



AIA Best Practices: Tips to make project photos sing

Adapted from SPF Journal article, "Great Architectural Photos Don't Just Happen"

Summary

Architecture photography is best completed by professional photographers, but that does not preclude architects from creating dynamic photographs of their own. Choosing ideal conditions, using the right tools, planning a shoot, composing a shot, and experimenting with digital enhancement can help an architect make project photos sing.

Background

"I truly enjoy going back to a project over time to take special photos for portfolio use and to give to my former clients, who often become friends," notes James M. Crisp, AIA. "The best advice I can give to another architect regarding architectural photography is to enjoy the photos you can and want to take, but hire a professional photographer to shoot the rest. They have the skill, equipment, and talent to do the job right, and are worth every penny of their fees."

Choose your ideal conditions

Cold winter days sometimes provide excellent, clear skies for photography.

Fresh snowfall adds interest and helps illustrate difficult-to-photograph site features. Use the camera's higher saturation setting to bring out colors. Use editing software to ensure accurate white balance.

Photographing buildings at dusk can add a dramatic effect, especially if the building has good interior lighting.

There is always an issue of getting the sky and the view to show without burning out the image of the house. The only way to shoot this successfully with available light is in the few minutes around dawn or dusk.

Choose your tools

Polarizing filters enhance colors, deepen sky tones, and reduce glare on especially bright days. If you don't have a polarizing filter for your camera, use a pair of quality sunglasses to cover the lens, get close, and make sure you can't see the rim in the viewfinder.

Ellis Schochet, AIA, likes to use the Nikon Coolpix 5000 digital camera with a 19mm wide-angle converter lens and available light only—no supplementary lighting. He also uses a tripod and a nifty cable release that Nikon makes for the camera.

Crisp's hobbies include amateur astronomy and photography. These come in handy when that special photograph can be taken only from more than 5 miles away. He used a Takahashi 102 apochromatic refractor telescope and a Nikon F3 to take a series of shots across a valley ridge in Dutchess County, N.Y.

A sturdy quick-release tripod is essential for dusk and dawn shots as well as a shutter release cable or a camera with a shutter release timer. Using a timer or cable release minimizes any movement in the camera that can be caused by pressing the camera's shutter button.

Plan the shoot

The most valuable time in taking photos of his projects is the time David Hughes, AIA, spends in the office planning the shoot. Take into consideration the time of the year, the orientation of the object to be photographed, the direction of the sun, and, consequently, the time of day to get the best result. Will excessive tree shade suggest waiting until spring or fall, or do you want the blooming landscape to be included? If you are going for interior shots, consider the type of interior lighting and whether it matches with the type of film to be used. Should you bring artificial lights (and extension cords), and will you need the tripod for long exposures? Consider whether you are after any special effects that require a polarizing filter or a fluorescent light filter. You may also want to take your own accoutrements or ask the owners whether they have sufficient items, including flower arrangements, to make the project look livable and not sterile or not yet completed. Finally, determine how much time you will need to set up the shot before any window of opportunity has passed, and arrive early if necessary. These may seem like simple items, but when you take an hour or more to begin the shot only to find out you are looking into the sun, you will wish you had taken the few minutes before you left.

The optimum period is so short that you've really got to be in the right place at the right time. By scheduling a shoot for when the owners were out of town for a week, Schochet could come in at the crack of dawn and return at twilight or sunset over the course of several days. He picked up different lightings, different weather, and could still put in a full workday in between.

Other planning tips from experienced architect-photographers include the following:

- Study the locations for the shot or shots desired, noting details such as camera position and height.
- Never let the clients run the photo shoot.
- Always check on light-source types before you select the film and set up for a shoot.
- If possible, ask the owner or client if you can take photos at two different times of year. In Atlanta, for example, early spring (to capture the blooming dogwoods) and late fall (to get vibrant tree color) work best for exterior shots.
- Know your job site well, and use the available context to set the stage.

- When doing renovation and addition work, it is helpful to have “before” and “after” shots, preferably from nearly the same location and orientation. “Before” shots are usually taken at the beginning of the project as “as-built” condition photos. Try to anticipate the scope and location of the finished project—and, with a little planning, its desirable views. Especially if you plan to use the photos for marketing, do not be too concerned about the quality of “before” shots. Black-and-white photos taken in the rain, for instance, will help show the contrast with the great changes undertaken.
- Although black-and-white photography is seldom used, it can be a powerful alternative to color and can work wonders if clients choose unfortunate color schemes.

Compose the shot

Create interest and depth in your photographs by using an object in the foreground. Focus the camera on the main subject; the secondary subject should fill in but not take precedence over your main subject. Be careful that the flash does not over-illuminate your foreground subject.

Retail shoots are difficult because merchandise must be fluffed and organized ahead of time, hang tags must be turned or hidden, and fixtures must get shuffled around for each shot. You should try to get the client to help before the shoot—and with each shot—or the shoot will take forever.

When taking interior photographs, use a wide-angle lens and prop open any doors to get the maximum view of small spaces.

Take the time to show off the best qualities of your design in the right context. Design elements such as fireplace detailing or custom light fixtures should be displayed at their best, in a collection of design elements that reinforce each other and speak to the general character of the project. Think about the basic design principles of composition, focal points, framed views, and figure-ground relationships. Have fun! It is your work, after all.

Use a very slow shutter speed (10 seconds or more) and soft lighting to get a visual balance between the exterior details and interior spaces. Sometimes lightly wetting the pavement can reinforce this effect.

When taking photos at dusk or dawn, begin taking photos before the ultimate setting arrives, framing the desired shot with various aperture openings and shutter speeds as dusk turns to darkness. Remember, the smaller the f-stop, the more light that enters the lens. Experience will be the best teacher, but taking numerous shots to get the one special exposure is worth the effort.

Digital enhancement

Go back and shoot some digital images of projects completed before the advent of digital photography. Use editing software to ensure accurate white balance, and crop for composition.

Instead of lugging around light fixtures, tripods, and wiring to properly illuminate interiors for good photography, let Photoshop do most of the work for you. To obtain good color balance in interior photographs shot with a digital camera and built-in flash, open the photo in Photoshop and make a simple

correction or two. First, select the image, then click on adjust, then color balance, and adjust the cyan-red scale to the right to emphasize the reds. Adjust the yellow-blue scale to the left to emphasize the yellows. This will change the cool fluorescent-like bluish whites into warm-tone whites that are much more natural looking.

Experiment with each photograph to determine how much red and how much yellow it needs. Vernon Reed, FAIA, has found that going left on the yellow the same amount that you go right on the red gives an excellent color balance and makes a profound difference in creating a friendly image of the space. Last, adjusting the brightness/contrast scales can also enhance the photograph far easier than setting up an elaborate lighting system.

Lessons learned

This Best Practice gave great tips like how to adjust photos in digital photo applications, and explained the importance of planning. In fact, the time you spend planning will save time when shooting.

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