

Ensayo

# Urban Metaphors Depicted Through the Scenographic Architecture of the TV Series Smallville

*Metáforas urbanas retratadas  
a través de la arquitectura fílmica de la serie Smallville*

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## Abstract:

Amid the ongoing discussions on Urbanism and experiences in contemporary cities, this essay explores the influence of the urban scenery on the profile and behavior of the residents through a playful analysis of the TV series Smallville (2001-2011). The narrative follows Clark Kent who grows up in a small rural town and evolves into the hero, Superman. Smallville with its anti-urban values contrasts with Metropolis, a fictional version of New York City, reflecting different urban dynamics. The series' filmic scenography illustrates metaphors of the city/individual relationship, showing how the urban environment shapes human behavior and contributes to psychosocial well-being. Furthermore, this study conducts a literature review based on theories such as Semiotics, Gestalt, and Neuroarchitecture, examining how scenography in audiovisual productions like the series Gotham (2014-2019) and the film Joker (2019) reflects real cities and influences the thoughts and personalities of the characters. These works highlight the power of urban structure in shaping individual identity and behavior. Ultimately, the essay contributes to understanding urban dynamics and their influence on



individuals, emphasizing the importance of scenography and the environment that was built while constructing narratives and shaping behaviors.

**Keywords:** anti-urbanism, urban scenography, semiotics, Superman.

## **Resumen:**

En medio de las discusiones sobre Urbanismo y experiencias en ciudades contemporáneas, este ensayo explora la influencia de la escenografía urbana en el perfil y comportamiento de los habitantes a través de un análisis de la serie de televisión *Smallville* (2001-2011). La narrativa sigue a Clark Kent, quien crece en un pequeño pueblo rural y evoluciona hacia el héroe Superman. *Smallville*, con sus valores anti-urbanos, contrasta con Metrópolis, una versión ficticia de Nueva York, reflejando diferentes dinámicas urbanas. La escenografía filmica de la serie ilustra metáforas de la relación ciudad/individuo, mostrando cómo el entorno urbano moldea el comportamiento humano y contribuye al bienestar psicosocial. Además, este estudio realiza una revisión literaria basada en teorías como la Semiótica, la Gestalt y la Neuroarquitectura, examinando cómo la escenografía en producciones audiovisuales como *Gotham* (2014-2019) y *Joker* (2019) refleja ciudades reales e influye en los pensamientos y personalidades de los personajes. Estas obras demuestran el poder de la estructura urbana en la formación de la identidad y comportamiento de los individuos. El ensayo contribuye a la comprensión de las dinámicas urbanas y su influencia en el individuo, destacando la importancia de la escenografía y el entorno construido en la construcción de narrativas y modelación de comportamientos.

**Palabras clave:** anti-urbanismo, escenografía urbana, semiótica, Superman.

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## Introduction

Is the urban environment a reflection of its inhabitants, or are its inhabitants a reflection of the urban environment in which they are immersed? As theorized by Paiva (2022), residents may be experiencing sunlight deprivation due to indoor routines, resulting in a scarcity of natural light and posing significant risks to physical well-being. Consequently, the nexus between cities and mental health is intricate, underscoring the crucial role of construction professionals in promoting the welfare of both individuals and the built environment. Disciplines such as Urbanism and its ideological counterpart, Anti-urbanism, contribute to comprehending the dynamics of urban living and its populace. Hence, this study endeavors to examine the impact of urban environments on residents' characteristics and vulnerabilities, with a specific focus on the urban scenery depicted in the television series *Smallville* (2001-2011). In essence, this research aims to explore the interplay between cityscapes and individual traits in its characters through an analysis of on-screen portrayals.

In other series such as *Gotham* (2014-2019), the scenographic architecture serves as a metaphor for metropolitan centers, yet it refrains from overshadowing the plight of industrial cities, whose tribulations have spurred reactions ranging from revulsion to reformist movements, encompassing scientific, artistic, and social propositions within the realm of urbanism (Campos, 2015). This underscores the intrinsic connection between urban distress and the pervasive sense of isolation. In contrast, the series *Smallville* presents two distinct city models: the tranquil *Smallville*, where the protagonist matures and embarks on his heroic odyssey, and Metropolis, a parallel rendition of New York characterized by rapid urbanization akin to *Gotham*, which becomes the setting for his adult exploits.

The methodology integrates bibliographic exploration, literature review, and case study analysis, focusing on the TV show *Smallville*. In terms of literature review, it covered several disciplines including Urbanism, Anti-urbanism, Neuroarchitecture, Semiotics, and Gestalt principles, a contextualization of Scenography and its significance, an exploration of Semiotics and Gestalt principles, as well as an examination of the intersection between Neuroscience and urban environments, all contributed to facilitating a profound analysis. This holistic approach review established a theoretical foundation for understanding how urban

environments influence individual traits and behaviors. In addition, a selection of other audiovisual productions, specifically *Gotham* (series) and *Joker* (movie), helped to further explore the themes of urban settings and their impact on characters.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in interpreting fictional urban environments as models for real-world urban analysis. As Coleridge's concept of *willing suspension of disbelief* suggests, viewers temporarily accept fictional elements as plausible within the context of the story (Kalaba, 2022). This study, therefore, adopts a critical approach to these fictional settings, recognizing that while they offer rich allegorical data, they are not direct representations of actual urban environments. *Smallville* is considered an idealized rural community, representing the anti-urban sentiment that values simplicity and close-knit social structures. The portrayal of Metropolis, especially in later seasons of *Smallville*, serves as a foil to this, representing rapid urbanization and the alienation it can bring. This study examines these portrayals with a view to understanding how these fictional cities might inform or contrast with real-world urban theories.

## The Relationship Between Architecture and Scenic Art

Scenic design is closely linked to architecture. The planning of spaces and their adaptation to a story is essential to the production process. Just as an architect conducts extensive field research, collects architectural references, and designs considering the culture, customs, and form of a city, directors demand the same from actors and extras to ensure that the final product conveys greater truth and connection with the audience.

Regarding the city, Rodrigues (2015) comments that the theater has a deep relationship with public spaces. From its origins, it is linked to society and the spaces in which it fully constitutes itself. Whether it be the street, the square, or the city, theater participates in and ratifies the public character of these spaces, regardless of scale.

According to Urssi (2006), humans are the primary element in the creation of a theatrical representation and construct the scenic space using verbal, scenic, tactile, and auditory signs. Thus, the performance can create an environment filled with meanings, and the spectator is exposed to different types of information simultaneously through the scenery, lighting, costumes, gestures, and speech.

The presence of familiar architectural elements, even if stylized, evokes emotions and sensations in the spectator. This occurs due to the association of images. The psychology of imagery conceptualizes association as a mechanism that connects our senses to our memory. Even without having visited a place, we can recognize its characteristics and establish relationships with something real and convincing (Bacher, 2018).

That which is scenic is present in any inhabited environment, just like architecture. In contemporary times, with globalization and contemporaneity, the power of cinema imagery is amplified and accessible to a broader and more diverse audience of cultures, allowing for the reproduction or induction of social patterns. The purpose is to reflect a reality that can provoke visual appreciation or dissatisfaction, especially in regards to urban scenery. The aim is to present a reality that can evoke visual appreciation or dislike. When it comes to cities, an urban setting is produced, suggesting a rejection of monotony and standardization, aiming for vibrancy through technical design.

Senses and sensory experiences constitute a fundamental aspect of our interaction with the world, with vision serving as the primary receptor. Architecture assumes a pivotal role in shaping these experiences, thus justifying the application of principles such as the Gestalt theory of form perception (Lopes & Filho, 2017) and Semiotics (Santaella, 2003).

The evolution of scenic art began with dances involving rituals and the use of shamanic cultural props in religious ceremonies, and it has now turned into large-scale productions that transcend the theater. The dramatic proposal originated in Greece, followed by the Elizabethan space during Shakespeare's era, and then the cinematographic production in the 20th century.

In the book *What is Scenography?* Howard (2015) asked over 50 scenographers from around the world about a concept for scenography but did not obtain similar answers. The responses ranged from theatrical creation to the physical manifestation of imaginary space or constant change, transforming drama into signs. Architecture, too, encompasses aspects of each of these quotes, translating abstract concepts into a visual form. There is much to compare between the roles of an architect and an art director. We say that scenography is a composition and a three-dimensional space - the theatrical place. We call the theatrical place the

location where the theatrical spectacle is presented and where the scene/audience relationship is established (Mantovani, 1989, p. 7).

The characterization of space involves the choice of materials, textures, lighting, colors, perspectives, environments, and flows. The architect lists the needs of building users, while the art director lists the needs of each scene. Light and sound are essential in scenes to direct the audience's gaze. For this reason, it is important for the creator to explore the full potential of space, synchronizing image, light, and sound (Howard, 2015).

Urban Scenography is a field that focuses on the occupation of formal and informal scenic spaces that encourage spontaneous public encounters, creating a kind of street theater. In this context, the building becomes a setting, often in marginal, empty, disregarded, or abandoned locations, waiting for performances. Furthermore, urban space has a history, present, and future, and can be seen as a living entity. In this manner, scenography and architecture are closely linked and many architects apply their knowledge to scenography (Howard, 2015). In summary, scenography is a complex art that requires extensive knowledge and skill to create sets that complement the story and help convey messages to the audience.

## Neuroscience and the Psychology of Space

The study of Neuroscience and the Psychology of space is crucial for understanding how Architecture affects human perception and behavior. Allon (2016) argues that Architecture can work in conjunction with the power of cinema imagery to create structures that evoke the spirit of one particular era or other. In films of various genres, whether documentary, historical, or futuristic, architecture captures the viewer's attention in a sensory way, as it can generate a pattern of comfort or displeasure based on aesthetics.

The psychology of Semiotics and Gestalt, for example, encompasses various areas of knowledge, but it is in architecture and design where form takes center stage and often employs procedures of experimental aesthetics as a basis for investigation of beauty through experiments (Pallamin, 1989). According to Netto (2008), it is important not to be afraid to use concepts from other fields, such as psychology and semiotics, to understand the effects of architecture on individuals. Thus, Gestalt proposes that the human brain automatically tends to break down

the image into different parts to organize them according to similarities in shape, size, color, and texture, and then the parts are reassembled into a graphic whole that enables understanding (Lopes & Seabra Filho, 2017).

According to Santaella (2003), Semiotics investigates the idea that human presence in the world is mediated by plural languages, examining the ways in which meaning, and sense are constituted in phenomena. Languages are defined by relationships between signs, icons, indices, and symbols.

Neuroscience, studying the nervous system and its functions, when applied to architecture, confirms how the environment in which people are immersed alters brain chemistry and can influence behaviors and interfere with productivity, including the occurrence of cases of depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety. This cerebral impact is often unconscious (Vieira et al., 2021).

Therefore, with the large and vertical constructions aimed at distancing the gaze between neighbors found in contemporary times, it is important to bring in the idea and correlation with the field of neuroscience, considering that the sensations attributed to people by cities, buildings, and any other architectural and urban typology significantly interfere with their way of perceiving and understanding the place, which will dictate their behavior and expectations in such spaces (Bencke, 2018). Botton (2007) points out that sensitivity to architecture can be problematic because environments can alter human mood, attitudes, and personality based on color, shape, or architectural design. This raises questions about the negative impact that an environment one is obliged to frequent can have.

In this regard, Lira (2017) states that in Brazil, the problem of violent crime is associated with late processes of industrialization and urbanization. Violence and the urban environment correlate when the latter ends up influencing the choice of materials in construction, opting for opaque and rigid elements, often resembling fortified medieval settings or prisons, with watchtowers, electric fences, and high walls that restrict freedom and exclude individuals instead of including and preventing crime. *Does violence influence construction, or does construction influence violence?* [emphasis added].

Harrouk (2021) describes that in order to accommodate a larger number of inhabitants, the trend is for housing units to become increasingly

compact. This productivity-driven logic leads to a new stacked or vertical lifestyle, which is a consequence of poorly planned cities. Sensory stimuli, security, sociability, principles of symmetry, rhythm, proportion, and the logic of warm colors (compact sensation) and cool colors (spaciousness), with natural lighting as a significant stimulus for productivity and physical and mental well-being. It is up to the creativity and sensitivity of architects and designers to incorporate this approach into their projects.

## **Audiovisuals that Highlight the Influence of Urban Scenography**

The relationship between cinema and architecture is closer than one might imagine. Some architects, such as Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, employ cinematic processes in their projects, allowing for a more realistic and interactive experience for the audience. Both are temporal arts with a strong complementary relationship, mutually reinforcing each other. The representation of the urban landscape in cinema is often not faithful to reality but rather an ideological and cultural reflection of behaviors and cities, which are often stereotyped and widely disseminated over time and space thanks to the immediate and global diffusion of information in the film industry. Therefore, the urban perception of a city can be influenced by convictions conveyed to a lay audience.

The rapid urbanization prompted by the First Industrial Revolution and the industrialization of developing countries has led to issues of high population density and overcrowding, which manifest as poverty or discrimination. This has resulted in increasingly apathetic and underserved neighborhoods with inadequate sanitation and overshadowed by the glamour and innovation of the city center. As a result, anti-urbanism has emerged, with individuals, often rural dwellers, criticizing this progress. The urban planning of a city should be designed to improve the quality of life in an integrated manner, with communal spaces that promote pedestrian use, movement, and safety for its residents.

In this context, it is noteworthy how these problems are reflected in audiovisual works from various periods, which can even reveal the urban situation and historical mindset of a particular country at that time. These audiovisual works connect memories and unveil strategies and paradigms employed in specific conflicts.



## Urbanism vs. Anti-urbanism

The industrial revolution marked the beginning of urbanistic thinking, according to Kohlsdorf (1996), as urban planners emerged with the intention of resolving conflicts resulting from this new society. This gave rise to new philosophical currents, such as progressivism, which contemplates the future with optimism, and nostalgic culturalism, which is critical and controversial, insisting on the past as a symbiosis of anti-urban naturalism and viewing this new urban cycle with pessimism.

Jane Jacobs, a journalist critical of modern urbanism and city planning, argues that “cities are an experiment resulting from attempts that can fail or succeed, and it is through the consequences of these tests that urban planning must learn and develop its theories” (Jacobs, 2013, p. 5). To unravel the untamed behavior of cities, it is necessary to observe more closely the events on the streets, on the sidewalks, no matter how commonplace they may be. With this attentive gaze, the level of violence can be reduced, as the presence of people will attract others (Jacobs, 2009).

Urbanism seeks the best way to systematize and develop the city through the determination of street positions, buildings, and public and private works, providing the population with a more comfortable environment (Vitruvius, 2002). According to Malta (2015), it is seen as a desirable and positive ideology, a way to evolve and reshape central areas, ports, sanitation, and new neighborhoods. Urbanism is a process of industrial growth that aims to export innovations from developed countries to developing regions, such as gardens, boulevards, eclectic architecture, shop windows, and monuments. According to Choay (1992), it is divided into phases, ranging from progressive pre-urbanism, which connects man and reason, to naturalistic thinking, which seeks the integration of man and nature.

In this way, the aspiration towards modernity coming from urbanist thinking tends to oppose traditional ruralist elements linked to anti-urbanism, being a Western thought since antiquity. Thus, the brilliance of these great centers sought to overshadow the crisis of the industrial city, generating a false scenario of consumption through a model of cities that turned their backs on the hinterland (Malta, 2015).

Furthermore, with accelerated urbanization, for these thinkers, the growth of cities generates ills such as pollution, social inequality, and destruction of nature. Thus, the occupation of these spaces forms an urban scenography in which the building becomes the setting, and the performers are the people themselves, since architects bring their understanding of space to theater, architecture, and scenography, which are intimately linked (Howard, 2015).

In this naturalistic (anti-urban) way of thinking, the urbanized life of the citizen in the big city is seen as a deception, as their happiness depends on clustering together in complete disorder and forced heat with the crowd, where nobody creates anything other than machines. Furthermore, it is believed that in current cities, people live in great misery, where children grow up hemmed in by buildings constructed and directed like factories that produce teenagers in the same way they produce shoes, and they could be installed in a natural park maintained by the visitors themselves (Choay, 1992, pp. 235-246).

The clear sky, green countryside, sound of birds, voices of animals, the feeling of the wind, the natural horizontality as an act of directing freedom beneath the ground, human-scale constructions, and the use of functional units, close and interconnected to one another, with a radius of 10 to 40 minutes' distance between various uses, are characteristics valued by anti-urban philosophers. They believe that the trend of this new urbanism is for cities to lose their distinct characteristics, their culture, regionalism, and become the same as any other region in the country (ibid).

Skyscrapers, for example, which seek to convey an idea of power, strength, and grandeur, care little about whether they clash with neighboring buildings or obstruct the horizon for those looking up from below. In this view, these structures should not interfere with the ground level, the streets, and should instead be implanted in small parks in open and green areas within the countryside, thus creating an organic, social, and democratic city, resulting in a vibrant city (Choay, 1992, pp. 235-246).

Furthermore, urbanist Ling (2017) asserts that the roots of the environmentalist movement that lead to anti-urbanism prompt the local observer to connect the development of cities to social problems, as exemplified in the following audiovisual context:

Virginia Lee Burton, the author of the bestselling children's book "The Little House" in the 1950s, which was also adapted into a Disney film, is considered by many to be an influential figure in the North American anti-urban environmentalist movement. The story revolves around a little house that, as it becomes surrounded by skyscrapers, suffers from constant pollution and noise. The story's success in elementary school classrooms led to its adaptation into a Disney short film (LING, 2012, translated by the authors).

The short film released in 1952 was based on Virginia Lee Burton's children's book from 1942, in which the author claimed to have been inspired by her own house. She denies any intention of criticizing urban expansion, stating that her goal was simply to celebrate the pleasures of the countryside (Abbott, 2017).

### *Gotham City and its Urban Metaphor*

The city depicted in the universe of Batman comic books was created as a caricature of the reality of large cities and, like them, reflects its culture, history, politics, and economy. With a stronger inspiration from the city of New York (see Fig.1A and B), Gotham recreates an American model of a city plagued by violence, social segregation, corruption, and protests, thus serving as a portrayal of urban life and its issues of a metropolis (Ferreira, 2014).

Figure 1A and B. The city of Gotham Skyline



Note. Figures from The Wall Street Journal article, the 'Gotham' Skyline: It's New York, But 'Lost in Time' (Holm, 2015).

The TV series *Gotham* (2014-2019) is based on Batman's story in his childhood, depicting his life after the murder of his parents, his conflicts,

friendships, and interests that led him to become the city's protector (see Fig. 2). The focus is on the internal conflicts of the villains, their life stories, what will shape them in the future, and why. In the series, it becomes evident what the rebellious characters have in common: their revolt against the city's political-urban system, its negligence, disdain, and privileging of a single class, which drives them to a stage of contestation to the point of seeking justice with their own hands. This context of denial and discontentment causes enough mental turmoil to alter the psychological state of these individuals, making them psychologically unstable, as seen in the film *Joker* (2019).

**Figure 2.** Gotham depicted on Netflix series, at the front the protagonist together with the antagonists



Note. Print screen of Netflix catalogue, 2022.

Unlike Superman, Batman brings forth a dark, violent, and unequal reality. Due to its young audience, it was necessary to create a fun, colorful, charismatic, and youthful character that would balance his story: Robin (Fig. 3A and B). For this reason, hidden elements of semiotics are noticeable through the use of colors, as Batman's costume is black, with a pointed,

rigid silhouette and a mostly covered face, creating a somber, mysterious, and reserved impression of the character. While Robin's uniform is colorful, intentionally causing a mental disorder associated with the character's chaotic and vibrant personality, it also features a cape with a flexible and curved drape, aiming to express a more extroverted and accessible character.

Figure 3A and B. 3A Batman and his apprentice: Robin, cover of Detective Comics #38, issue of the Detective Comics series (Volume 1), where Robin first appeared in 1940 3B The comic Showcase Presents: Robin the Boy Wonder (DC Comics, 2008)



Note. DC FANDOM, s.d. and Greenfield, 2023.

After the implementation of age ratings in comics in the 1970s, the city of Gotham began to be further explored, giving rise to somber films featuring dark streets, tall buildings, and great hardships, which were fundamental characteristics for the development of the characters that reflect their city. After all, *what better home for a bat than a city that lives in shadows?* [emphasis added] (Ferreira, 2014). According to the same author, the city influences and is influenced, and Gotham is a great example of this, as it is both a product and a consequence of its environment. From a Semiotic standpoint, black is the predominant color for both the hero and his city, perhaps to enhance the sense of suspense and drama that is customary in

the story, and to provide a perfect backdrop for thefts and robberies in the city known in the comics as the most violent.

In the film *Joker* (2019), it is clear how the city's problems and neglect are directly related to the protagonist's unstable personality. You can observe that the colors accompanying the character's feelings throughout his journey; at the beginning, his moments of sadness are highlighted by the presence of pastel tones and a curved posture, as if he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders (see Fig. 4).

**Figure 4.** Arthur (the Joker) in a moment of sadness at home, with sober colors and curved posture



Note. Screenshot by the authors of the movie *Joker*.

As the protagonist (Arthur) becomes more consumed by his psychological issues, there is an explosion of vibrant colors: green, pink, and red, along with an upright appearance (Marinho, 2019). Psychological problems are quite common among the villains who reign in Gotham, aligning with the argument of Faris and Dunham (1949) cited by Vieira (2014) - in a study of cases of hospitalizations in mental health institutions in the city of Chicago, mental disturbances and the urban structural form of the city were directly linked, especially in large industrial and rapidly expanding cities.

Regarding the film *Joker* (2019), the scene depicting the transformation of Arthur's character into Joker stands out not only due to the shift in color palettes but also because of the filming location. The staircase in the Bronx district, located on 167th Street in New York City, has become a tourist attraction where people reenact moments from the movie (Fig. 5A and 5B).

**Figure 5A and B.** 5A left side - In contrast, the Joker in his moment of ecstasy, DVD cover of the film by Warner's brothers, s.d. 5B right side - On social networks, the epiphany of the Joker. Erin Sauer's social network (ASME LASH, 2019).

In relation to the behavior of the Joker, Vieira (2014) associates it with



the crime in Gotham, a modern city where urbanization and social disorganization prevail, leading to increased criminality and delinquency. According to Vieira, both Batman and Superman are prominent male heroes who must deal with the challenges of maintaining anonymity. However, they navigate this challenge in different ways: Bruce Wayne, as a public figure in Gotham, uses his public persona to protect his identity as Batman, while Clark Kent, who lives in the big city of Metropolis, hides his true identity behind the role of Superman. This contrast between Wayne and Kent highlights how each hero adapts to the urban environment of their respective cities—Gotham and Metropolis. Wayne's public life allows him to maintain a dual identity in a city plagued by crime, while Kent's role as an ordinary worker provides him with a different form of anonymity. This duality in their lives is crucial for both heroes as it helps them protect their loved ones and continue their fight against social and urban ills. It is within these complex urban settings that the world of superheroes has flourished.

### *Smallville and its Urban Metaphor*

The American television series *Smallville* (2001-2011) is centered on the character of *Superman*, Clark Kent, who was originally created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster for DC Comics in 1938. The series traces his journey from adolescence in the rural town of Smallville to his eventual emergence as a superhero in the cosmopolitan Metropolis. Tye (2013, p. 274) explains:

The show zeroed in on Clark Kent's high school years in the town of Smallville, Kansas, while he was discovering his powers and before he assumed the identity of Superman. It was the Superboy story that Jerry Siegel had imagined nearly sixty years before, but with the focus now on his heart, not his muscles.

To understand the narrative and the protagonist's relationship with the themes of urbanism and anti-urbanism, it is essential to highlight some key characters that shape the main character's personality. Clark Kent (see Fig. 6) is the alter ego of Superman. However, in the series, he has yet to realize that he will one day become a hero. He is portrayed as a humble and friendly individual, raised by Jonathan and Martha Kent (see Fig. 6), his adoptive parents who found him stranded in a field shortly after a meteor shower hit their town. They guide Clark in managing his powers wisely, instilling fundamental values and principles to ensure he uses his abilities for good. Over time, they discover that their son is an extraterrestrial sent to Earth to escape the extinction of his home planet and to fight against evil. Tye (2013, p. 275) describes Clark's arrival on Earth and the consequences of the shower of green meteors on the town:

The damage became clear in everyone close to Clark – from the girl he loved, Lana Lang, whose parents were squashed by the falling kryptonite, to his friend Lex Luthor, who lost his hair and his innocence. A succession of others turned up with strange and evil powers (...). The comic book Superman may have blamed himself for being Krypton's sole survivor, but his TV stand-in was faced with a more proximate and disabling font of guilt: a bodycount that grew with each new episode.

Jonathan and Martha Kent are the adoptive parents of Clark Kent, or *Kal-el*, as he is known on his home planet. They go to great lengths to protect their son's secret and are depicted as exemplars of honesty and companionship.



**Figure 6.** Season 1 regular cast members



Note. From left to right, Jonathan and Martha Kent, Clark Kent, Lana Lang, Lex Luthor and Chole Sullivan. Picture from The Guardian by (Virtue, 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/02/how-clark-kents-never-ending-teen-years-became-smallville-kryptonite>

Despite eventually becoming Superman's greatest adversary, Lex Luthor (Fig. 6) begins the story as Clark's best friend. Lex is the heir to the region's largest corporation, which aims to transform the agrarian Smallville into a major business hub. Unlike his ambitious father, Lex initially cares about the town's residents and is sent from Metropolis to Smallville to manage one of his corporate branches. His obsession with uncovering Clark's secrets gradually drives him to paranoia, ultimately making him resemble his father.

Chloe Sullivan (Fig. 6) is Clark's childhood best friend. They attended school together in Smallville and later worked together as journalists in Metropolis. Although she hid a secret crush on him during school, this did not hinder the deepening of their friendship. Chloe is portrayed as friendly and astute, always seeking out information without fear of danger. By the end of the series, she discovers that her mother possessed powers due to the first meteor shower in the town, just like her, although she eventually loses these abilities.

Lana Lang (Fig. 6), Clark's first love and friend, is also a native of Smallville. Lana is portrayed as sweet and naive, with her parents having died in a meteor shower caused by Clark's arrival on Earth. This incident makes Clark feel guilty, compelling him to seek redemption not only with

her but also with the entire town that lost something significant that day. Their relationship is strained by Clark's inability to reveal his powers to her, as this would make her a target. Lana eventually moves to another country, explaining to Clark that the only way he can save the world is by letting her go. Although she returns to Smallville and rekindles her relationship with Clark, she later becomes infected and turns against aliens like Clark, ending their relationship permanently.

Lois Lane (Fig. 7) is a journalist from Metropolis who comes to Smallville to investigate the alleged murder of her cousin and Clark's friend, Chloe. She enlists Clark's help in solving the mystery. In contrast to Lana Lang, Lois is independent, determined, and strong-willed — qualities that make her the perfect match for Superman. Initially, they clash due to their different personalities, developing a love-hate relationship that eventually blossoms into romance and, later, marriage.

Figure 7. Lois and Clark



Note. Picture from the Smallville Fandom Wiki

The TV show is different from other Superman stories set in Metropolis, where the headquarters of the prominent Luthor Corp is located, the company aims to expand its business, the series takes place in the town where he grew up: Smallville, which is 683 km away from Metropolis.

Smallville is a rural town with a countryside climate, where everyone leads a simple life, knows each other, and respects one another, despite numerous attempts by entrepreneur Lionel Luthor to transform agricultural territories of the town into large, groundbreaking ventures.

However, starting from season 4, Clark Kent graduates and moves to the bustling Metropolis (Fig. 8), where he works at a journalistic company, finding himself in a rapidly urbanized city with increasingly tall buildings, pollution, heavy traffic, and a growing focus on power, disregarding the resulting environmental impact.

Figure 8. Aerial views of the city of Smallville and Metropolis



*Note.* Pictures from the Smallville Fandom Wiki

Clark Kent's childhood in rural Kansas was crucial to shaping his personality. His parents are recognized for embodying values such as hard work, simplicity, and justice. The childhood phase plays a significant role in the development of an individual's personality, as our brains are more malleable and still in the process of maturing. Therefore, while Clark's powers make him more powerful, his upbringing on the Kent farm makes him a hero, as human as anyone else, despite his alien origins, or perhaps even more human, as stated by Batman (Irwin, 2014).

However, in season 3, episode 6, it is revealed that the Kent family was not chosen by chance to care for the young Kal-el. Forty years ago, Clark's biological father visited Earth on a mission and happened to meet Hiram Kent, Jonathan Kent's father, who proved to be a compassionate, hospitable man with strong values. Hiram offered him the assistance he needed, provided him with shelter, and assured him that if there was anything he needed, he knew where to find him. Moved by this encounter, years later, with the impending extinction of his planet, *Jor-el* sends his son *Kal-el* to Earth in Smallville, so that the Kent family could find him.

According to Irwin (2014), the choices made by world leaders can affect millions of lives and the future of a nation, just like those of Superman, who assumes various roles: son, husband, journalist, colleague, and hero. Consequently, some of these roles may conflict with each other, requiring a prioritization in each situation. When both roles require assistance, you must determine which is more important at that moment. This is where Superman's moral education is tested, as his father affirms:

In the world, things are not always black and white. Sometimes you have to step into the gray and do what you think is right. [...] You are different from me and your mother. You will have to make moral choices in life that we will never have to make. But we know that when that time comes, you will do what you think is best, what is right (Smallville, 2001, season 3, episode 13).

We can relate this to the concept of virtue ethics proposed by philosopher Aristotle, who recognizes the importance of upbringing. We are not born with virtues (or vices), and this is crucial for understanding the heroic personality of Superman. As explained by Aristotle, Virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against it (Irwin, 2014, p. 51). An individual can acquire virtue through habit; it is indeed possible to change the traits of our personality. For instance, if Clark had been raised in the context of Nazi

Germany, recruited at the age of 10 to serve Hitler's practices, believing that he was helping people, instead of growing up with his school friends in Smallville, that would have shaped his understanding of the world (Irwin, 2014).

It is argued that Superman does not face the same difficulties as other heroes, but this is due to his upbringing in a stable and secure family environment, unlike Bruce Wayne (Batman), for example, who experiences the loss of his parents at a young age and finds himself orphaned in an individualistic and segregationist setting, training to fight against injustices in the most violent city in comics (*ibid*).

Unlike Lex Luthor, his greatest enemy, who comes from a turbulent and ambitious family, and was taught from childhood by his father to never accept defeat through Nietzsche's philosophy that "compassion is the greatest human weakness," Superman acts not out of power but as a result of a destiny he has shaped for himself. He views love as a strength, not a weakness. Lex Luthor, who grew up in Metropolis, relocates to Smallville at his father's request to expand his businesses in the region, which is how he meets Clark. His mother had two children, but after observing how her husband treated Lex, she did not want another child, fearing it would also grow up traumatized. With severe mental issues, she ends up killing her younger son in front of the eldest, who chooses to pretend he was responsible for the tragic act to protect his mother, as his father would not kill his own child but would cause his mother significant suffering. Consequently, his father does not forgive him and begins to view him as the source of his unhappiness, treating him with increased harshness, coldness, and a lack of love and affection, which contributes to Lex's transformation into a villain. For Lex, Metropolis represents the city of tomorrow, the place to go if one wishes to change the world, where desires become reality and imagination is limitless.

It is not without reason that books by philosopher Nietzsche frequently appear in scenes at the Luthor mansion in Smallville. His theories also fit into the context of the conclusion of battles and the loss of motivations that Superman brings to the city. Nietzsche argues that people need conflicts to strive to be the best they can be. Thus, for Lex, humans need to be inspired by other humans, not aliens. Therefore, he believes that people have become weak and spoiled, accustomed to always being saved (Smallville Fandom, n.d.).

According to Moura (2013), the end of the 20th century was highly conducive not only to the launch of the series in the United States but also to the heroic culture as a whole. With the attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001, the urban scenario was characterized by threat, fear, and chaos. Thus, there was a need for a figure to reassure citizens, even if fictional, and the dual identity of Superman served as a way to bring him closer to human reality. With its release the following month, in October 2001, *Smallville* brought the hope that had been brought 70 years earlier with the release of the genre's first production.

From the first episode of the series, there is a clear attempt to associate the image of Clark Kent, not yet revealed as Superman, with that of his alter ego through colors. His everyday clothes consistently feature blue or red (Fig. 9), which are the colors of his future uniform. In some humorous scenes in the series, when Clark does not wear these tones, there are comments about it. These shades are also associated with a nationalist aspect as they are part of the American flag, which links them to the political and social context. Moreover, not only in clothing but throughout various scenes, both indoor and outdoor, it is possible to notice the use of these colors in common objects such as cars, gift boxes, levers, and walkways.

Figure 9. Clark Kent wears blue and red every episode



Note. Photo Collage by Yourprops.com.

Another important aspect of the series is the use of visual elements to create different atmospheres. In the scenes set at the Kent farm, Chaer (2013) associates the yellowish and saturated scenes with an attempt to evoke a sense of warmth, coziness, and family. To achieve this effect, the set designers used warm (yellow) light sources, even during the day, which would not be justified.

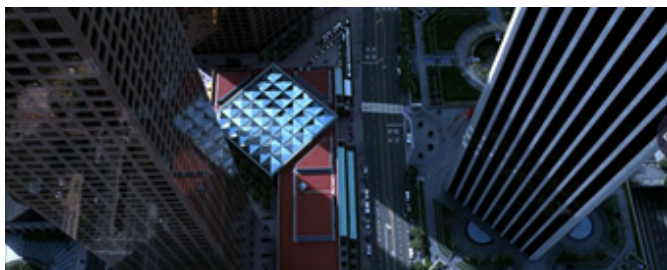
**Figure 10.** Yellowish scene during the day. Even the lights are on



*Note.* Screenshot from episode by the authors.

Therefore, as Clark Kent leaves Smallville and heads towards Metropolis, the scenes become darker, even if it is still daylight, mainly due to the large shadows on the streets caused by the tall buildings present. According to Chaer (2013), this represents a portrayal of a harsher adult life, with more responsibilities as he no longer has his parents around, as well as a reflection of his mindset filled with doubts and conflicts. His clothes also undergo a transformation, resulting in darker and more somber tones (Fig. 11), reflecting the characteristics of the new city: violent, impersonal, where nobody knows each other.

**Figure 11A and B.** The city of Metropolis and Clark Kent's new look





Note. Screenshot from episode by the authors.

Furthermore, through the application of Gestalt principles in the Season 2 poster and Season 9 poster, in the former, a young Clark is depicted with a strong contrast of light and shadow on his face, highlighting the character's internal struggle with his powers still being discovered and the mystery of what is to come. His gaze to the side not only reinforces his uncertainties, doubts, longings, and distress, but also guides the viewer to read the prominently displayed title in red, the color of his costume, which he wears throughout the episodes of the early seasons.

Figure 12. Posters from the second and ninth seasons



Note. Pictures from the Smallville Fandom Wiki



Additionally, in this poster, one can observe the characteristics of his home, Smallville, surrounded by extensive green areas that serve as sustenance for his family, despite a fire occurring in the region, which may have been accidentally caused by the still inexperienced Clark Kent.

In contrast, Season 9 poster of the series, a more urbanized and verticalized setting can be observed, representing Metropolis, with little spacing between its uses, as well as a predominant hazy bluish light among the buildings, which conveys a sense of smoke and pollution, possibly originating from cars and large industries in the region. Additionally, it is worth noting the posture of the older Clark Kent, almost 10 years later, more experienced, confident, and determined, now living in the big city. The darker setting can be compared to that of Gotham, as it also aims to portray a violent city with accelerated and segregating urbanism. Hence, his dark and long clothes allude to his future cape, with the *S symbol* [emphasis added] imprinted as a semiotic symbol that will also be implemented in his superhero uniform in the future, as a kind of emblem, given his role as a vigilante. Once again, this emphasizes and exemplifies how the change in the urban setting influenced the progression of Superman's personality.

## Conclusion

Based on the reflections presented in this article, it is evident how Cinema and Architecture can be intertwined. In order to achieve a sensory, playful, and realistic experience, Cinema and Architecture can complement and influence each other. Thus, this text provided examples of the audiovisual works *Smallville* (2001-2011), which depicts Clark Kent before becoming Superman, and Gotham City, portrayed in the audiovisual works *Gotham* (2014-2019) and *Joker* (2019), also showcasing the early stages of their protagonists before they become heroes or villains. The purpose was to affirm the importance of well-planned urban structuring in a city and how this environment can influence the personalities of its inhabitants.

To better understand the influence of Architecture on human psychology, the fields of Neuroscience, Semiotics, and Gestalt were explored. Neuroscience highlights how the environment can affect brain chemistry and human behavior, while Semiotics examines how languages shape an individual's perception of the world. Gestalt, in turn, investigates how the human brain organizes visual information for comprehension.

It is important to note that the impact of Architecture on human psychology is often unconscious. Therefore, it is crucial to consider these psychological aspects when designing and constructing environments. Architecture can have a negative impact on individuals, such as changes in mood, attitudes, and personality, depending on the form, color, or architectural design.

For Batman, despite his alien origin, Superman is the most human of heroes, and this is due to his upbringing on a farm by his adoptive parents, who serve as examples of honesty and values. By employing the principles of Gestalt, Semiotics, and Neuroarchitecture, it was possible to compare the dark, gloomy, violent, and vertical reality of Gotham with the small, welcoming, rural, and horizontal Smallville, thereby demonstrating how the environment can influence an individual. Batman is known as the Dark Knight due to his dark personality, while Superman is the Man of Steel. This contrast can also be observed in the characters themselves, such as Lana Lang and Lois Lane, in terms of their personalities. While Lana embodies qualities of gentleness, sweetness, and innocence, Lois is tough, determined, and persistent.

In summary, both Smallville and Gotham explore visual metaphors in different ways, reflecting the distinct personalities of the cities and characters. Smallville employs bright and vibrant colors to represent hope and the duality of Superman, whereas Gotham utilizes dark and somber tones to represent the city's corruption and chaos. Both series demonstrate the importance of visual metaphors in constructing complex and engaging narratives.

Finally, the authors would like to share a reflection from Irwin (2014) - *What if Superman had been raised in Nazi Germany from childhood? Would he still use his powers for what he believes to be right and just?* [emphasis added]. This question highlights how an individual's personality and values can be shaped by the environment in which they live.

Finally, the authors would like to share a reflection from Irwin (2014): *What if Superman had been raised in Nazi Germany from childhood? Would he still use his powers for what he believes to be right and just?* While these hypothetical questions are thought-provoking, it is important to acknowledge that the environment alone may not fully determine a superhuman's moral compass. The idea that Smallville is solely responsible for shaping Kent's goodness is challenged in alternative

narratives. For instance, series such as *The Boys* (2019-), where characters like *Homelander* and *Soldier Boy* exhibit ferocity despite their human upbringing. Similarly, in *Brightburn* (Yarovesky, 2019), we see a more unsettling portrayal where the environment fails to ensure moral integrity, emphasizing that goodness is not guaranteed. These examples suggest that while Superman's story is one of hope and virtue, other narratives present a more complex, and perhaps realistic, view of how a superhuman might develop in response to their environment.

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