

the Zweig A/E Marketing Letter

One art to another: Architectural photography

Four photographers share their expertise on getting the right shots.

By Heather Baker

We don't all have the opportunity to walk beneath the Eiffel Tower, stare up at the Empire State Building, or stroll the grounds of Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water. We often know these buildings, and the emotions they inspire, only through photography.

As photographer Peter Vanderwarker recently explained to a large audience of architects, developers, and building industry professionals: "Photography is the best chance we have to experience a space when we're not in it."

A panel of renowned local photographers, including Vanderwarker, Steve Rosenthal, Warren Patterson, and Greg Premru, discussed the role of photography in the architectural profession at last year's Build Boston conference and offered tips for creating a successful photographic portfolio.

Planning for a photo shoot

Plan the shoot at least six months in advance. The earlier, the better. Start by selecting a point person to manage the planning process and define the roles for everyone else involved.

Once the team is organized, create a list of adjectives that define the project and your goals for the final product. This will help the photographer get a feel for the design and will frame your goals for the finished photography.

"Determine the best time of year and day to shoot the building," Patterson advised. "The height of the sun varies greatly from December to June, and affects shadow lengths, tone, and the severity and angle of the light. North-facing buildings, especially, require significant seasonal planning for light considerations. Taking at least one round of scouting shots will

help determine the impact of natural light on the photo shoot timing."

Photos of the exterior or surrounding site may also be impacted by foliage. Consider when the trees and landscaping will look most flattering and consider any views that may be impaired in wooded areas.

Since the events of September 11, rooftop or aerial shots have become more challenging to plan. Photographers are required by law to obtain a permit to photograph from rooftops, and clearing air space and harbor areas may sometimes be required. All of these steps can add time to your schedule.

When it comes to coordinating the day of the shoot, you have a short time span of opportunity. Photos should ideally be taken once the project is complete, but before the movers arrive. Always schedule an alternate shoot day in case of bad weather to prevent a coordination nightmare at the last minute. To ensure the best results, make sure the point person

Tips on file types

- TIFF (tagged image file format) is best for photo files. Data isn't compressed in this format, resulting in very high resolution and print quality.

- JPEG (joint photographic experts group) files are compressed. The JPEG removes information by interpreting similar or adjoining pixels and removing them. Every time a JPEG is re-saved, more pixels are removed. The result is lower image quality, but with small file sizes that are ideal to use in e-mail, on a web site, and PowerPoint.

- PDF (portable document format) compresses an image and interferes with the tonality. This format is best for documents containing text.

- Raw Camera Files provide the most information from the image, but are unusable until they're translated to a TIFF or other file format. Leave this to your photographer—this format is ideal for fine image adjustments.

- GIF (graphic interchange format) only has 256 colors, compared to millions with other file formats, and is best used for line drawings (not photographs).

maintains open communication with the design team and the client, and keep in mind what you want to achieve from the finished shots.

Lighting

Photo film and paper cannot capture the same levels of contrast as the eye. To balance interior and exterior light contrast in a realistic way, photographers often rely on interior lighting and strobes.

Rosenthal describes this approach as, "Lying in order to tell the truth."

Consider using sunlight to catch interesting angles and highlight unique aspects of the architecture. For example, dusk shots that feature glass lit from the inside make it easier to see connections between the exterior and interior design.

Setting the scene

A photographed space should look like you can walk right into it. Hire a stylist to help set the scene, or ask a marketing professional or interior designer to help. Use artwork and plants to create an inviting scene. However, a photo often looks more cluttered than the space does in real life; take a step back and make sure the architecture remains the focus.

People can also be very effective to show the use of a space and bring a photograph to life. To prevent the photo from becoming dated by changing clothing styles and changing technology, people can be blurred as they move through the space. Keep in mind that working with models is typically very expensive and can take up at least an extra day on a shoot.

Provide a full-spectrum experience from the overall site to the smallest detail. Photos of the site can provide visual cues to the building's setting. Include other buildings in the area to show scale and neighborhood design connections. You may want to highlight specific materials and illustrate what the structure is made of with detail shots, which can call out unique aspects of the design.

Film versus digital

Many photographers now use a digital pack on the back of their existing

architectural format camera. As Premru explained, a digital format is preferable for many reasons:

- Digital pictures have no grain, and so they look cleaner than 4-by-5 film.

- No film costs.

- A photographer can work faster and take more pictures with digital; no waiting to expose the film.

- Polaroid proofs are no longer needed to check for the right shot. The digital pack can be connected to a laptop to proof images in real-time.

- It's easier to take multiple exposures to correct for light contrast. Images that used to require days of darkroom time now are possible very quickly.

- Easier and faster retouching.

- Files work well for sharing via e-mail, web sites, and PowerPoint.

When is film better than digital? If the image is going to be blown up 4-by-5 film will result in the best quality print.

Creating a portfolio

Once the shoot is complete, the final result should be striking images that represent the design intent and emotion connected to the space. These images can then be used to communicate your experience to potential new clients, to submit for design awards and magazine features, and to include in marketing brochures and collateral. Successful photographs will serve an architectural firm well for years to come, representing their design experience in an easily visible way—as a portfolio of the firm's work. ■

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