of the emotional weight left by such cruelty. The blue tiles contribute to the sad atmosphere, the ornate leg of the bathtub evokes the era, the rust on the mirror reflects the weight of memory, and the stark white light renders the room cold and unwelcoming. The bathroom's smooth, tiled walls contrast sharply with the coarse, oppressive surfaces of the cell where Eunice was detained for twelve days. Although tiles are not inherently comforting, their clean, cool touch against her skin — after days of exposure to harsh textures — offers a small sense of relief.

One of the most poignant scenes in the film portrays the moment the family leaves to live in São Paulo. It marks the end of both their beachside life and their *Carioca* home. The "father's armchair" is loaded onto the moving truck, and Marcelo stops in front of it, gazing at its interior. Babiu (Maria Beatriz), the youngest daughter, sits on a step looking into the now-empty house, and we share in her sadness as she watches her home being dismantled. At this moment, Eunice re-enters the house in search of her daughter Eliana. Every room is bare, and her presence in this emptiness mirrors the void left in her heart and in her family.

In the couple's bedroom, we see the outlines of picture frames and bedside tables on the romantic floral wallpaper. These marks, also visible in other rooms, reflect the house's

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

emotional history — serving as visible scars from the wounds inflicted by the military regime. The “garbage” strewn across the floor is not only a trace of the life once lived in each space, but also a metaphor for a family torn apart. The silence of the vacant rooms and the echoes of Eunice’s solitary footsteps heighten the sense of absence, transforming the house into a vessel of pain and memory. In the car with the family, we say goodbye to the house through a blurred view, clouded by tears shared with the characters.

Bachelard (2000) reflects on the childhood home, which, for him, remains more vivid within us than any of the houses we inhabit later in life. Even if physically demolished, it continues to live on inside us, like a daydream of intimacy. The childhood home, deeply tied to memory, becomes more than a physical structure — it transforms into a “psychological house,” alive and pulsating within us, inspiring dreams and shaping our relationship with the world throughout our lives. The loss of this home can deeply affect our subjectivity: “the sadness felt for a lost home is similar to mourning the death of a family member,” writes Pallasmaa (2017, p. 23). For Bachelard, to symbolically revisit this house is also to revisit the self, touching the very essence of who we are. “The memories of the outside world can never have the same shades as the memories of the house” (Bachelard, 2000, pp. 25-26).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

In 1996, Babiu and Marcelo talked about when they finally realized their father was dead. The young woman says the following: “I think it was when we left Rio. Seeing the house all empty” (115’19”). Beyond the spatial aspects of shelter and security, Bachelard (2000, pp. 28-29) also emphasizes that the childhood home serves as a fixed temporal reference point:

> In its thousand alveoli, space retains compressed time. This is the function of space. ... We cannot relive abolished durations. We can only think of them, think of them in terms of an abstract time deprived of any thickness. It is through space, in space, that we find the beautiful fossils of duration concretized by long stays. The unconscious remains in places. The memories are immobile; the more solid, the more specialized they are.

At the end of the film, the camera once again moves through the empty house in Rio de Janeiro. In a dolly-out shot, we see the couple’s bedroom, the office, the living room, the entrance hall, and the dining room. We glide through the rooms of this home, absorbing the story that has been told to us. The absence of furniture, paintings, and toys reveals that what was once an idyllic and secure refuge now stands as a monument to trauma, its walls bearing the weight of memories that cannot be erased.

In a drama where only two shots are close-ups, the role of production design becomes even more crucial. Every element that appears in the frame is purposeful, contributing to the emotion conveyed by the scenes. The home of the characters in *I am Still Here* was meticulously crafted to welcome the viewer, captivate them, and, ultimately, evoke a sense of sadness.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Conclusion

The setting of a film should not be viewed merely as a backdrop for action, but rather as a dynamic element that influences how the narrative is perceived. A space can hold layers of memory, and a character's home, more than just a physical location, becomes a vessel of experiences, shaped by stories that define its atmosphere. In *I am Still Here*, the Paiva family's house not only stands as a testament to everything the family has endured but also reflects the protagonists' identity and the era's political instability.

At the start of the film, the house's large, open windows symbolize freedom and a connection to the outside world. As the narrative unfolds and political repression intensifies, the house gradually becomes more enclosed. Shadows begin to dominate, and the feeling of confinement deepens. The transformation of the residence throughout the film not only mirrors the family's fate but also serves as a metaphor for Brazil under the grip of military dictatorship.

Therefore, it becomes evident that the house is not merely a physical space. Still, a symbol of the scars left by the dictatorship, playing an essential role in the film's aesthetic and emotional experience. In *I am Still Here*, we share in the characters' moments of happiness — listening to records, dancing in the living room, savoring soufflé, and playing with the dog. However, as the story progresses, the house shuts itself off from the outside world, with looming threats from the outside world knocking at its door. In the end, the house stands empty,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.772 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

mirroring the hollowed heart of a family fractured by loss, forever marked by the absence that lingers.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] A key reference for Brazilian documentaries, Venancio specialized in uncovering relics that tell the story of Brazil. He worked with Walter Salles, Eduardo Coutinho, João Moreira Salles, Miguel Faria Jr., Eduardo Escorel, and Nelson Hoineff, among many other professionals.

[2] French author, editor, and collector of 20th-century avant-garde movements.

[3] The works in the *Metaesquemas* series are composed of trapezoids, rhombuses, rectangles, and squares, usually set against a light background.

[4] A collective album recorded by Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Nara Leão, Tom Zé, and Os Mutantes, released in 1968.

[5] The banner-poem features a newspaper photograph of Alcir Figueira da Silva who, realizing he had been cornered by the police after robbing a bank, discarded the stolen money and took his own life. For Oiticica, figures like these anti-heroes laid bare the urgent need for a "complete social reform."

[6] [Editor's Note]: There is a significant lack of analysis of the pioneering film *I'm Still Here*. Aside from minor analyses previously like Nakanishni (2025) and Montoya (2025), the authors' detailed contribution is very relevant and timely with impact.

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