

Case Study:  
Set Designer Chad Owens Recreates History  
in the Award-Winning Film *Milk*



Castro theatre, Photo courtesy of Susan Saperstein.



Harvey Milk was the first American politician who openly stood up for gay rights, a fight that cost him his life in the late seventies. Thirty years after his death, Gus Van Sant directed a movie about his life. *Milk* won two Oscars®, 33 other awards, and numerous nominations. The success of the movie was also largely due to the credible work of the production team, since *Milk* tells the story of the Castro district in San Francisco.

“The city played an important role for Gus Van Sant,” explains set designer Chad Owens. “We filmed everything on location. There was no point in building the sets in the studio, as there were so many scenes taking place in the district and, in addition, it would have been too costly.” Owens took care of all the drawings for the movie sets. And when they had to be redone, he took care of the detailed drawings of furniture, traffic lights, and parking meters.

### **Forty Years Younger**

The production team had to make the district appear 40 years younger and had to follow the changes in the street appearance throughout the seventies, from hippie to disco. For that challenge, Owens turned to Vectorworks® software as his tool to plan and accurately design all of those elements. He imported photographs and images of all the buildings into the software program and traced over them. He then added elevations of blocks and changed the details of the facades to reflect the time period. “It saved us a lot of time to be able to draft ‘roughly’ and then use Vectorworks’ interactive dimensions and Object Info palette to convert designs into accurate representations,” explains Owens.

Owens changed the appearance of the district and had to hide contemporary logos, as well as everything related to computers and other modern things. He gave all store fronts a retro look, replaced all modern cars with vintage cars, and swapped the parking meters with reproductions of the old ones. Other locations in the movie, such as the city hall, still looked exactly as they did 40 years ago and didn’t need to undergo a facelift; adding ashtrays from the seventies was good enough.



The exterior of Castro Camera as dressed by the set design crew.

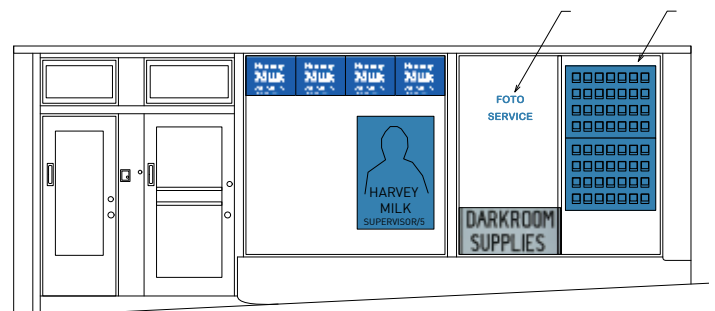
## Camera Store

Milk's store is the central interior location of the story. "Fortunately, it was a camera store. Therefore, a lot of pictures were available, and we were able to make every detail accurate," explains Owens. "I used the pictures to design the furniture and displays. Of course, we also had to take care of the walls, floors, and ceilings since everything had changed. And to make it even harder, we had to remove everything again after filming because the owners had asked that their gift shop be returned to its original condition."

The script for the movie takes place over several years. The camera store changed over time, and there were a total of eight time periods. Because the scenes were not shot in chronological order, it was necessary to keep track of what was where and what was displayed in the window. The design team had to be able to change the décor quickly in order to not hold up the filming. "The flexibility of the Vectorworks program played an important role in accomplishing this task," explains Owens. "We had to have phased ground plans by which we could track changes. The software made it easy to pull up the scenes that were needed during a specific filming day."

At one point during the filming, the art director also wanted the building to be moved three feet over. "When I showed them that I could do this with the click of a button using the Vectorworks Move Command, they were pleasantly surprised," says Owens. "It would have taken all day if we had been drafting by hand."

Owens would sit across from the graphic designer, Halsted Craig Hannah, during the preparations. "He had a considerable task," says Owens. "For example, you can see the boxes of film rolls in the camera store, and because they are no longer made, we had to create them one by one. We had another issue with the re-design of logos for brands of beer that didn't exist any longer. You can get sued if you show an existing brand in the movie."



A portion of one of the phased elevations drawn for the set dressing.

### Crazy Colors

Another central interior location was Milk's apartment. "The real apartment was above the camera store. It is now occupied again, and it wasn't possible to film there so we looked for and found another location on Haight Street," says Owens. "The colors were crazy and there was a ceiling with stars in the bedroom. We left it this way, as you don't have to always stick to every historical detail. In the end, we are making a movie and not a design for the Folk Museum."

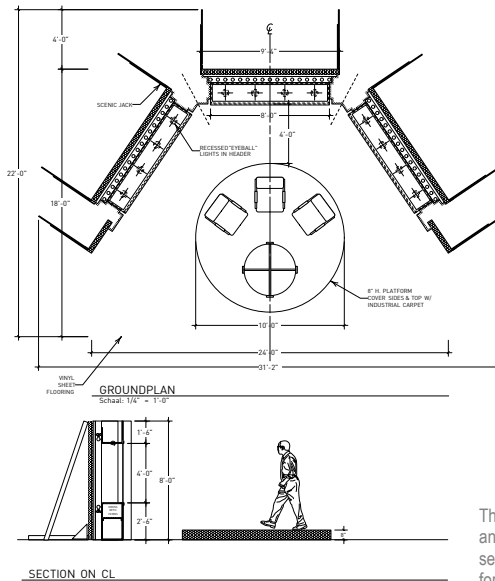
Danny Nicoletta and Cleve Jones (friends of Harvey Milk) helped set up the apartment. Some of their original posters and other small items were hung in the rooms. An unexpected problem surfaced when the team attempted to borrow the original furniture of the murdered politician from the Harvey Milk Museum. "These people asked for a ridiculously high amount, so we copied the furniture based on pictures," says Owens.

### Film Set for The Morning Show

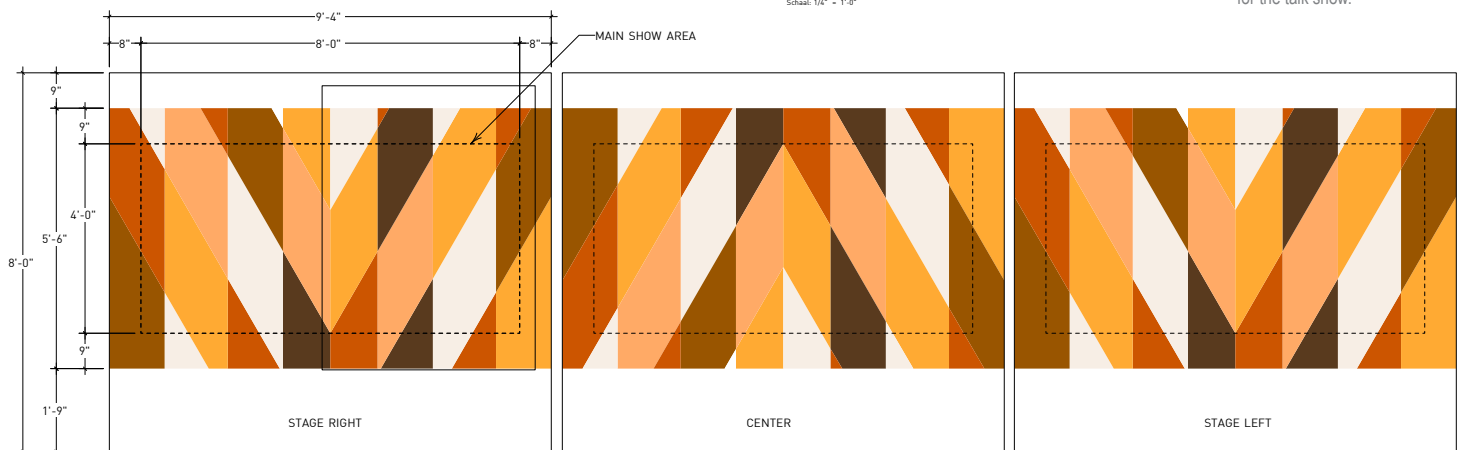
Owens moved to San Francisco in 1981, three years after Milk's murder. "I had a lot of firsthand knowledge and memories of the city as it was back then. We also did a lot of research on this time period and had collected many pictures and other original material in the art department. The walls of our office were covered with pictures. We also assembled a book for the actors and for the set dressers to give them an idea of the look and feel."

Owens worked very closely with production manager Bill Groom for the movie. "Bill coordinated all the designers and workers and had daily contact with the artistic director, set designer, graphic designer and other assistants. It was fantastic working with him: a great communicator with a passion for movies."

It is important that the sets are correct for the credibility of a historical movie. "The task is even more difficult for movies that take place in the recent past because the viewers have experienced the period themselves," says Owens. "You need to keep every detail in mind. If you make a mistake, everyone sees it. If you do everything right, then no one sees it. The set then disappears into the background and subtly supports the story, and that is what we want to achieve."



The ground plan and section of the set which was built for the talk show.



SCENIC FLATS  
Schaal: 1/2" = 1'-0"

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Courtesy of Chronical/Terry Schmitt.

## The Real Harvey Milk



Harvey Milk's inaugural walk to City Hall from the Castro neighborhood January 9, 1978, photo © 1978 by Daniel Nicoletta.



Harvey Milk in front of his Castro Street camera store circa 1977, photo ©1977 by Daniel Nicoletta.

## Acknowledgements

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