

THE RIGHT DIRECTION

EXTERIOR OF
BOLVANGAR.

DENNIS GASSNER
FILM PRODUCTION DESIGN
THE GOLDEN COMPASS

INTERIOR OF THE
MAGISTERIUM.

DENNIS GASSNER'S SETS FOR THE GOLDEN COMPASS BORROW IDEAS FROM A CLUTCH OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTS.

TEXT TINO SCHAEGLER AND ALICE CHARLOTTE
PHOTOS NEW LINE CINEMA

The film *The Golden Compass*, based on Philip Pullman's children's fantasy novel set in 19th-century England, is not a likely candidate to be harbouring influences of some of today's more interesting architectural designs. On close inspection, however, sets created by Oscar-winning production designer Dennis Gassner reveal elements – aided by digital modelling – that could be attributed to Santiago Calatrava, OMA and Zaha Hadid.

Gassner is best known for films such as *Road to Perdition* and the Coen Brothers'

classic *Miller's Crossing*. The *Golden Compass* proudly bears the stamp of Gassner's distinctive hallmark. The film is set between a musty English college and the remote landscape of the Arctic, where the main character, a little girl, travels to rescue her friends from a wicked organization. The film's design is an eclectic mix of Gothic and Art Nouveau brought up to speed with digital technology. In doing so, Gassner meets the *Zeitgeist* with a rediscovery of intricately ornamented spaces and façades.

The design for the Magisterium – the dark governing power – takes its inspiration from Saint Paul's Cathedral. Gassner's version of the building's exterior, conceived using 3D modelling scripting, consequently surpasses the solid stone design. A base module scattered across the façade in accordance with

defined parameters resulted in a richly varied surface. By applying cutting-edge technology, Gassner shaped a Magisterium whose contemporary take on Gothic architecture brings Calatrava face to face with Reiser and Umemoto. Bolvangar, the arctic institute where children are kept for cruel scientific experiments, demonstrates Gassner's sensitive use of colour, lighting and texture. The highly engineered look of the exterior, with its complexly layered façade, is beautifully illuminated in shades of green and blue.

Of course, the setting is distinctly British and the film creates an atmosphere that makes the design all the more unnerving and powerful. Here is where cinema can transcend architecture – commanding attention and offering a sense of space sure to spur the imagination.