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Spike Lee Made the Olympia Dumbo a Star

By: Adriane Quinlan
Impressions: 712,612



*The imagined interior of a music mogul's apartment atop the Olympia in Dumbo in Highest 2 Lowest.
Photo: A24*

When the sail-shaped Olympia went up in 2022, neighbors fumed. The 33-story tower of curving, mirrored glass stuck out from the rest of art-adjacent, warehouse-loft Dumbo, blocking views and offending sensibilities. People [called it a “villain’s lair” and an “icon of extravagance.”](#) A four-bedroom penthouse was asking \$19.5 million — a [borough record at the time.](#)

That reputation made it a perfect fit for Spike Lee’s [Highest 2 Lowest](#), which opens with a montage of the Olympia’s exteriors at sunrise while “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’” from Oklahoma! plays, then zooms to a penthouse balcony. Denzel Washington as David King, a music-mogul workaholic, attempting to wrest back creative control of his

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label, is pacing outside while taking a call, and a quick-paced police procedural unfolds from there.



A still from the trailer shows the opening sequence, in which drone shots show the Olympia penthouse from every angle and the light of sunrise casts the building in a glamorous glow. Photo: A24/Youtube

The film is based on the 1963 Akira Kurosawa film *High and Low*, which centers on an executive whose sleek, modern home at the top of a bluff in Yokohama is such a contrast to the slums below that its architecture motivates the film's central crime. ("As I looked at it, I gradually started to hate you," that film's antagonist confesses.) Lee is less overt, but the building does play a key role in the crime. "I used to be on the Brooklyn Bridge, looking at you on your terrace at the Dumbo Olympia," A\$AP Rocky as a young rapper named Yung Felon tells King. "You were at your highest. And I was at my lowest."

Ahead of *Highest 2 Lowest*'s streaming release, I talked to the film's [production designer, Mark Friedberg](#), about why he wanted the Olympia, why the penthouse layout didn't work for the story, and about a building he hates so much he edited it out of the Manhattan skyline.

How did you land on the Olympia?

In the very beginning, we looked at Billionaires' Row and at a lot of the newer conversions in the Financial District, but there was always a question about King's

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economic standing. He's not the richest man in the world, but he is rich. Now there's a new class of rich, so just having \$30 million doesn't qualify as that rich anymore — it's like, pretty rich. Also, I live in Fort Greene and was driving back and forth over the bridge, and I was thinking that maybe Spike's going to want this set in Brooklyn. I just don't think he knew the Olympia, specifically. When we pitched the idea, we took him there and that was it. We didn't look again. He was saying, "This is where we're doing it."



Photo: Adriane Quinlan

I get that Brooklyn rich is slightly less rich than Manhattan rich. But why this building? First of all, it's unusual for a New York high-rise in that it's not a box. It's sort of based on a sailboat. It has a sense of movement and it's kinetic. David King is a man of taste. He's a creative man. We were using the location more to reveal the character.

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Akira Kurosawa's 1963 High and Low put the wealthy protagonist in a western-style home on a hill, at odds with Japanese-style wood houses below. The contrast even annoys detectives scouring for clues.

Photo: Toho Studios / Toho International Inc.

So you wanted somewhere interesting, which is why some neighbors don't like the Olympia. It stands out. In the Kurosawa version, the characters see the house on the hill as garish.

For sure we watched High and Low. And there's some of that. But this is a reimagining. We really don't explore Dumbo at all as a place. His neighborhood is his view. I don't know that there's a more iconic view of Manhattan than from the Olympia. If you live there, you're just looking west and watching the sunset over the harbor. From that view, you see south all the way past Governor's Island. But if you can see out, they can see in.

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A listing photo shows the terrace at Penthouse B, where they filmed, which was twisted slightly when it was rebuilt on a Brooklyn soundstage to give wider views of Manhattan. Photo: Douglas Elliman/Eklund Gomes/Sotheby's International Realty



In both the Spike Lee and the Akira Kurosawa films, the family's luxurious home has views of the city that show they're wealthy and have a sense of control over the city below. Photo: A24

Which creates a lot of tension. We're watching him. Who else is?

It was important to the plot in the original film that there was a line of sight between the kidnapper and the family, that there was a sense of them being watched, of the

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kidnapper knowing details that he shouldn't know. That is tricky in high-rises in New York City, where you're looking vertically from underneath and you can't get an angle to see into them. But we felt it was within the range of possibility that you could see into the King apartment in the Olympia from the bridge. I guess it's a target if you look at it that way, or a castle. There's even a shot from inside King's office at his record label where you can see the Olympia, and it's like he's looking home. We shot at 32 Old Slip, on an empty floor, and the view was real.



A still from the trailer shows King gazing out on a view that includes his own apartment atop the Olympia, the tall gray building that sticks out of the skyline from the foot of the Brooklyn side of the bridge. Photo: A24/Youtube

I saw you filmed for a few days around the Olympia but mostly worked on a stage. When you rebuilt the apartment as a set, what did you change?

There's [a building](#) at the end of the Manhattan Bridge on the Manhattan side, which we hated so much that we took it out of our backgrounds. We digitally removed it. We hate it so much. I'm sorry to whoever built that and apologies, but man, that should not have happened. That's fine to sort of alter the skyline. But the bridges? To take out the view of the Manhattan Bridge on that side just seems wrong to those of us that look from the Brooklyn side. We weren't thrilled about that.

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A still from the trailer for Highest 2 Lowest shows the King apartment, lit up and visible from the Brooklyn Bridge. Photo: A24/Youtube



A still from the Kurosawa film shows the Gondo family is visible through their windows. Photo: Toho Studios / Toho International Inc.

And you shot at the Olympia, right? I recognized the model in the lobby from a tour I did there.

We used it in all of its majesty. We used its lobbies, its garages, its approaches. We saw it from the bridge. But I don't think it's even legal in New York to shoot that many days

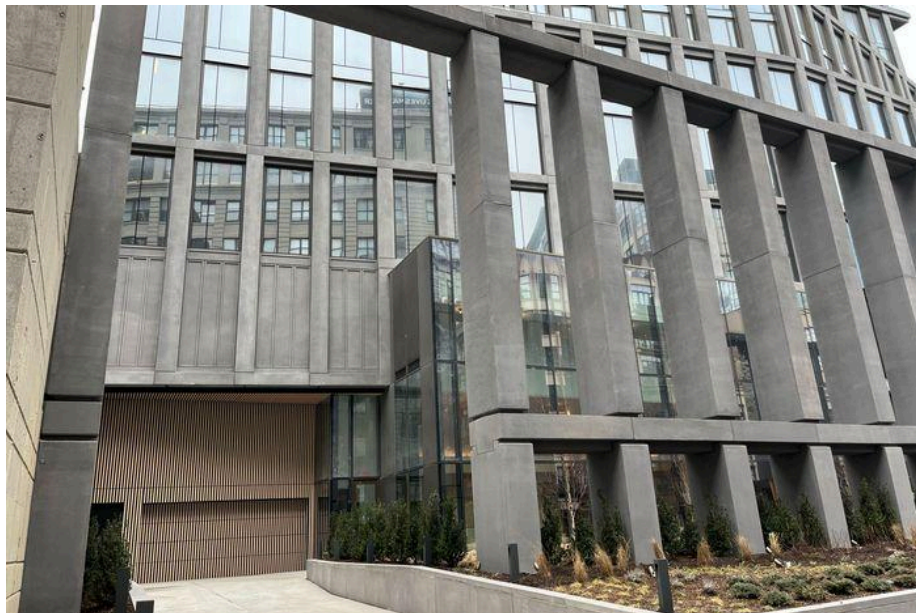
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in a row in one place and it wouldn't be very nice to anybody who lived there. They were very gracious and welcoming, but our two or three days at the Olympia were enough for them, I think. We built our own interiors on a stage to fit our needs.



Spike Lee is known for shooting at real New York city locations, and a trailer shows a scene that was shot on the street outside the Olympia building. Photo: A24/Youtube



The porte cochere leads to an underground garage — a bonus for wealthy residents worried about their security for the same reasons that the characters in both films are. Photo: Adriane Quinlan

Ah, what did you need?

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That building has huge bedrooms but very limited living areas. No disrespect to the Olympia's very beautiful design, but we needed to get 30 cops in our space and have a grand piano in the living room. I was charged with trying to come up with a version of that apartment that could believably fit inside of the building. We also built a 200-by-30-foot LED wall that could show actual footage from the Olympia terrace. It was basically the actual view from that building, but I slightly adjusted its angle on Manhattan so that the wide side of that building is facing more of Manhattan. And we were able to have a little bit of control over what was going on so that we could speed up traffic or move boats along.



A still from the trailer for Highest 2 Lowest shows a family dining room filled with police officers. Photo: A24/Youtube

Can we talk about the art and design choices you made in the apartment?

Most of the billionaire buildings that we looked at were white on white on white on white. That's the décor. White furniture against white walls with white sofas. It's very much in style and it's a way of showing wealth. But for me, it's clearly decorated by someone else. We wanted this to feel personal. These were choices that David and Pam made themselves and didn't just have a decorator come in and do it for them. David didn't start out trying to become rich. He started out trying to make good music and I think we wanted to keep enhancing his artist's heart, or that side of his

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personality. I wanted his art to be happy in a colorful world, not to be in a sort of museum where it was distinct from what was going on around it.



A listing image of Penthouse B at Olympia shows a clean slate where a homeowner could add their own décor, as we can imagine the King family doing. Photo: Douglas Elliman/Eklund Gomes/Sotheby's International Realty

And this was my first Spike Lee movie, so I was rewatching every one to see where he is coming from, and I was also noticing that they're not white on white on white on white apartments — they're in color. His big color adjustment was, "As long as you make one wall fuchsia, I'm okay. That's [my mother's favorite color.](#)" So in the foyer, the wallpapers we used are fuchsia and gold.

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A still from the trailer for Highest 2 Lowest shows the interiors that Frieberg built on a set. The actual penthouse doesn't have the staircase. Photo: A24



In the 1963 Kurosawa film, much of the action takes place around a curved couch that's not too different from the couch at the center of the King family home in the 2025 version. Photo: Toho Studios / Toho International Inc.

And [all the art, of course, was copied from his actual collection](#). Were there other ways you tried to make the place feel real, since it was on a stage?

There's Chinese menus on the fridge, stuff like that; articles in the magazines that are in his office — New York Magazine and The New Yorker and the Post and the Daily News. On his desk is a maquette of the Martin Luther King sculpture that sits outside the High

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School for Art and Design on Amsterdam Avenue, which was built by a very dear friend of my father's — [William Tarr](#). A great sculptor.

It's an iconic piece of New York. I happened to have the maquette because he left it to me. I would help him in the afternoons and learned to weld as a 7-year-old while he was building it. So I used it on David's desk as something that was important to him, some significant, iconic piece of New York.

There's one shot of the hallway that shows the Kings live at Penthouse B — the second-best penthouse. I feel like most movies would edit out the "B" or replace it with an "A."

Spike was like, "This is Penthouse B, so let's make it Penthouse B." He likes [using real locations](#).

[Highest 2 Lowest](#) *is in theaters now and premieres on Apple TV+ this Friday, September 5.*

https://www.curbed.com/article/interview-spike-lee-production-designer-highest-2-lowest-mark-friedberg.html?_