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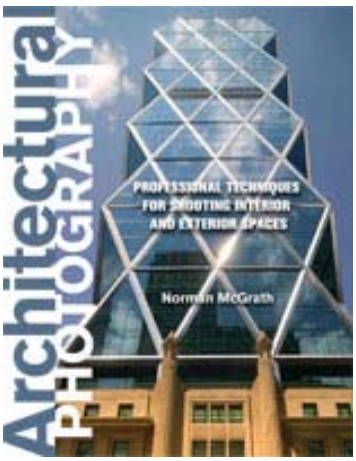
BOOK REVIEW



ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY:

PROFESSIONAL TECHNIQUES FOR SHOOTING INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR SPACES

Norman McGrath; Amphoto Books/Crown Publishing Division of Random House, New York; 2009; 208 pages; $29.95.

Shutter Release, February 2010

The profession of architectural photography saw unprecedented publicity in the fourth quarter of 2009. First, a full-length motion picture featuring the late photographer Julius Shulman revisiting the sites of his most famous works ("*Visual Acoustics*") played at theaters in major cities. Second, accomplished architectural photographer Norman McGrath published this book, which is groundbreaking. While not the first or the last to engage technique of photographing buildings, it's the first to fully accept and incorporate digital imaging as a full-fledged tool of architectural photography.

Norman has been practicing the craft since the 1960s. His reputation as a leading architectural photographer reflects his mastery and extensive portfolio but also his outreach as a teacher through workshops and articles. As such his manner of writing in the book is not so much as expert addressing novice, but as one photographer sharing with another.

What and how to learn from this book? In sum, it teaches largely through presentation and description of more than a hundred excellent examples of architectural photography. Most images are by the author himself, but works of other photographers are featured as well.

Norman elaborates nearly every image and describes how it was taken, including some key factor or challenge faced in its production. The variety of subjects is impressive, from tiny rooms to lofty skyscrapers. (On a personal note, I've always wanted to photograph the iconic Seagram building in New York City from street level; now I know which equipment can manage to capture the towering structure without sacrificing perspective control, and from where.)

From these lessons, the attentive reader will observe ordered symmetry. That nearly every segment of every image is sufficiently bright to show texture. That outdoor lighting appearing in interiors (e.g., through windows) is roughly the same brightness as the interiors. And that colors and tonality can be softened to emphasize a unified perspective and harmony of the image as a whole. Another lesson concerns shadows**:** rather than struggle with sometimes unavoidable strong, unwieldy shadows (e.g., from trees), it may be better to accept and include the effect, if that is the reality on a bright sunny day, while unabashedly strong shadows can add stature to a photograph.

Norman's exemplary images stress a certain gentility or dignity from well-balanced composition and, in my observation, a frequently subdued, quiet tonality. Judging from the book alone, he would appear not to depend as much on dramatic touches as some other architectural photographers. Yet a visit to his website, easily accessed through Google, indicates his portfolio does in fact include images with bright, perky flair.

Architectural Photography: Professional Techniques for Shooting Interior and Exterior Spaces provides much more. The belated arrival of digital technology to the field, and use of both film and digital equipment in the numerous instructive examples, is educational and encouraging, as Norman uses both media in an apparently seamless way. Application of high dynamic range photography to architecture, and also panoramic stitching, are illustrated and explained.

A section on the profession of architectural photography summarizes its objectives and current challenge, which is that digital technology has enabled people needing pictures of buildings to adopt some techniques formerly in the specialized domain of architectural photographers. Approaches to entering and engaging the field are described from an autobiographical perspective.

In devising such teaching books, determining what goes without saying is a judgment call. It is not unreasonable to assume that most persons interested in architectural photography would know about lens shift (i.e., raising the lens in relation to the film plane or digital sensor has through most of photographic history been the only way to avoid slanting lines when aiming the camera up to capture a tall building). Still, lens shift as a vital function of perspective control might have been noted in the book, albeit briefly, for background and to fully explain the benefits of Photoshop and similar programs offering perspective adjustment. Further, Norman does not explain his criteria for choice of film or digital equipment for particular situations. (I can surmise the factors are ease of use and color balance (elements that favor digital) on the one hand, and extreme perspective and need for substantial lens shift (which would favor film)). I will note finally my amazement that Norman has obviously thrived in his career while apparently avoiding formal contracts with most of his clients, relying more on good will and reputation. I suppose that success begets success!

In sum, Norman McGrath has published an eminently enjoyable as well as instructive, insightful text, thoughtfully illustrated, about techniques of contemporary architectural photography, and the profession itself. Practicing as well as prospective architectural photographers should be keen on reading this guide.

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