

Capturing Architectural Blasts from the Past

By Matthew Bamberg

Many photographers can preserve history by becoming the kind of candid photographer who, instead of photographing a human subject, shoots an architectural object. Finding the right type of architecture for you to photograph depends on your interests, the places you like to visit, and--most importantly--what you would like to see preserved.

As a baby boomer, I can recall days of flower children and roadside motels with neon signs--both recollections that explode with color. I travel often, so I encounter a good assortment of colorful objects day and night. Whether I'm shooting in Shanghai or Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, I look for colorful blasts from the past or objects that shine (no matter what their condition) with every color under the rainbow. Many of the objects I discover are of the here-today-gone-tomorrow sort, so capturing them on my sensor is a form of preservation.



Mid-century modern era bowling alley sign scanned from negative with minor Photoshop manipulation.

Creating a crisp, clear image day or night requires that you get to know your camera and are aware of the following:

1. Create a Focus

Whether your subject is an entire building, a wall, a public art piece, or a sign, frame your image so that it focuses on only a few shapes. Choose just a door or a window, or something even smaller such as an architectural element. Try to frame so that extraneous elements do not lie within the frame.

2. Enhance Color and Contrast

Set your exposure compensation lower by a half or a full stop when the sun is shining directly upon the architectural elements within your frame, as this will increase the color tones within your image. Color enhancement using this method can brighten multicolored doors, windows, and shutters, or make color within signage textual elements pop. At the same time, the color in the elements will outline each line and curve of the style in which they were built.

3. Don't Be Afraid of Patina

Patina is the aging process many architectural elements show as they age. Patina in architecture is like character lines in people. It makes your photographs tell a story--not of character, as facial lines in people, but of changing natural elements--the wind, the rain, and Father Time--that affect architectural surfaces within landscapes.

4. If it's Dark, Shoot Anyway

Sure, dawn and dusk are great times to shoot, but try night, too. With today's digital cameras, you can shoot at a high ISO speed (800 or above) without using your flash in places where there is little light. Or you can always set your camera on a tripod and keep the shutter open for a third or half second or more to let in enough light to give your architectural surfaces almost the same amount of detail as you get during daytime shots.



Dog in doorway in Burma (Myanmar) underexposed by -1 EV.



LAX Encounter Restaurant taken at 1600 ISO, then tweaked in Raw format.

5. If All Else Fails, Use Your Flash

Your camera's flash can assist you in creating successful shots day or night. At night, if you're within a couple feet of the architectural element you want to capture, a flash will spread light over much of the area you want to photograph. During the day, if you're shooting a door or window in the shade, using a flash fill can help brighten the colors in your image.

After you try some of these techniques outdoors, you'll get a feel for how to shoot by observing the light that shines on your object.

Creating a collection of images that suits your tastes and appeals to others, as well, is also dependent on the type of camera you have and whether or not you can change the lenses (usually a must for professionals). Most digital SLR (Single Lens Reflex) models enable you to take off one lens and put on another. I find that a zoom lens (28 to 300 mm) works best for the blasts-from-the-past that I like to photograph. This type of lens comes with much versatility and way less distortion than a wide-angle lens produces. Since most of my shots are candid and focus on the part of the whole my zoom lens covers most of what I want to do.

Some fine art and architectural photographers use a tilt-shift lens because they want to shoot entire buildings from a straight-on perspective. If you shoot with an ordinary lens, many times a building will look as if it's falling over. The tilt-shift lens will eliminate this effect.



Above all else, experimentation with your camera's setting, flash, and focal lengths often produces some great surprises and helps you to overcome a learning curve if the equipment that you use was just purchased. If it's an art photo you want, think of your camera's settings and lenses as your paintbrushes and the light available upon your object as the contents on your canvas, and you'll enjoy hours of artistic satisfaction.

Wig Wam Motel, a national historic monument, taken with tripod at 1/3 second exposure time from location across the street

Matthew Bamberg is the author of Digital Art Photography for Dummies (Wiley, 2005) and is currently working on another photography book, The Book of Signs--The Twentieth Century. To find out more about his book visit the Wiley website at <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0764598015.html>