

How *The Americans* Designs Its '80s Spy Sets

BY MIKE AYERS MAR 20, 2014



During the new season of *The Americans*, we're [looking at the show's use of espionage tactics and getting behind-the-scenes accounts from the creators, directors, make-up artists, actors, and even former spies to help analyze what's under the hood](#). This week's episode of season two, "A Little Night Music," featured a hefty amount of different scenes — ten exterior and nine interior — making it one of the more challenging shoots to date. We spoke to set decorator Andrew Baseman, who broke down five ways the show's look and design factor into espionage plots.

1. Hone in on the mundane.

"You don't want to blow their cover, so I'll decorate a set as if an average person is living there," Baseman says. "I can't give it away by showing anything other than what a regular person would have. For example, when you go in to the Jennings home, and you're in the laundry room, there's a panel that has all their spy gear and weapons. The audience will see everything once they go there, once they start gathering their props. [Last week](#), there was a scene where Paige goes to see her aunt, one of the KGB members. That place was dressed to look like an elderly aunt's home in 1982, so nothing would give it away."

2. Objects, like people, have personality traits.

"It's really easy to be generic and just throw things on a set," he says. "I like to show character. Most of the time, it's not written in the script. Like for a recurring character, it won't say 'on his desk is a bottle and a lighthouse lamp' — none of that's there. Martha is very optimistic: shiny surfaces, more modern things. She wants to settle down, but she's almost like Mary Tyler Moore, being single, being spunky. I hope that her interior reflects her personality."

3. Location shoots are critical for spy scenes.

"A lot of the locations depend on what else is around there," he says. "If we found the perfect record store in Manhattan but there's nothing else in the area, we couldn't shoot there. We typically shoot three to four locations a day. You can't just move all the equipment and the trucks and the actors very easily each time. Scenes need to be grouped together. So the record store scene from 'A Little Night Music' was actually shot not far from our office in Brooklyn. We found a music store that already had instruments and pieces we could use, but I'd say we removed 80 percent of what was there."

4. Tracking the KGB can be done only by true patriots.

"Some of the look is left over from the '70s and the Bicentennial," he says. "For [FBI agent] Stan Beeman, I like to use white and gold and dual tones. The mugs they'll use will have eagles on them, they'll have other flag motifs throughout the house. Any character from the period could have something from the Bicentennial, but someone from the FBI would have those elements of Americana."

5. Suburbia: an unlikely source of inspiration.

"It's a bit of a challenge in New York because we have a few prop houses, and the prop houses don't have a lot of items from the '70s and '80s," he says. "People think a period movie or show should reflect the period that it's in, but interiors would be things going back 10, 15, 20 years. And if the characters are older, even older than that. I use lots of '60s, '70s, and early '80s items in the homes depending on the wealth of the character. Other factors will dictate how we finish showing the items. That said, a lot of prop houses don't have a lot of '80s. It's not old enough to be collectable and not new enough to fit. It's that no man's land. I end up getting things at thrift shops. I go to New Jersey for that. I go out to Long Island. Just out to suburbia and comb the thrift shops."