



Student booklet
Course
Architecture

#1

DEFINITION

The expression “architectural photography” implies both a subject (architecture) and a tool (photography).

More precisely, this practice is limited to taking a view of a building, from the inside or from the outside, in its complete or partial form. The shooting of an architectural ensemble, whether it is coherent or not, is also accepted in this genre.

It is important to distinguish architectural photography from the genre of the urban landscape, which focuses on urbanization as a whole, and therefore on the elements that constitute a city area (streets, signage, advertising displays, statues, buildings, green areas, etc.).



urban landscape



Architectural photography

#2

THE MATERIAL QUESTION

There are several possibilities for the architectural photographer, when it is time to choose his equipment; it ranges from a device specifically designed for this practice (and expensive), to a more versatile (but also more affordable) solution.

The view camera: this device allows the image to be recorded on a large support (up to 20x25cm). The obvious advantage of this large format will be the increased accuracy and image sharpness.

But the view camera also offers the possibility of adjusting distortions caused by perspective (related to the placement of the device in relation to the building). Thanks to the movements of the two camera planes (front and rear), the parallelism of the architecture lines can be adjusted, and the focus plane of the image can be modified.



Tilt-shift lenses: this type of lens will be an excellent solution for architectural photography. In fact, a tilt-shift lens allows, as on a view camera, to correct distortions related to perspective, and to adjust the focus plane of the image.



The basic equipment: The equipment mentioned above represents expensive solutions, and only intended to take high precision shots. These devices also have the disadvantage of a relatively slow and complex set-up, preventing dynamic use; it will be absolutely necessary to use a tripod, and to grant yourself additional time to adjust the shift of center.

Hence, for reasons of versatility, usefulness or budget, one option will be to use “standard” equipment (also suitable for different photographic genres).

However, there are still some essential gear to be able to take architectural photography without frustration:

A wide angle lens, between 20mm and 35mm (24x36mm ratio), in order to be able to frame a large assembly when the possibility of retreating from the subject is not sufficient. Unfortunately, these focal lengths will often cause distortion.

A standard lens, about 50mm (24x36mm ratio), to limit distortion (when the distance from the subject allows it).

A good quality, robust tripod that correctly locks the orientation of the camera.

A retouching program, such as Lightroom or Photoshop, to correct deformations and distortions in post-processing.



#3

A WIDE VARIETY OF APPROACHES

Whether the goal is an objective representation of the building, or a more aesthetic approach to architecture, it is obviously necessary to choose the point of view, the light and the type of composition. In this sense, here are some possibilities of approaches, with different aesthetics and points of view:

The descriptive and accurate image

Lorsque l'intention est de représenter l'architecture avec précision et de manière objective, la rigueur de prise de vue, et la gestion technique seront au coeur de la démarche ; il faudra donc veiller à ces quelques points :

- Use a tripod.
- Choose the lowest ISO sensitivity.
- Choose its optimal aperture for maximum sharpness and a homogeneous image (depending on the lens, but approximately at f/8), or choose the aperture according to the desired depth of field.
- Focus at hyperfocal, for maximum depth of field (and to infinity).
- Use the Evaluative Light Metering (Nikon Matrix), and if necessary adjust the exposure using the exposure corrector.
- Stand back from the subject (if possible) to avoid using a focal length that is too short (which would cause distortion).
- Keep the sensor parallel to the building surface, an inclination in relation to the building would cause the lines to diverge.



The clean image

This type of composition has the advantage of focusing attention on a shape / geometry chosen by the photographer. The architecture will be partially displayed here, and the image will represent a more subjective and personal vision of the building.



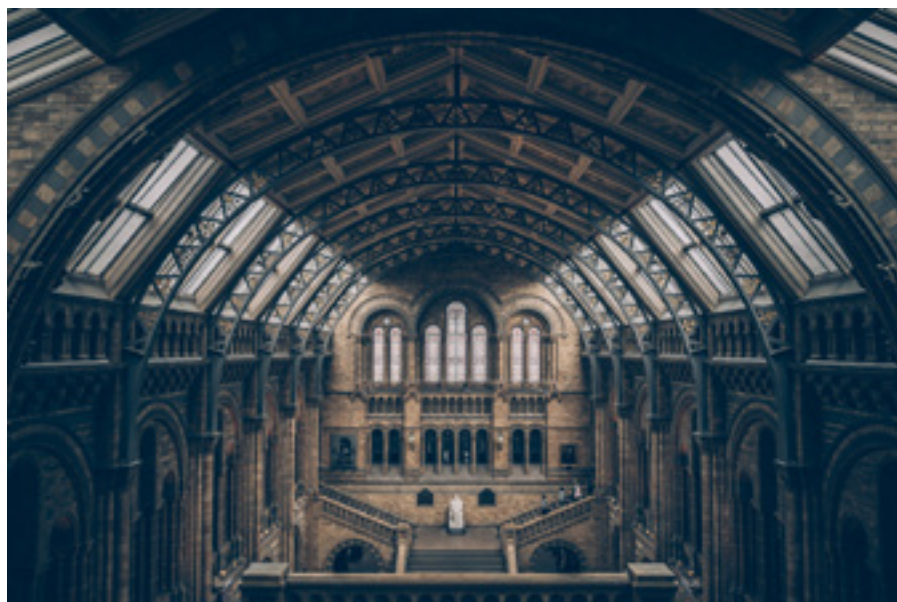
The “flat” and decontextualized image

This composition technique was massively used by the photographer Lewis Baltz; it consists in capturing “samples” of architecture, without revealing the volume or the global shape of the building, making the subject unidentifiable.



The symmetry highlighted

Symmetry is omnipresent in architecture, and awaits only to be recognized and sublimated by the photographer! In order to highlight this aesthetic feature of architecture, it will be essential to produce a precise and geometrically rigorous image



The graphic and complex image

This will be a very subjective representation of architecture, and the obvious subjects will be geometry, shapes and lines. The image must also be complex; either abstract and minimal, or filled in detail.



#4

DIGITAL ASSEMBLY

In order to standardize the exposure of a high-contrast scene, or to combine a wide plane with the absence of distortion, “HDR” and “Stitching” techniques are respectively used.

The HDR

Frequently used by architectural photographers, the HDR technique will be very useful to reveal details in shadows and to darken the highlights in a high contrast scene; for example, a building with backlighting, or a dark interior with windows.

It consists of combining several shots of the same scene, at different degrees of exposure.

Below is, in essence, how to proceed to create an “HDR” image:

- Make the desired framing using a tripod
- Take a few photographs, with identical framing, and different degrees of exposure (for example -4 EV, -2 EV, -2 EV, +2IL, +4IL)
- Import images into Lightroom or Photoshop software, and use the HDR function.



-4 IL



-2 IL



+2 IL



+4 IL



Result of the HDR with "natural" effect



Result of the HDR with "art" effect

The Stitching

This technique will consist of combining several images, side by side, to create a larger view. The advantages of stitching will be:

- The possibility to capture a subject more widely, and more closely.
- The possibility to adjusting distortions without reframing the subject.

Below is, in essence, how to proceed to perform stitching:

- Choose a suitable subject, for example a building tower.
- Mount the camera on a tripod.
- Choose a focal length, and adjust your distance by framing the subject. Do not change the focal length and distance between the different shots.
- Adjust your exposure in manual mode.
- Take the series of shots. Be careful to leave "margin" at the bottom / top of the building, and not to "place" the end of the frame on the same line as the end of the previous picture.
- After importing the images to your computer, use the Photoshop program and the "Photomerge" tool, or Lightroom and the "Panorama" tool.



#5

SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966): This German photographer is one of the main representatives of the New Objectivity of the 1920s. His photographs depict a strict geometric vision of the building; his point of view is minimalist, focused on the essence of architecture, namely its geometry. His favourite subject is industrial building.

Hervé Lucien (1910-2007): French modernist photographer, he collaborated with Le Corbusier as official photographer of his constructions. Lucien's graphic aesthetics is so advanced that it often tends towards geometric abstraction.

Ezra Stoller (1915-2004): American photographer, trained as an architect, who documented the emergence of modernist architecture in the United States.

Bernd and Hilla Becher (born in the 1930s): This German couple of photographers made an inventory of European industrial buildings: silos, mine shafts, blast furnaces, gasometers, water towers... It is with a desire for objectivity, and a rigorous shooting protocol, that the Becher founded a movement: the New German Objectivity.

Candida Höfer (1944): A student of Bernd and Hilla Becher, she deals exclusively with the interior architecture of buildings. Höfer is obsessed with theatrical spaces, grandiose, and symbols of the highest economic and cultural spheres of our society. She composes her images symmetrically, without distortion, and uses a 20x25 camera to obtain a high image resolution.

Lewis Baltz (1945-2014): This American photographer is fascinated by standardized constructions, and uses photography to represent them in a cold and austere way. His images are most often similar to architectural samples, taken from the front, without volumes, graphics, and radically straight lines.

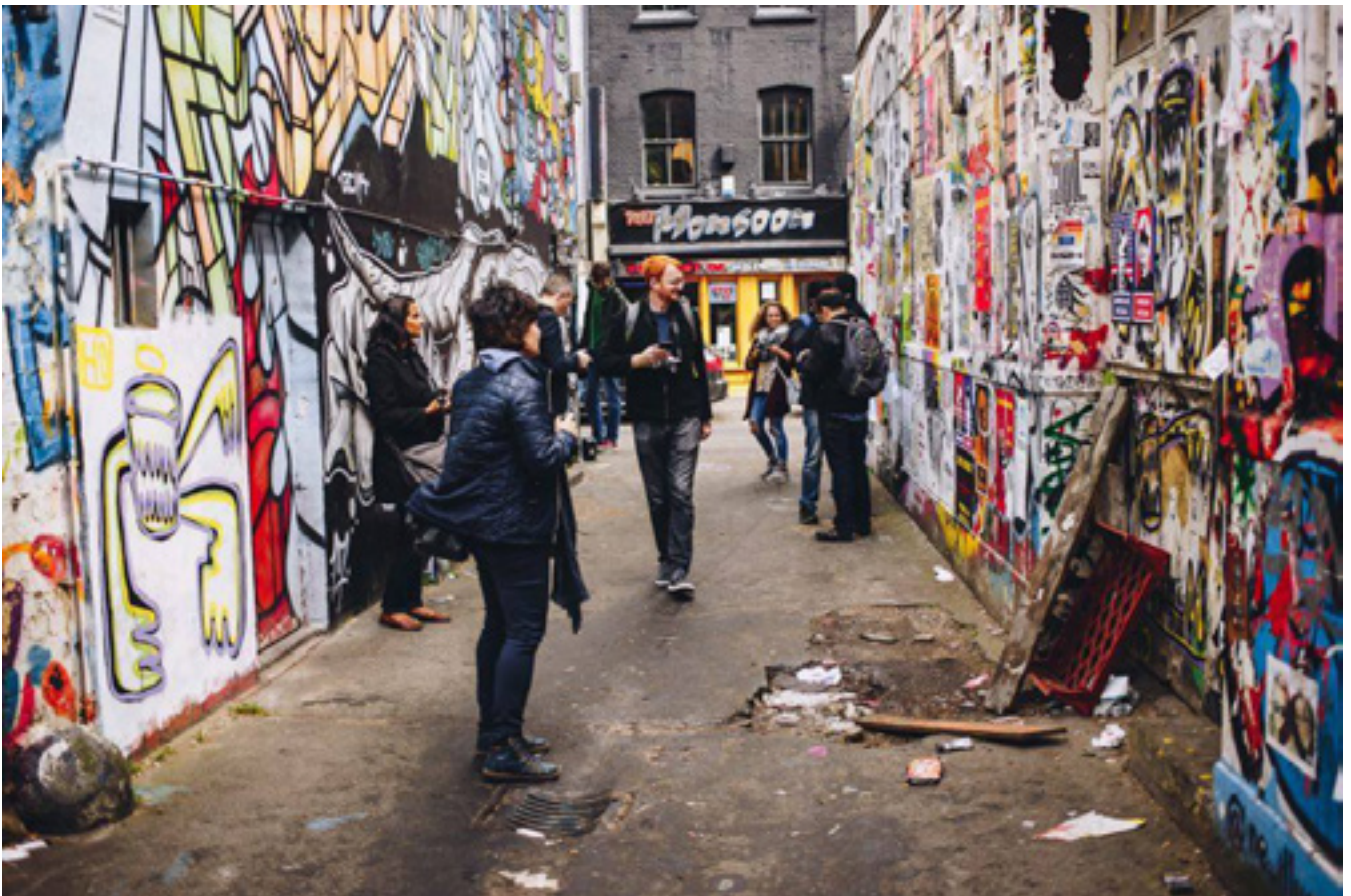
Hiroshi Sugimoto (1948): This Japanese photographer devoted part of his work to architectural photography, but in a rather unusual form: the images are blurred. The concept is surprising, and goes against what a “good” architectural photography should be: detailed and precise. However, the blurred nature of his images brings us back to the essential, to the very essence of buildings, that is, their shapes.

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