



# FORUM

## INFORMATION

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## Introduction to Photographing Historic Properties

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by Kirk Gittings

### Introduction

Early photographs document the development of our country beginning in the 1850s. Photographs of gold mines, rapidly growing cities and natural wonders are an accessible and memorable record of the past. America's pioneer photographers, including Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, left lasting images of Yosemite, San Francisco and Seattle; these and other early photographs give us a picture of the lives of our forebears. For students of history, photographs complement the written record and provide visual confirmation. Architectural photographs today can be that same permanent record of America's historic sites and structures, and can be used to influence others on behalf of preservation.

Historic structures are highly visible and accessible aspects of our cultural history. Much of our history can be learned from books and museums, but buildings designed and built by our predecessors are all around us and are part of our everyday life. They show the progression of architecture and construction in a region and in individual communities. Historic homes reveal how our ancestors lived, churches reflect

our religious history and commercial areas show the economic development patterns of a city. Photographs of buildings expand these educational benefits: photographs can be displayed in other communities, provide a new perspective on a building and preserve the information even if the building is altered or demolished. The education provided by the buildings themselves and by architectural photographs is accessible to all citizens, not just limited to scholars.

Architectural photography can vary widely in content, purpose, style and usage, from a snapshot of grandmother's house to an elaborately prepared photo of a carved stone detail. Photographs can convey basic information about what a building looks like or they can include the complex details of construction and design necessary for restoration. They can be used for a brief period of time or preserved for future generations. Photographs can be precise and practical or dramatic and persuasive.

### Architectural Photography as Documentation

Documentary photography can illustrate architectural styles and building techniques. What sort of details are appropriate for a Georgian home? How is a round barn constructed? What were the dominant architectural styles in a given city in the 1890s? Architects and contractors use photographs to restore buildings accurately. Local landmarks commissions and design review boards use them to evaluate buildings proposed for designation or to determine whether proposed work on a designated building is appropriate.

Photographs that document an entire restoration project are especially useful. They record material to be removed so it can be replaced or rebuilt accurately. They can be valuable to others planning a similar project, offering a road map to restoration. Before- and after-rehabilitation pictures are very persuasive in arguments for preservation, showing dramatic improvement in the condition of historic buildings.

A photographic record of a building prior to demolition preserves at least the image of the building and can support arguments to save other structures. Historic buildings slated for demolition should be photographed extensively. In some situations, the State Historic Preservation Office can require that a building be recorded according to the Historic American Buildings Survey Photography Standards before demolition (See Appendix A). The photos can be used in educational efforts, to show examples of an architect's work or to lend support to an argument for enacting preservation legislation. If in spite of demolition plans, a building were to be saved, the photographs would be valuable for accurate restoration.

Photographs are often required in applications for local or national landmark designation as part of the description of the significance of the building. The photography section of the National Park Service's "Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms" states, "Submit clear and descriptive, black and white photographs with each nomination form. Photographs should give an honest visual representation of the historical integrity and significant features of the property. They should illustrate those qualities discussed in the



description and statement of significance. Photographs must clearly depict the current condition of the property."<sup>1</sup> (See Appendix B).

In addition, photos are used in community planning to illustrate a point of view, e.g., potential for redevelopment, and in legal cases as evidence. In all of these circumstances, accuracy, completeness and clarity are necessary for successful photographs.

## Architectural Photography as Art

By reflecting the art of architecture, photographs can be works of art themselves. Historic properties are often very beautiful and evocative of an event or time past; photographs can capture that beauty on film and communicate that feeling to others.

There is a clear philosophical distinction between the photograph as pure documentation and the photograph as art, but in practice these elements can be balanced. The purpose of the picture determines the balance of art and documentation. Beaumont Newhall, noted photographic historian, wrote of "the deep respect for fact, coupled with the desire to create ... that marks documentary photography at its best."<sup>2</sup> Two images may show the same facts about a building, yet one may reflect the photographer's strong feelings about the place. Greater tonal contrast or the angle of the shot may emphasize a building's dramatic details. As a result, it may make a more effective poster, newspaper photo or exhibit.

Much of the impact of photography is in the viewer's belief that it is inherently truthful. For most architectural photography, documentation is more important than art, and maintaining that truthfulness is essential for effective results. For example, in an application for listing, the National Register of Historic Places needs to know what a building looks like. A brooding, evocative, wide-angle shot of the roof line is insufficient. A romantic shot of a mansion's splendid gable that excludes the concrete block addition does not accurately illustrate the building in its current condition, yet may be valuable for the beauty of the image. The photog-

rapher, aware of the many potential uses of the photographs, balances art and accuracy accordingly.

## Equipment

### Basic Equipment

The popular 35mm single-lens-reflex (SLR) camera is adequate for most architectural photography. Some additional equipment can give the photographer more flexibility. Basic equipment includes:

**A. THIRTY-FIVE MILLIMETER CAMERA BODY.** To be the most versatile, the camera should have the capacity to interchange different lenses. With a single-lens-reflex (SLR) camera, the photographer views the scene through the lens as the camera views it. Viewfinder cameras have a separate viewing glass which does not show the change in the image made by a different lens. Cameras that set the exposure automatically do not allow the photographer much creative control, but they may be helpful to the photographer with limited technical knowledge.

**B. STANDARD LENS (50-58 MM FOCAL LENGTH).** This lens approximates normal vision and is the one used most frequently.

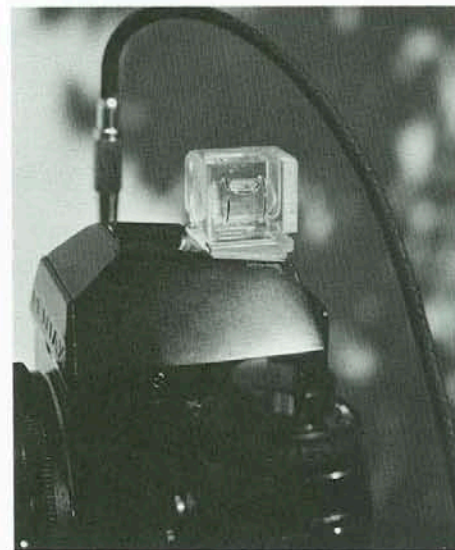


*Figure 1: Pentax LX 35mm camera with a 28mm perspective correction lens; shown on a tripod with a cable release.*

**C. TRIPOD AND CABLE RELEASE.** Using a tripod-mounted camera with a cable release to trip the shutter reduces camera movement and results in sharper images (Figure 1). With a steady camera, slower shutter speeds allow shooting in dim light. It is also possible to steady the camera on fences, posts or door jambs without using a tripod.

**D. FLASH UNIT.** Photographs of interior details, such as a carved fireplace mantle, will probably require the additional lighting of a camera-mounted flash. Photography of full interiors poses difficult lighting problems and requires the use of supplemental strobe lights.

**E. NOTEBOOK, COMPASS, TAPE MEASURE.** Every picture should be accompanied by written notes describing technical data. Typical notes include date and time of day, direction from which the photo was taken and type of camera, lens and film used. It may also be helpful to note descriptions of the surrounding terrain and dimensions of the building. A measuring stick shown in the image against the building is a point of reference for architectural drawings.



*Figure 2: Plastic bubble level attached to flash shoe of 35mm camera.*

**F. BUBBLE OR SPIRIT LEVEL.** Specially designed camera levels are made to fit into the flash shoe (Figure 2). In addition to preventing photographs of "leaning" buildings, a level camera helps to avoid the distortion of converging verticals.



The first rule of documentary photography is simple: cover the subject. Camera location and lens selection should be based on accurate recording of the building and its features. At least two photographs taken from opposite corners are required to record the front of a building. Shots of each side of a building, known as elevations, may also be useful, particularly elevations with entryways or striking features. Important details should be photographed and any outbuildings included.

Figures 7 through 10 show the effects of using lenses with various focal lengths. The lenses create images portraying widely differing information and character, yet the camera is held in the same position in all four shots.

## Artistic Considerations

Some techniques will make an ordinary photo a bit more interesting. A photographer can sometimes stretch the technical guidelines of documentary photography to produce images that reflect a personal vision, achieved by orchestrating the existing scene: altering tonal relationships, using distortion expressively and selecting a point of view. After describing his renowned nature photographs as "departures from reality for the purpose of emotional effect," Ansel Adams stated: "The viewer may accept them as realistic because the visual effect may be plausible, but if it were possible to make direct visual comparison with the subjects, the differences would be startling."<sup>4</sup>

The images in Figures 13 and 14 show some of the many possible photographic variations. Figure 13 was taken by a student with a hand held 35mm camera and a normal lens. Close inspection shows that it is slightly out of focus and is a muddy gray image. The improved result in Figure 14 was achieved with a number of devices. A large format (4" x 5") camera with a wide-angle lens was used on a tripod. The use of



Figure 13: Taken by a student at Gran Quivira National Monument, N.M., using a hand held 35mm camera, medium speed film (Plus-X). Exposure was  $\frac{1}{30}$  of a second at F/8.



Figure 14: Taken by the author from the same position as in Figure 13, a few minutes later; using 4" x 5" view camera on a tripod, with a wide-angle lens, a Wratten #15 orange filter and high speed film. Exposure was  $\frac{1}{2}$  second at F/22, and the negative was over-developed and printed on high-contrast (Grade 4) paper.

These excerpted pages are from a manual written for the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Society for Photographic Education by Kirk Gittings in 1988. It is still in print. You can order it from:

<http://www.preservationbooks.org/showBook.asp?key=23>