

The architectural protagonist of King's Landing: A dynamic force in the *Game of Thrones* narrative: How does architecture within *Game of Thrones* act as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 November 2024

Received in revised form 30
March 2025

Accepted 11 August 2025

Keywords:

Architecture,
Game of Thrones,
King's Landing,
Architectural Narratives,
Dark Fantasy,
Architectural Protagonist

ABSTRACT

Game of Thrones is a dark fantasy TV series based on a book by George R. R. Martin, and known for its violent and dark narrative. In the context of *Game of Thrones*, the architectural design of sets and locations serves as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes. The study uses a qualitative case study approach to examine four key scenes from the series, including Joffrey and Margaery Tyrell's wedding, Cersei's arrest by the High Sparrow, Cersei watching the Great Sept of Baelor explode from the Red Keep, and Cersei's coronation.

By delving into existing literature on the concepts of 'architectural symbolism' and 'architectural protagonist', and comprehending the process of translating fictional realms into visual representations on screen, a foundational knowledge has been established. This knowledge serves as the basis for the analysis conducted in the chosen case studies.

The case studies involve collecting data, highlighting and examining the key aspects of the scenes' narratives through the use of dialogue, narrative summaries, character summaries and selected frames taken from the key scenes. After collecting the data, the book *Reading architecture: A visual lexicon* is used as a guide to conduct a graphic analysis of the selected scenes, examining how the architecture has used various elements to complement and enrich the specific narratives (Hopkins, 2012).

Through the examination of these scenes and a discussion aimed at exploring the findings of each case study in connection with the research question, the study endeavours to substantiate the term 'architectural protagonist' as posited by Thomas Honegger (2004). This contributes to an enhanced understanding of how architecture is pivotal in constructing and enhancing the intricate dark fantasy narrative of *Game of Thrones*.

Introduction

Game of Thrones is a multi-award-winning TV series, adapted from the book series: *A Song of Ice*

and Fire, written by George R. R. Martin. Its dark fantasy narrative is defined by its violent atmosphere and frightening world. The show focuses on the horrific actions and extreme lengths

people are willing to go to in order to gain power and status. The show focuses on the noble families including the Starks of the north, Lannisters of the west, Baratheons of the Stormlands, and the Targaryens who ruled for centuries. The show spans eight seasons, featuring political intrigue, plot twists, complex characters, and supernatural elements such as dragons and the undead creatures from the far north. The narrative is driven by the struggles among noble families who fight for control over the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos. Westeros is rich in history, politics and culture, with varying locations that each have unique and different architectural characteristics that convey the inhabitants' social standing, lifestyle and traditions.

This article will focus on exploring how the architecture enriches and complements the narrative within selected scenes, situated within two key buildings: The Red Keep and the Great Sept of Baelor. These reside within the capital city of King's Landing, which is situated in the south of the continent of Westeros. This article will aim to show how architecture plays the role of a key protagonist, alongside the character protagonists, when portraying a successful compelling narrative.

King's Landing is home to the Red Keep, which is the epicentre of all political affairs, serving as the official residence for the ruling monarch and is where the Iron Throne resides. The Iron Throne seats the ruling monarch of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, symbolising the pinnacle of power. The Iron Throne room is where many royal coronations and events are held throughout the TV series. The Great Sept of Baelor is a key structure that represents the religious influence of the 'Faith of the Seven' in the Seven Kingdoms. It plays a crucial role in the socio-political dynamics, hosting significant social events and legal trials. Both buildings – The Red Keep and the Great Sept of Baelor – function as beacons of hierarchy, towering over the rest of the city, symbolising how powerful the monarchy and religion are within the narrative and the inhabitants of the fictional world.

Using a case study analysis, this article will investigate how the architectural protagonist complements and enhances the narrative. The analysis will be divided into four key scenes, focusing on a range of architectural elements. To conclude, a discussion will investigate how the architectural elements have complemented the key scenes narratives, in reference to the research question: How does architecture within *Game of Thrones* act as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes? This will involve utilising the collected evidence concerning the role of the architectural protagonists in the narrative, as demonstrated through the role of the architectural elements within the previous case studies.

Literature review

Introduction

Various authors, notably Astakhova (2020), Vidler (1994), Honegger (2004), Sekhar (2018), Müller (2008), and Bowen (2006), have explored the term 'architectural protagonist' as well as 'architectural symbolism's' role in complementing a narrative; however, there is little information on how architecture complements narrative within specific films or TV series. Within *Game of Thrones*, the dark fantasy is made up of various families, cultures and races that span a spectrum of social classes, languages, built environments and geographical locations, intertwining to build a complex narrative. Despite the limited information on the role architecture plays specifically in *Game of Thrones* and how it complements the narrative, various authors have explored fictional worlds and narratives such as *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* with regards to the role of architecture in complementing the narrative or character development.

Architectural symbolism complementing fictional narratives

Symbolism in architecture plays a crucial role in conveying meaning, identity and cultural significance. Through the use of symbols, architects can imbue buildings with layers of interpretation, allowing them to communicate complex ideas, values and beliefs. According to Astakhova, the significance of symbolic imagery is fundamental in numerous architectural structures, particularly in religious and memorial buildings (Astakhova, 2020). Deciphering the symbolic meaning embedded in architectural forms can pose a challenge, prompting Astakhova to emphasise the necessity of accompanying symbolic forms with vivid imagery, both pictorial and sculptural. These additional symbolic architectural elements serve as a simpler language to communicate the meaning inherent in the architectural design. Astakhova uses the example of The Pentagon, expressing how its shape and form are used as ‘a symbol of the US military power (1941–43, architect George Bergstrom)’. The symbol of power is ‘embodied in the planning structure of the building’ (Astakhova, 2020).

Authors such as Holland Young (2015) and Nadim Afzal (2023) have delved into architectural symbolism and how it is used within visual media. They showcase how the use of symbolic messages and hidden meanings can contribute to the building of narratives, enrich plotlines and develop character traits in fictional worlds. Young (2015) explored the symbolism of medieval castles, stating their ability to serve as ‘physical representations of power and affluence’. He suggests that ‘castles symbolise the obligations and responsibilities associated with nobility, especially when located in the hearts of urban districts’. As well as providing ‘the ideal backdrop for scenes of political intrigue or for staging epic battles’, Young goes on to name both ‘Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*’ and ‘HBO’s popular *Game of Thrones* series’ as examples of applying the use of

medieval castles to complement and enhance their complex narratives (Young, 2015, p. 52).

Nadim Afzal explored how architecture expresses character traits in Middle Earth, specifically ‘analysing the Great Dwarven Cities of Moria & Erebor’ (Afzal, 2023, p. 1). Afzal explains how the ‘Dwarvish architecture’ expressed and added layers to the ‘Dwarven inhabitants’ character traits, building on the development of the characters. (Afzal, 2023, p. 4). Afzal explored the Mines of Moria’s columns and scale, and the City of Erebor’s entrances, and openings, to evaluate how architecture ‘can tell the viewer more about the Dwarves as characters’ (Afzal, 2023, p. 2).

Afzal concluded after in-depth analysis that ‘the culmination of traits/expressions developed around the Dwarves provided fulfilment of the research aim regarding understanding how architecture expresses character traits’ (Afzal, 2023, p. 10). He came to this conclusion after analysing numerous elements including how the geometric nature of Moria’s column design ‘expressed the pragmatic nature of the Dwarven mind’, and how the ‘scale of Moria expresses the collapse of an ambitious group of people into loneliness and despair’ (Afzal, 2023, p. 9). Afzal’s conclusions on how the architecture of Moria and Erebor expressed character traits also enhance how architecture can enrich a fictional narrative by adding to the characters’ complex individual narratives.

Both authors show how storytellers can take advantage of architectural symbolism and use it to add depth, layers and a sense of familiarity to their narratives, taking advantage of familiar symbols and themes in order to construct relatable environments that an audience can associate with. In an interview with John Hodgman (2011), George R. R. Martin outlines his process for creating aspects, for example elements like religion, within his dark fantasy narrative begins with the deliberate incorporation of elements from reality, serving as the foundation the audience can relate to. Martin then skilfully adapts and tweaks these elements, introducing his own creativity and imagination as he infuses the narrative with fantastical elements.

Finally, Martin elevates the narrative to grand proportions, amplifying its scale. Martin draws upon the example of 'the Wall', a fictional colossal ice barrier demarcating the northernmost realms of Westeros from the uncharted lands beyond. Inspired by his visit to Hadrian's Wall during a UK trip, Martin adeptly melds historical elements with his imaginative talent. By infusing this real-world experience with the fantastical addition of ice and magnifying its scale, he not only enhances the narrative with relatable elements but also invites the audience to delve into the complex world he has created (Hodgman, 2011).

The importance of architectural narratives when building fictional worlds and sets

Architecture plays a prominent role in captivating an audience in film and TV; however, what the viewer does not see on screen are the concept design and in-depth planning that has taken place. In 2013 Deborah Riley was appointed the role of production designer, responsible for Seasons 4 to 8 of HBO's *Game of Thrones* along with her extensive art department. In 2019, Riley & Revenson authored the book *The art of Game of Thrones* which reiterates the importance of architectural design concerning the complex narrative of *Game of Thrones*. The book demonstrates the significant amount of time that went into translating George R. R. Martin's complex fictional literary world into concept art and architectural designs that make up the fictional world the viewer sees on screen.

Blueprints, concept sketches and models are different ways art departments and construction teams work together to build a set, using a combination of digital and physical techniques. People often believe the material produced is 'purely for constructional aims in order to build the end result' (Katz, 1991). However, their purpose is more than just functional and can build upon the narrative a director may have, adding 'emotional power to the film' (Katz, 1991).

In 1920, Anthony Vidler (1994), an architectural historian and critic, had the idea to interpret space as a dynamic element and with a 'conscious

expression', as it was previously viewed as static, with no other significant purpose other than to fill a background in a scene. Vidler declares that architecture within films is 'no longer an inert background' but rather now participates in the very emotions of the film (Vidler, 1994).

Tejas Sekhar states how architecture 'serves the purpose of reinforcing cultural, societal, or national values', explaining how architecture has more symbolic meaning than simply existing 'for aesthetic appeal and obvious structural functions' (Sekhar, 2018).

Architectural protagonist

Thomas Honegger (2004) explores the term 'architectural protagonist', commenting on how architecture within a fictional world 'is not merely the backdrop' but also holds the power to represent memories and symbols through a range of architectural elements. These factors can all express a story, backing up Honegger's statement that architecture is 'a "protagonist" in its own right' (Honegger, 2004, p. 59).

Throughout this article, the concept of an 'architectural protagonist' will be explored, and the article will explain the key role of architecture in telling a compelling story. This term encapsulates the dynamic nature of architecture, and its ability to enrich fictional spaces using various architectural elements as well as adding depth and symbolism that enhances the narrative.

Andreas Müller states 'with every architectural design, an idea is constructed', outlining to whom the architecture relates and what type of people they might be. Müller is trying to show that architecture holds the power to capture the essence of its inhabitants and past events (Müller, 2008, p. 75). This emphasises the concept that architecture, as a tangible entity, operates as a discreet protagonist, a visually dynamic yet silent actor that contributes a powerful narrative, provoking reactions from its viewer. Anastasia Bower further emphasises: 'since the beginning of motion pictures, architecture frequently has played a lead role'. The architecture,

buildings and surrounding context can support the ‘character development, and also help you understand the subtleties of the plot unfolding right in front of your eyes’ (Bowen, 2006). Honegger (2004) agrees and reiterates the importance of architecture within fictional worlds by analysing the works of ‘Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and London in Dickens’, investigating how the architecture provides ‘not only the background for the action but are often at least as important as the human protagonists’ (Honegger, 2004, p. 60).

Literature review final reflections

The existing literature by authors such as Astakhova (2020), Vidler (1994), Honegger (2004), Sekhar (2018), Müller (2008) and Bowen (2006) all provide insights into architectural symbolism and the evolving view of how architecture plays a significant role in complementing and enriching the narrative within fictional worlds. There is very limited literature on specific films and TV series that researches how architecture plays a role in complementing their specific narratives and/or characters, other than recent authors Young (2015) and Afzal (2023).

Young concluded his thesis by stating that there is room for further analysis regarding how ‘architecture may be used to support the four elements of narrative: plot, theme, character, and setting’ (Young, 2015, p. 146). Inspired by Holland and the rest of the existing literature, this article will explore further how architecture has complemented and enriched the narratives within TV series by specifically focusing on the fictional world of *Game of Thrones*, directed by Benioff and Weiss, based on George R. R. Martin’s novel *The Song of Ice and Fire*. The gap in knowledge in how architecture complements the *Game of Thrones* narrative allows this article to explore the key elements of the architectural protagonist and how they enrich key scenes, giving the viewer a better

understanding of the complex dark fantasy narrative.

Methodology

To analyse the architectural protagonist’s contribution to the *Game of Thrones* narrative, in relation to the aims/objectives of this article, various qualitative methods will be employed. The analysis will be illustrated through case studies, investigating four key scenes, set out in chronological order, selected from a range of different episodes in the *Game of Thrones* TV series. The case studies are set out in chronological order so the developing narrative can be demonstrated clearly and referred to within the analysis. The key scenes were selected to show a range of spaces within the two key buildings – the Great Sept of Baelor and the Red Keep (Figure 1) – with each scene aiming to answer the question: How does architecture within the *Game of Thrones* act as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes?



Figure 1. Visual overview of the research structure (Author’s own image)

Each key scene will have a selected set of architectural elements for further analysis, analysing elements such as ‘scale, layout and

organisation', 'ornamentation and decoration', 'lighting', and 'filming perspective, representation, and framed views'. To understand and analyse how these elements can complement and enhance the narrative, the first step will be to understand and summarise the narrative of the selected scene using dialogue from the TV show. This step ensures there is a clear understanding of what the architectural elements are aiming to complement, providing a foundation to analyse how the elements play a role in adding to the narrative.

The second step of the analysis will use evidence from the concept art books, existing literature and real-world comparisons, to understand how the architectural elements complement and enrich the narrative. The third step will use the book *Reading architecture: A visual lexicon* as a guide in conducting a graphic analysis of the selected architectural elements and develop a range of annotated drawings/personal sketches that interpret and investigate the evidence explored (Hopkins, 2012). To conclude, a discussion will investigate how each space/key scene has complemented and enhanced their specific narratives, exploring how these architectural elements have an integral role in the communication of the narrative. The overarching goal of this discussion is to demonstrate how the architectural protagonist uses a range of elements to collaboratively function as a central protagonist, thereby contributing to the development of a compelling narrative. See Figures 1 and 2 for a visual overview of the research methods.

KEY SCENES:

S = Season
E = Episode

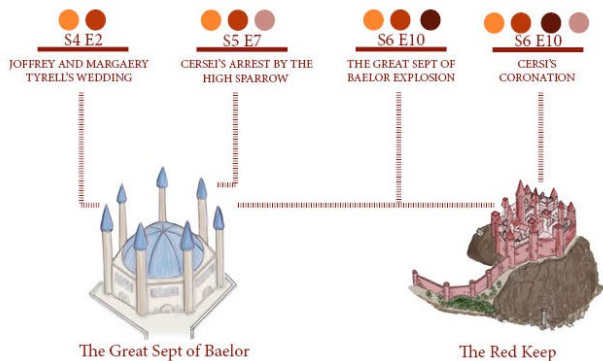


Figure 2. Visual overview of key scenes along with the elements of analysis (Author's own image)

Data collection

Key scene:	<i>S4 E2, 27:20–29:00: Joffrey Baratheon and Margaery Tyrell's wedding</i>
Narrative summary:	To sum up the main point of narrative and plot within this scene, Margery Tyrell (Queen Consort) and Joffrey Baratheon (the King of the Seven Kingdoms) are joining in matrimony in a grandiose ceremony. The wedding is intended to solidify an alliance between House Baratheon and House Tyrell, while also showcasing the opulence of the ruling families, with a lavish display of wealth and power. The scene also highlights the relationship between the power of religion (The Faith of the Seven) and monarchy (The Royal Family) within the TV show.
Plot keywords:	Religion, monarchy, opulence, grandeur, lavish, alliance, wealth, power, bond, social hierarchy.
Character summary:	Margaery Tyrell: A cunning ambitious character Joffrey Baratheon: A cruel, power-abusive, unpredictable character who is known for his sadistic nature, took pleasure in tormenting his subjects and guests, creating an uneasy atmosphere.

Key scene:	<i>S5 E7, 50:35–53:00: Cersei's arrest</i>
Narrative summary:	In the unfolding narrative, tension and strain had been steadily building between the Faith of the Seven, representing the realm's religion, and the Royal Family and nobility, embodying the monarchy. This escalating discord found its roots in a series of recent arrests orchestrated by the High Sparrow, who held the influential position of the High Septon. The High Sparrow's actions, including the arrests of prominent figures, served as catalysts for the intensifying conflict. Among those apprehended were Loras Tyrell, the queen's brother, accused of engaging in illicit activities, and Margaery Tyrell, the reigning queen, facing charges of perjury. In this scene selected S5 E7 (Martin et al., 2015, 50:35–53:00), the pinnacle of this narrative crescendo unfolded when Cersei, the formidable Queen Mother, found herself ensnared in the web of accusations. Her arrest was justified on the grounds of incest, adultery and treason. This intricate web of arrests not only deepened the fissures

	between the Faith of the Seven and the monarchy, but also set the stage for a power struggle with far-reaching consequences in the turbulent political landscape of Westeros.
Plot keywords:	Religion, monarchy, tension, strain, vanity, gold, ornaments, statues, pillars, simple, solid, finery, political power struggle, class divisions.
Character summary:	<p>Cersei Lannister: A highly ambitious and cunning character with a fixation on power and influence in the political landscape of Westeros. She is willing to employ ruthless and Machiavellian tactics to achieve her goals and aims for her family and loved ones at substantial moral and ethical costs.</p> <p>High Sparrow (High Septon): Once a humble and pious character, rose to prominence within the Faith of the Seven, becoming the High Septon. He gained this power by advocating for the rights of the less fortunate and challenging the excesses of the noble class. Despite his apparent ascendance, the High Sparrow's zealotry and rigid moral stance eventually contribute to his downfall.</p>

Key scene:	<i>S6 E10, 10:30–17:21: The Great Sept of Baelor explosion</i>
Narrative summary:	In the aftermath of a string of recent arrests, including that of Cersei Lannister, tensions between the monarchy and the religious authorities had reached a perilous tipping point. Following Cersei's arrest and subsequent confinement by the Faith, the discord reached a critical juncture. In a bid to circumvent trial, Cersei endured the public humiliation of a walk of atonement, commonly known as the walk of shame, before the people of King's Landing. However, even after this penance, she found herself relegated to isolation within the Red Keep. Her standing in King's Landing diminished significantly, rendering her emotionally and politically vulnerable. During her seclusion, Cersei began orchestrating a retaliatory plan against those who had disgraced her. Aligning herself with Qyburn, a disgraced former maester, the two devised a strategy to reclaim power

	and eliminate their adversaries. Cersei's journey took a legal turn when she faced accusations of various crimes, prompting her to name the formidable Ser Gregor Clegane, 'The Mountain', as her champion for a trial by combat. Unexpectedly, the High Sparrow outlawed trial by combat, leaving Cersei without her intended legal defence. The culmination of Cersei's revenge unfolded in Season 6, Episode 10, from 10:30 to 17:21, known as 'The Great Sept of Baelor explosion'. In this gripping scene, Cersei employed wildfire, a highly explosive substance, to annihilate the Great Sept of Baelor along with her enemies. The explosion not only eliminated the Faith of the Seven, but also claimed a significant number of nobles, solidifying Cersei's ruthless ascent to power.
Plot keywords:	Explosion, elimination, monarchy and religious conflict, emotionally and politically vulnerable.
Character summary:	<p>Sir Gregor Clegane (The Mountain): A formidable and ruthless warrior in the service of House Lannister, known for his immense size and cruelty.</p> <p>Qyburn: A former maester expelled from the Citadel who becomes a skilled healer and adviser to Cersei Lannister.</p>
Key scene:	S6 E10, 59:57–1:02:00: Cersei's coronation
Narrative summary:	In the aftermath of the preceding events, Cersei seizes control of the Seven Kingdoms. In the same pivotal episode of Season 6, Episode 10, between 59:57 and 1:02:00, Cersei formally declares herself taking the title of the first of her name, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. This momentous coronation unfolds within the grandeur of the Iron Throne room situated in the heart of the Red Keep. Within this scene, you get the sense that Cersei is descending into madness, after her isolation, humiliation, and grief for all her children who are now all deceased, leaving her with power but also with the loss of many of her loved ones.
Plot keywords:	Power, Madness, violence, war.
Character summary:	Jaime Lannister: A skilled knight and member of the Kingsguard, known for his combat prowess and complex relationships within the Lannister family.

Case Study 1: Joffrey Baratheon and Margaery Tyrell's wedding

Scale: Social hierarchy

The scene opens with a panoramic view of King's Landing, highlighting the significant role of scale in the evolving narrative, and emphasising the intricate connection between religion and monarchy. The Great Sept of Baelor and the Red Keep stand tall above the surrounding structures, piercing through the building plane and symbolising the rigid social hierarchy and class structure in King's Landing, as noted by Riley & Revenson (2019, p. 119). The architectural scale showcased in the skyline evokes a profound sense of awe within the narrative, highlighting the grandeur of the space. Joye and Verpooten (2013) discuss how scale throughout a skyline complements the monumental significance of a building, and in this scene is used to enrich the unfolding plot. Katherine McLaughlin's (2023) observation that churches were designed to inspire 'awe and emotion' aligns with the idea that such structures aimed to attract and captivate visitors, emphasising the intentional design decisions to encourage worshippers to look upward, fostering a connection with the divine, and these design decisions are also seen within the Great Sept of Baelor (McLaughlin, 2023).

Seven-pointed star: Religious importance

The seven-pointed star is represented architecturally within the window and decoration, as well as creating the layout and organisation of the Great Sept's floor plan. In the Faith of the Seven, a fictional religion, this star symbolises the 'seven aspects of the core deity', with worship extending to three male figures (Father, Warrior, Smith), three females (Mother, Maiden, Crone) and one androgynous deity, the Stranger (Wittingslow, 2015). George R. R. Martin, inspired by the medieval Catholic church, parallels its central doctrine of a singular God with three aspects: Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Hodgman, 2011). In the real world, historically, there has been a close

association between the church and monarchy, stemming from the belief that a monarch's right to rule was derived from divine authority and a mandate from God. This religious doctrine bestowed legitimacy upon rulers, solidifying their power over their subjects. Visual elements such as the symbolism of the seven-pointed star and statues of the seven deities symbolise the monarchy's relationship with the Faith of the Seven, enriching the wedding scene by deepening the historical and real-world religious context.

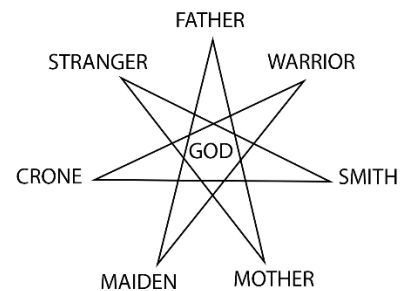


Figure 3. Seven-pointed star diagram (Author's own image)

Marble decoration: Wealth, vanity and grandeur

In this scene, intricate marble decorations cover the floor, columns and interior façade, featuring the prominent seven-pointed star symbol. The use of expensive materials such as marble not only adds grandeur and opulence to the space but also draws parallels to the characteristics often associated with baroque-style architecture, such as grand columns, gold leaf and natural stones. In baroque architecture, highly embellished domes, colonnades and ceilings were employed with the intent to awe visitors and attract followers (McLaughlin, 2023). The extravagant design of the architecture is crucial to the narrative as it explores the role architecture plays within the monarchy across several generations. This significance is articulated by the High Sparrow, who describes it as a means for people to 'inflict their vanity on those who came after them' (Martin et al., 2015, 50:35–53:00).

Real-world comparison:

Cathedrale Notre-Dame de Paris and the Great Sept of Baelor's Layout and Interior Organisation

The architectural layout and configuration of medieval cathedrals often reflect symbols tied to religion. According to Hopkins (2012), the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris showcases this as its layout is derived from the 'Latin cross or Crucifix'. This is the universal symbol for Christianity and holds significant importance in the Faith, as it represents the death and resurrection of Christ. Nelly Shafik Ramzy highlights how the interior space and organisation of the repeating arch – an integral interior component, for both structural as well as aesthetic reasons (Hopkins, 2012) – is 'divided into three divisions: arcade, clerestory, and triforium. Three is the number of the Divinity revealing itself (Holy Trinity)', showing an example of how the spatial organisation includes hidden messages and complements the religious setting (Ramzy, 2021).

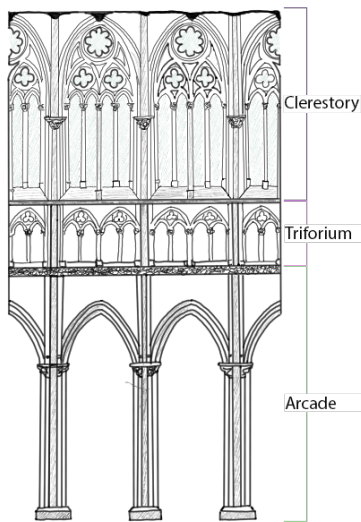


Figure 4. Notre-Dame de Paris interior architectural detail sketch (Author's own image)

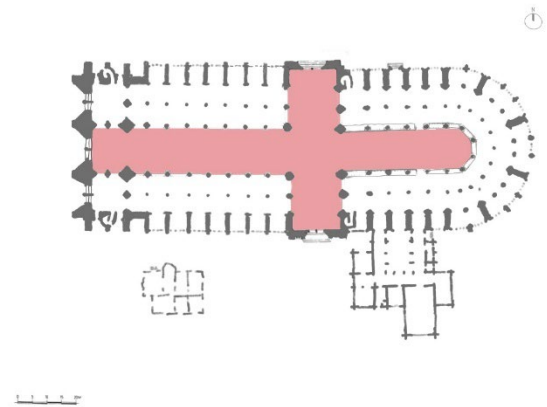


Figure 5. Cathedral layout (Author's own image)

Comparatively, the layout of the Great Sept of Baelor is intentionally designed around the seven-pointed star – a symbol filled with religious significance in the fictional realm. The design choice of the Sept reflects what is seen within the real world and adds historical narrative depth to the show. The architectural configuration features seven distinct sections in its spatial organisation, connected by the seven-pointed star incorporated into the floor decoration and united under the overarching dome. Each sector within the design is associated with a sculptural representation, emblematic of one of the deities. The skylight integrated into the roof metaphorically embodies the central doctrine, serving as a symbolic representation of the singular deity.

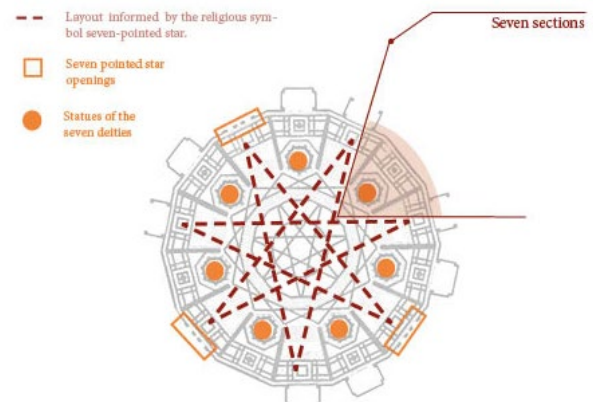


Figure 6. Diagram of architectural floor plan for the Great Sept of Baelor (Author's own image)

Cathedrale Notre-Dame de Paris and the Great Sept of Baelor's Religious Symbolism

Nelly Shafik Ramzy (2021) conducted an insightful investigation into the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, delving into the use of symbols infused into the architecture. Nelly highlights the utilisation of the gothic trefoil symbol, purposefully integrated into the facades to symbolise the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Within the facades, there is also the use of decorative openings, for example of the west façade one of the openings takes the form of a ‘Rose window’, a decorative opening filled with multiple interpretations and messages. For example, as explained by Ramzy, the Rose Window is characterised by its ‘radiating pattern’, symbolically representing ‘the iris inside the all-seeing eye of God, with the image of Christ the pupil’ (Ramzy, 2021, p. 376).

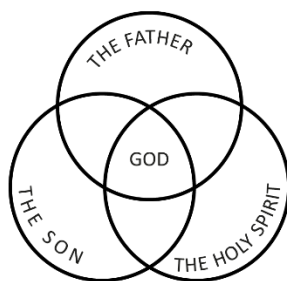


Figure 7. Trinity trefoil diagram hidden message (Author's own image)

Comparatively, the Great Sept of Baelor incorporates the seven-pointed star symbol, purposefully embedding it into the interior space using marble, as well as including three large openings taking the form of the symbolic star. This addition not only adds the symbolic messages of religious teachings, but also contributes to the overarching theme of grandeur, wealth and vanity during the wedding scene as previously examined.

Case Study 2: Cersei's arrest by the High Sparrow

Absence of decoration and ornamentation – Pure Faith

This scene is set within a chapel, one of the oldest structures in King's Landing, situated below the Great Sept of Baelor, as noted by the High Sparrow (The High Sparrow, S5, E7, The Gift, 51:45–53:06). The simplicity of the space and the materials surrounding the characters allow the viewer to focus on the developing tension and conflict between the character protagonists. The chapel shows the absence of grand materials or lavish decorations; instead, it consists of a single stone material, with the only embellishments being the carvings of the seven-pointed star on the floor and altar. This design choice complements the purity of the faith of those who came before.

Seven-pointed star

The seven-pointed star is simply carved into stone, without any other decoration or ornamentation surrounding it, complementing the clean faith of the people who built this space.

Character protagonists' dialogue enriched by the architectural protagonist

The High Sparrow observes the absence of names carved in the chapel's architecture, highlighting that its builders refrained from imposing their vanity on future generations, unlike Baelor and his 'gilded monstrosity' above in the Great Sept. He interprets the ornate elements of the Great Sept as symbols of nobility and, by stripping them away, emphasises simplicity and solidity in their shared space. In the cited dialogue detailed in the data collection table, the High Sparrow utilises architectural elements as a metaphor for the role of decoration in illustrating social hierarchy. Simultaneously, he references the physical space, asserting its significance with the declaration, 'This is what remains' (The High Sparrow, S5 E7, The Gift, 51:45–53:06).

The High Sparrow's comparison of the grandeur in the Great Sept to the simplicity of their surroundings underscores his message. The architectural protagonist actively collaborates in delivering this message, creating a synergy between words and space. In this dialogue with Cersei, the

High Sparrow's words and the architectural setting work in tandem, forming a compelling and complex narrative.

Scale – Small spaces build tension

Along with the simplicity of the space, the use of a small, confined scale adds to the tension and strain between the characters, creating an uncomfortable atmosphere for the viewer as they see the tension building up to the pinnacle of this narrative crescendo. The characters within this scene serve as metaphorical representations of these opposing forces – monarchy and religion. Swati Chattopadhyay's assertion that small spaces can evoke a sense of threat aligns with the observations of IBR Architects, who highlight that transitioning from a 'large to a small space' can result in a threatening atmosphere (Chattopadhyay, 2023; IBR Architecture, n/a). The small, confined space within this scene creates a threatening, uneasy atmosphere, adding to the escalating tension in the storyline, and strengthening the narrative.

Natural light and artificial light

The confined space and lighting intricately collaborate in this scene, intensifying the suspense embedded within the narrative. Light plays a crucial role in eliciting emotions and evoking feelings in the real world, demonstrating its potential to complement a fictional narrative in visual media (Major et al., 2005). Within this scene, the interplay between light and shadow attains equal significance. The subtle illumination evident in the frames to the left, reveals a diffused light penetrating the space, skilfully communicating its basement-level setting. Simultaneously, candlelight is employed, a lighting choice often linked to the creation of an atmosphere imbued with mystery and spirituality, as noted by Major et al. (2005).

The deliberate absence of light within this scene contributes to an atmosphere of unease, suspense and tension, a characteristic often prevalent in the horror genre. This lack of light and illumination, as

noted by Rose (2005), has been integral to instilling a fear factor, further enhancing the narrative.

Summary

In summary, the scene employs scale, lighting and deliberate simplicity in decoration, to enhance the developing narrative. The strategic use of scale and lighting intensifies the tension and suspense among the characters, while the understated ornamentation reflects the historical purity of the faith. These elements not only complement each other but also elevate the tension that is building within the unfolding narrative. These architectural elements enrich the scene with historical depth and play a crucial role in advancing the overarching narrative, shedding light on the escalating power struggle between the Faith of the Seven and the noble classes in the realm.

Case Study 3: The Great Sept of Baelor explosion

Framing the view of the Great Sept of Baelor - Ongoing monarchy and religious conflict

The recurring use of the framed view from Cersei's balcony onto the Great Sept not only enriches the meticulous and strategic nature of Cersei's plans, as outlined in the narrative summary, but it also serves as a poignant reminder to the viewer of the ongoing conflict between religion and the monarchy. Each time Cersei looks down from her balcony, the looming presence of the Great Sept becomes a symbolic reflection of the enduring tension and intricacies between these two powerful forces in the narrative.

In contrast to Case Study 1, which employed a panoramic view of King's Landing to depict the connection between two structures, the chosen perspective from Cersei's chambers deliberately positions her high up, symbolising a hierarchical gaze down upon the Great Sept. This deliberate choice in framing accentuates Cersei's calculated

authority and dominance within the unfolding narrative.

The use of the technique, repetition with variation, commonly observed in visual media, can evoke a curious tension in the narrative, as articulated by Jonathan Auerbach. In his assertion, Auerbach contends that this technique enables the viewer to establish connections between previous and current actions (Auerbach, 2000). Using repetitive visual elements, 'such as colours, objects, or camera angles', is often used 'to reinforce a theme' as conveyed by Jason Hellerman. Hellerman also explained how repeating visual elements can 'establish a sense of continuity or to symbolise themes'. He explains this using 'The recurring imagery of crows in *Game of Thrones*' expressing how it 'represents various foreshadowing and symbolism' within the show (Hellerman, 2023).

Notably, during Season 6, Episode 10, the winds of winter masterfully illustrate this narrative technique. During the first 15 minutes of the episode a recurring skyline perspective is employed, subtly reminding the viewer of the escalating tension established between the monarchy and religious parties. Five minutes later this same view is revisited, but with the variation being the destruction of the Great Sept, as Cersei's devious plan unfolds.

Layout: The structure of the Faith

Building on the insights from the earlier examination in Case Study 1, the layout of the Great Sept is designed around the symbolic seven-pointed star. The use of this layout becomes evident as the character protagonists navigate it during the trials in Season 6, Episode 10. The visual portrayal illustrates the Seven Septons strategically positioning themselves on the points of the star, assuming the role of judges for those on trial. This narrative device reinforces the concept that the Seven Septons are selected within the Faith of the Seven to embody the 'seven aspects of the core deity' (Wittingslow, 2015).

Decoration and ornamentation – Elimination of the Faith

As highlighted previously, the use of visual repetition possesses the capacity to emphasise themes, establish a sense of continuity and deepen the narrative. This potency is exemplified through the consistent inclusion of objects or visual elements filled with symbolic meaning, contributing to a more profound and meaningful storytelling experience (Hellerman, 2023).

Building on this exploration, the visual representation of the seven-pointed star, as evidenced in both Case Studies 1 and 2, serves to maintain a sense of continuity. The statues depicting the seven deities, coupled with the overall grandeur associated with the Great Sept, become recurring visual motifs throughout the narrative. This recurrence is evident not only in Case Study 1, but also in the scene depicting the trials. The deliberate repetition of these elements has been steadily building up, culminating in the impactful moments of destruction portrayed during the explosion of the Great Sept in Season 6, Episode 10. These figures represent the climax of the conflict between the monarchy and the Faith of the Seven, showing the annihilation of all the visual motifs associated with the religion, along with the character protagonists.

Summary

In summary, this scene skilfully employs the technique of repetition and variation, serving as a poignant reminder to the viewer of the persistent conflict between the monarchy and the faith. It also highlights the character protagonists' use of the Great Sept's layout, further reinforcing the religious symbolism embodied by the star during the trials. Furthermore, the carefully chosen frames during the explosion exhibit the deliberate repetition of visual motifs linked to the faith, effectively complementing the significant narrative actions that unfold.

Case Study 4: Cersei's coronation

Opening view of King's Landing

Building upon the insights from Case Study 1, where the skyline was used strategically to underscore the intricate relationship between the monarchy and faith, Case Study 3 introduces a notable change in perspective. This shift, positioning the monarchy above the faith, serves as a visual representation of the developing conflict between the two forces that have been steadily escalating throughout the narrative. This scene, which opens with Jamie Lannister looking over King's Landings skyline, marked by the destruction of the Great Sept, vividly accentuates the climax of this conflict, leaving the Red Keep as the sole dominant force within the capital city, King's Landing.

Scale: Intimidation, power display

Architectural drawings featured in Deborah Riley's & Jody Revenson (2019) concept art book depict the columns within the Iron Throne room, illustrating their size relative to people. The scale of these columns within the interior space serves to convey a compelling sense of intimidation, strategically employing scale as a powerful visual element within the narrative. Fawcett, in *Architecture design notebook*, states how in some cases architects have used a 'stripped classical architectural language' within monumental architecture to symbolise the sense of power, enforcing intimidation over its users (Fawcett, 2003, p. 64).

Iron decoration: Violence, destruction and war

Riley highlights the dynamic nature of the throne room, which undergoes a redesign for every monarch's succession, be it a King or Queen. This redesign is not merely a cosmetic change; rather, each transformation serves as a deliberate communication of both the ruler's personality and the overarching ambiance linked to their reign (Riley & Revenson, 2019).

During the redesign of the Iron Throne room, the columns underwent a transformation with the

addition of iron decoration – a material frequently associated with weaponry and violence, as highlighted by Wells (2020). The presence of iron decoration intricately envelops the columns and helps form the construction of the symbolic Iron Throne itself. The imagery of swords around the Iron Throne has great historical significance and is important to the fictional narrative, as it is described as being constructed from the melted and twisted swords of Aegon the Conqueror's defeated enemies. Throughout the scene, the repeated use of this material in the decoration highlights the charged and intense atmosphere, creating a fitting setting to the recent shocking destruction and acts of war detailed in the narrative summary.

Comparison

The Iron Throne room's adaptability with the narrative

To reiterate the earlier point, it is worth noting that the throne room undergoes a redesign with the succession of each new monarch. This emphasises the adaptability of the architectural elements under analysis within these case studies, highlighting their ability to be adapted within the same space to convey different narratives and themes. Showing this adaptability during Season 1, Robert Baratheon's reign, Riley states that 'the throne room's columns were encircled by a relief of leaves' a decorative element that enriches a sense of grandeur (Riley & Revenson, 2019, p. 125). Whereas within the frame taken from Cersei's coronation during Season 6, the viewer sees columns encased with iron decoration, complementing the sense of violence of recent events within the narrative.

Lighting

Within the comparison the discernible contrast in lighting becomes evident: the throne room in Season 6 exhibits a markedly darker ambiance, relying on artificial light, whereas in Season 1 it is notably brighter and more illuminated. In Season 1 the throne room introduces a stained-glass window,

skillfully designed to ‘engulf light and colour’, symbolising the power, divinity and wealth associated with the space (Anderson, 2021; Major et al., 2005, p. 31). Contrarily, in Season 6 the throne room portrays a distinct shift – the removal of colour within the main opening, accompanied by iron bars encasing it. This alteration, coupled with the transition from natural illuminating light to artificial light around the columns, contributes to a heightened atmosphere of suspense and fear.

Summary

In summary, the opening frame with Jamie Lannister looking over the King’s Landings skyline showcases a pivotal shift in perspective, positioning the monarchy higher than the faith and accentuating the intensifying conflict. Architectural elements, such as the scale of columns and the incorporation of iron decoration, are examined for their symbolic association with power and intimidation. The comparative explores the redesign of the throne room for each monarch’s rule, highlighting the deliberate change in lighting, decoration and ornamentation to communicate the monarch’s personality and ongoing narrative. Comparisons between seasons emphasise this adaptability, illustrating how architectural elements convey diverse narratives.

Discussion

The main purpose of this article is to answer the question of how architecture within *Game of Thrones* acts as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes. The analysis of the case studies chosen demonstrates the diverse ways in which architectural elements serve to complement and enrich specific themes, convey concealed messages and contribute nuanced layers to the evolving plot within a scene (Figure 8). These architectural components have the ability to elevate a narrative by crafting an atmosphere that resonates with viewers or employing symbolism that embeds hidden messages and historical depth as stated by

Astakhova (2020), thereby complementing the narrative.

Architectural elements play a crucial role in enhancing the grandiose ceremony of the wedding storyline (Case Study 1), showcasing the opulence of ruling families and symbolising wealth and power. This ceremony serves as a focal point, emphasising the significant relationship between religion and monarchy, two powerful forces in the fictional world. The strategic use of scale, and religious symbolism in decoration and ornamentation, contribute to the narrative, enriching the atmosphere of awe and emphasising the grandeur of the ceremony. The lavish marble material accentuates the intricate decoration, highlighting the wealth associated with this event.

The synergy between scale and lighting within Case Study 2 contributes to the rising tension between the faith and the monarchy. The deliberate absence of decoration and the simplicity of religious symbolism align with the character protagonist’s (High Sparrow) dialogue. He highlights how architectural decoration and ornamentation in monumental structures can be used to project vanity, wealth and power. By stripping away these elements, the truth and purity of the space is revealed. He states this to explain how nobility may use finery to conceal lies and hide their true intentions.

The repetition of architectural elements examined in Case Study 1, including layout, decoration and ornamentation, serves to amplify the religious impact and historical depth within Case Study 3’s selected scene. The strategic use of perspective heightens the building tension during Cersei’s revenge. Through the repetition with variation technique, viewers are consistently reminded of the ongoing conflict between religious and monarchy groups. This conflict is effectively communicated by a change in perspective within the skyline, positioning Cersei’s view to look down on the Great Sept.

In Case Study 4, the culmination of lighting, perspective, decoration and scale strategically contributes to the heightened display of power during Cersei's coronation following her vengeful actions in Case Study 3. This power shift is emphasised using scale, creating an atmosphere of intimidation for both the inhabitants and the viewer. Additionally, decoration plays a pivotal role in enhancing the overarching theme of war, violence and the imposing force of intimidation over others.

The comprehensive analysis across all four case studies highlights the capacity of architectural elements to complement and enhance their narratives. Whether imbued with symbolic meaning, offering a sense of reality and familiarity, enriching the atmosphere, evoking specific feelings or emotions, or collaborating intricately with the character protagonist through dialogue, these factors collectively articulate a compelling story. Thomas Honegger's (2004) exploration of the term 'architectural protagonist', encompasses these various elements, and resonates profoundly with the viewer. Applying this definition and considering the demonstrated ability of architectural elements to contribute meaningfully to the narrative, it becomes evident how the architecture of King's Landing emerges as a dynamic protagonist – a powerful force with the character protagonists in the *Game of Thrones* narrative.

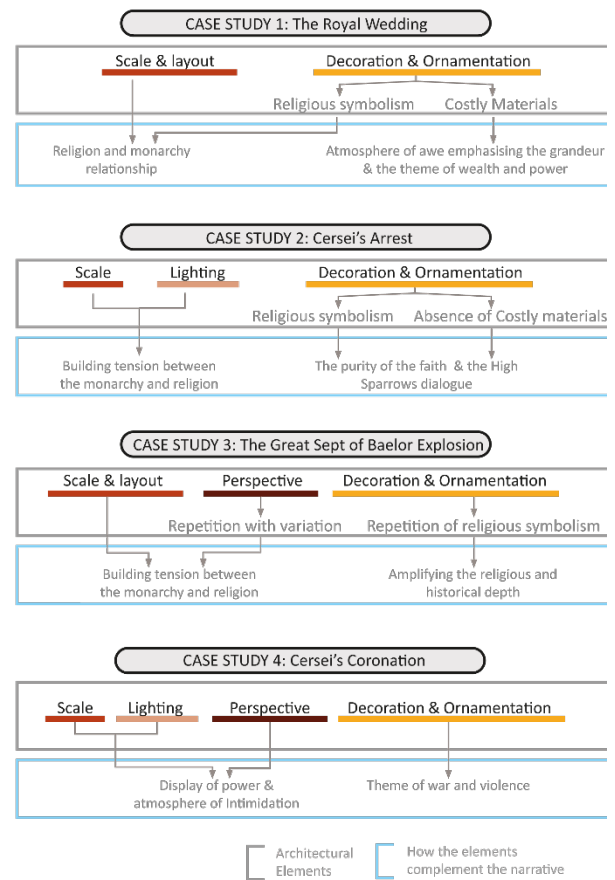


Figure 8. Discussion diagram (Author's own image)

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore the role of architecture in *Game of Thrones*, specifically the term 'architectural protagonist' and how architecture contributes to the communication of the complex storyline. The research sought to answer the question: How does architecture within *Game of Thrones* act as a silent yet powerful protagonist, complementing and enriching the narrative of specific scenes? The scrutiny of four case studies, analysing key scenes and their architectural elements, revealed instances that successfully link back to the research question, highlighting the substantial role played by architecture in elevating selected scene's narratives.

As detailed in the discussion, each case study underscores how architectural elements collectively build a compelling narrative. Through their ability

to be filled with symbolic significance, provide a sense of reality and familiarity, enrich the atmosphere, evoke specific emotions, or collaboratively enhance a character protagonist's message, collaborating with the dialogue. The discussion concludes by emphasising that the evidence explored within the case studies, combined with the definition of an architectural protagonist and the examination of architectural symbolism from existing literature, establishes architecture in *Game of Thrones* as an architectural protagonist in the creation of a complex narrative.

Future analysis could further explore the adaptability of the architectural protagonist, comparing the evolution of a space and how it adapts to narrative changes, as exemplified in Case Study 4's Iron Throne Room. This avenue of research is not confined to *Game of Thrones* and has the potential to extend to other forms of visual media.

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Figures

Figure 1: Galea, A. (2023). Visual overview of the research structure (Author’s own image)

Figure 2: Galea, A. (2023). Visual overview key scenes along with the elements of analysis (Author’s own image)

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