

Dr. Strangelove, released in 1964, was Adam's first collaboration with the director Stanley Kubrick. The pair worked very closely on the design, creating a cinematic masterpiece: the War Room was to become one of the great iconic film sets of the time. For this darkly satirical comedy, Kubrick

and Adam (pictured right, on set) understandably had no official guidance on the interior of U.S. government offices. The limitations of 1960s technology meant that Adam had to create the vast wall of screens, seen on the right, using thousands of lightbulbs behind sheets of plywood



ARCHITECT OF DREAMS

You may not know his name, but you'd certainly recognize the work of twentieth-century cinema's most influential production designer. From *Goldfinger* to *Dr. Strangelove*, his sets are as famous as the stars themselves. Ian Christie meets Sir Ken Adam

“For *Dr. No*, I had to fill three of the largest stages at Pinewood Studios with sets. There was no time to do sketches and no one looking over my shoulder. I wanted to do away with all the old materials of setbuilding, wood and paper, and use new materials. My crew was very excited, but it was taking an enormous risk. The producers and director came back from location work in Jamaica just four days before we were to start shooting, and I was petrified.”

It’s hard to imagine Sir Ken Adam quaking in his shoes. Even at 91, the most famous living production designer, with over 40 film credits to his name, ranging from the early Bond capers to the period elegance of *The Madness of King George*, exudes an air of assurance. We meet in his elegant Knightsbridge home, surrounded by awards, headed by two Oscars, and piles of books that include at least three celebrating his career. And he recalls that nervous wait in 1962 for the verdicts of *Dr. No*’s director, Terence Young, and its famously tough producers, Cubby Broccoli and Harry Saltzman.

He needn’t have worried, since everyone loved the fantastic setting he’d created for this first Bond villain, even though it later emerged that he’d overspent on the film’s modest budget by a whole £6,000 (around US\$10,000). No one – least of all Adam, who cheerfully admits to not having read the Ian Fleming novels – had any idea that Bond would become the longest-running franchise in British film history, with the twenty-third, *Skyfall*, released this year. Adam designed seven Bonds over a period of nearly 20 years, and became almost as well known as the actors who played 007 and his exotic adversaries and dangerous girlfriends.

Raising the stakes for each successive film was a responsibility that Adam relished: “It was fun, and I didn’t find it difficult.” For his second Bond, *Goldfinger* (1964), the challenge was to design something that everyone had heard of but nobody had ever described: the inside of Fort Knox, where the U.S. Treasury stores

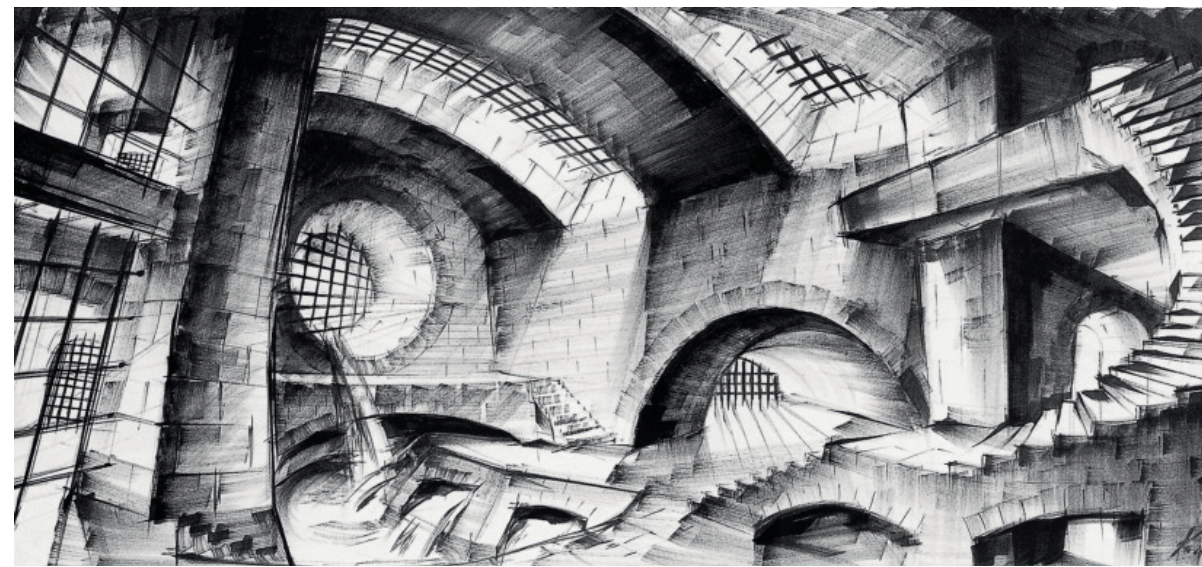
its bullion. Adam managed to inspect the Kentucky building from the air – “very dull 1920s art nouveau” – and as he describes its bristling defenses, with machine guns and loudspeakers, I’m reminded of his own wartime experience as a fighter pilot. But the interior of Fort Knox, which even the U.S. president has never seen, had to be pure speculation. It may be unlikely that gold ingots would be piled high since they are so heavy, but Adam conceived a “cathedral of gold” that would reach up toward the studio roof, and he still recalls with pleasure using a special lacquer finish that made the ingots look “more real” than the real thing.

That trompe l’oeil effect explains much of what production designers are called upon to do: “fooling the audience, but in a nice way.” The aim is to create a *feeling* of authenticity, even when few, if any, viewers will have any direct experience to draw upon – especially in a Bond film. Since Fleming’s novels offered little detail on the settings of his hero’s adventures, the designer was not only free but obliged to create plausible fantasies. As ambitions and budgets grew with the worldwide success of the franchise, Adam found himself creating on an increasingly massive scale.

“I always had experts to consult,” he explains. For *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), “I knew Colin Chapman [the founder of Lotus], and I talked to people in the U.S. who did mini-submarines, and they made the Lotus Esprit actually work underwater.” For his last Bond film, *Moonraker* (1979), the villain of which plans world domination from a space station, “I spent some time at NASA, finding out what they intended to do, and I had an assistant who had worked there. These scientific institutions are always very helpful.”

Adam’s sets for *Moonraker* ranged from a Mayan-style command center, supposedly located in the Brazilian jungle, to a space shuttle housing a conference center dominated by giant rocket exhaust ducts. They occupied the three largest film studios in France,

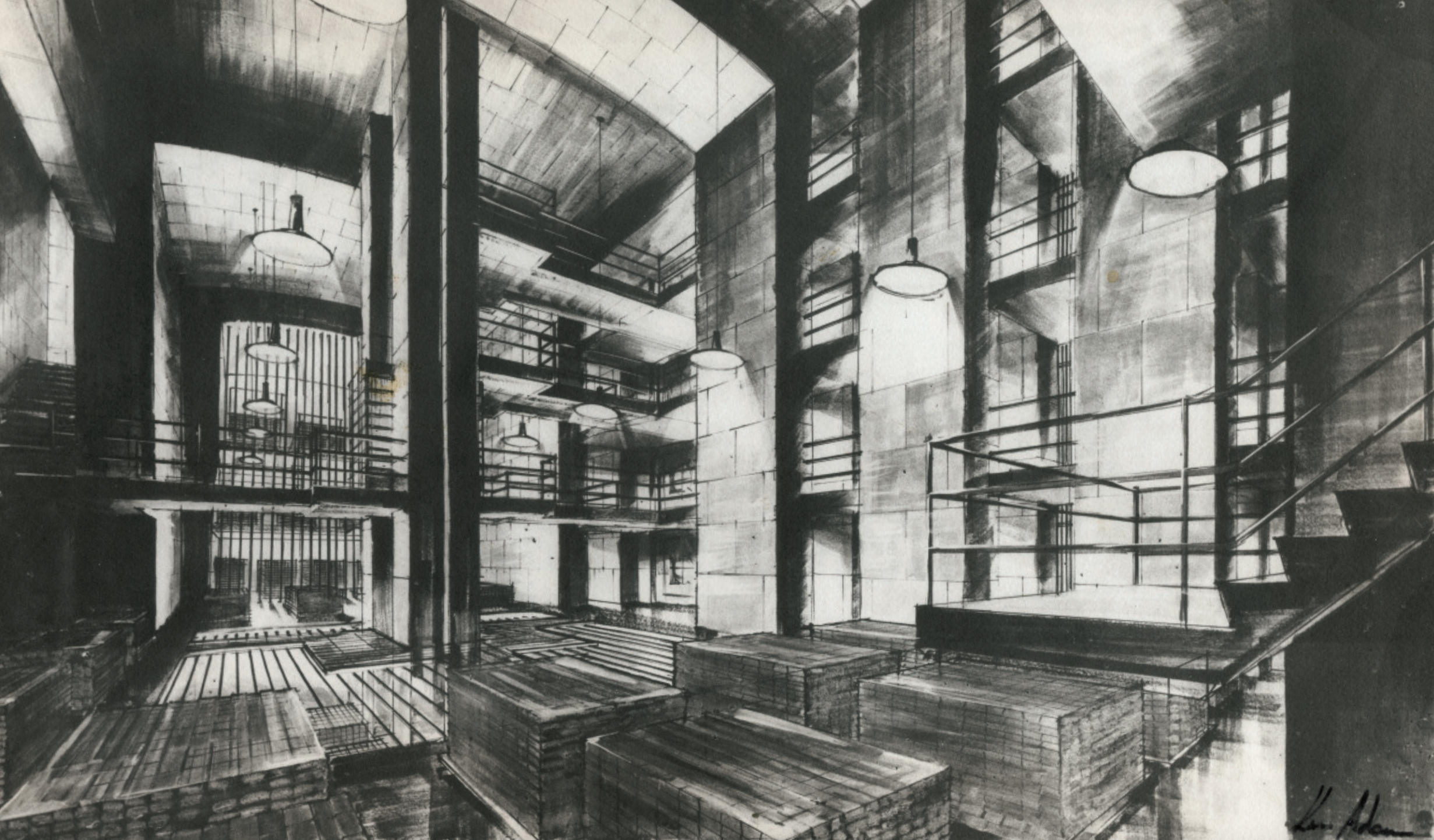
When *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, the children’s book by Bond creator Ian Fleming, was made into a film in 1968, Adam was asked to design the sets along with the famous flying car – a Rolls-Royce crossed with a Bugatti – and a working airship. His sketch (right) for the underground dungeons where the children of *Vulgaris* hide from the Child Catcher, borrows from 18th-century etchings of labyrinthine prisons by the Italian artist Piranesi, one of Adam’s many influences. Opposite page: Sir Ken Adam pictured at home in London, earlier this year



PHOTOGRAPHS: “KEN ADAM DESIGNS THE MOVIES: JAMES BOND TO BEYOND,” CHRISTOPHER FRAYLING, THAMES AND HUDSON; DESIGN SKETCHES: © KEN ADAM; PORTRAIT: HENRY BOURNE. FILM STILLS: COURTESY OF MGM STUDIOS/MOONRAKER © 1979 DANJAO, LLC & UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. GOLDFINGER © 1964 UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION & DANJAO, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



“I THOUGHT REALITY WAS DULL, AND IF I GAVE THE AUDIENCE SOMETHING UNEXPECTED THEY’D ENJOY IT”



Above ground, Adam was able to use a real nineteenth-century Bavarian palace, the fairytale Neuschwanstein, “designed by a theater designer for King Ludwig, like a toy castle.” But everything else – including another fantasy automobile – had to be created in his beloved studio. “That was one of my most difficult tasks, to design a car from the early twentieth century, which was also sexy. We built a prototype in the Pinewood plasterers shop, and years later one of the technicians told me, ‘You were impossible.’ But the end result was good.”

There’s no doubt about Adam’s favorite of all his designs: the War Room for Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 *Dr. Strangelove*, an apocalyptic black comedy that ends with nuclear annihilation. “He rang me up and said he’d just seen *Dr. No*, and would like to talk to me about *Dr. Strangelove*.” After three weeks’ work on the design, the notoriously demanding Kubrick insisted on scrapping it and starting again. “He was standing behind me as I drew, and he said, ‘Yes, a triangle is the strongest form in geometry. Can we have concrete, green baize

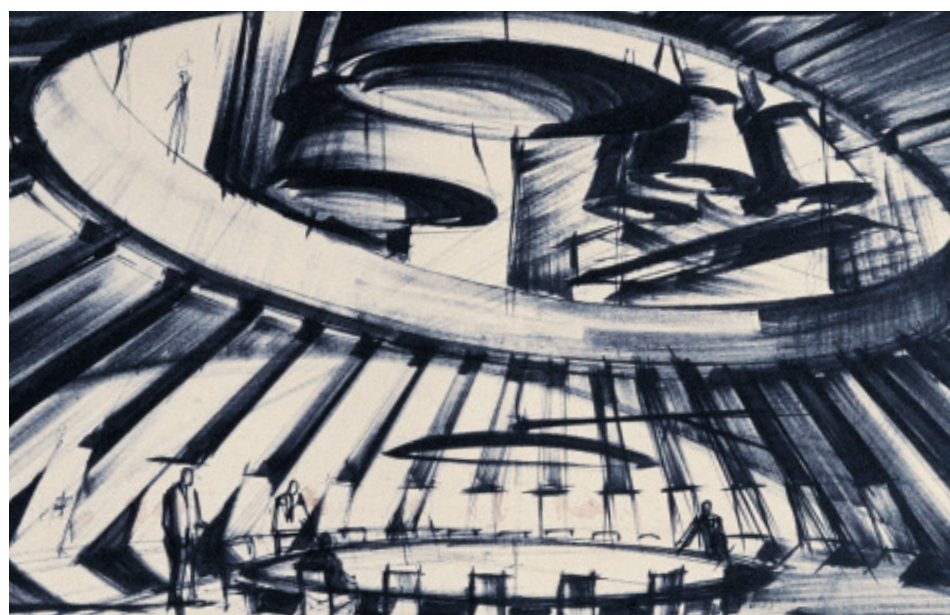
on the table, and an unsupported ring above for lighting?’ We spent many evenings together, working it out.”

It turns out nothing in this eerily plausible setting was easy to achieve. “I wanted a shiny black floor, like I’d seen in the Fred Astaire musicals...” And for the giant screens that display the map of Soviet Russia and the bombers’ locations, “Stanley didn’t want to use 16 mm projection, which could go wrong, so I made plywood boxes for the screens lined with photographic paper that had to be air-conditioned.”

The result, however, was so convincing that apparently Ronald Reagan, soon after he was elected U.S. president, asked to see the War Room – only to learn that it never existed except on screen, thanks to the imagination of that great impresario of our dreams, Ken Adam. His philosophy is disarmingly simple. “I thought reality was dull, and if I gave the audience something unexpected they’d enjoy it.” Thank you, Sir Ken, we have, for much of the last half-century. ♦

where the production was based for tax reasons, and at first there were battles with the unions. “By the end of the shoot, when they had built something special like the space station, they were really proud of what they’d done.” Adam remembers his dauntless construction manager once boasting in an interview: “Whatever he can draw, I can build.”

Some film designers want to emphasize realism, but Adam was inspired by the Hollywood greats William Cameron Menzies and Cedric Gibbons. “They taught me not to be afraid, so whenever possible I was enhancing or stylizing reality.” Having trained as an architect before the war, afterward he became a draftsman. “Eventually I realized I had to release myself from the drawing board and work more freely,” and so began the bold sketches for which he has become famous. Behind these lie many references, from the German designers of the Bauhaus in the 1920s – “They were so advanced and exciting, using new materials and a new sense of space” – to such classic artists as the eighteenth-century Italian printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi. His *Imaginary Prisons* was an inspiration for the labyrinth of stairways and arches that Adam created for the underground grotto in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), where the children of Vulgaria are hidden by their parents to escape the Child Catcher.



As with *Dr. Strangelove*’s War Room, Adam’s challenge on the Bond films was to imagine and create a convincing visual world with few actual reference points; Fleming’s Bond novels contained very little description of locations. The interior of Fort Knox, as seen in the 1964 film *Goldfinger* (top and above right), is in reality top secret, yet

Adam’s vividly imagined set is both credible and highly dramatic. The space shuttle Exhaust Chamber (above and left) from *Moonraker*, 1979, doubled as a conference room. But though the set was built full size, the space shuttle launch pad was a model and was part of a vast space station that would be Adam’s largest and most ambitious project