A “place” is unique among the range of architectural creations; it is both distinctive and conventional, both public and individual. It may be difficult for a designer to maintain the balance between these extremes, but the work of Italian film director Federico Fellini, who has created many memorable places on the screen by exploring these contrasts, provides some insight on how this might be done.

Fellini consistently uses two themes to elaborate settings in his films. A major theme is represented by a physical structure or an activity that dominates a place; a minor theme is depicted by incidental objects or activities. A minimum thread of logic ties the overall setting to the incidental elements, relating the two themes. But the two themes represent two versions, public and personal, of a place. By making this distinction and juxtaposition, Fellini presents a layered, balanced portrait.

In films that depict real places (such as those that appear in Fellini’s autobiographical films), the major theme tends to be represented by a conventional image of a location. The Piazza delle Erbe, for example, a setting in Amarcord, has a standard appearance that a person probably could have found in any 1930s Italian town: stone pavement, buildings with tall, gloomy facades, arcades, American movie
Public and personal images of the Piazza del’Erbe coincide in Fellini’s Amarcord. Courtesy New World Pictures.

Note