



Building on Success

By professional photographer Andrew Lee.

I have been working exclusively as an architectural photographer in Scotland for nearly ten years. At first, I was producing and supplying all my photographs on various formats of transparency, and then gradually moved to a hybrid transparency/scanned digital workflow. It was only 18 months ago that the available technology finally seemed to converge to make the switch from large-format transparency to a 100% digital workflow possible without compromising on quality. My current set-up is a tethered Phase One H 25 on a Linhof m679cs and I have not looked back since.

Productivity has nearly doubled with no more trips to the lab, trips to buy film and Polaroids, time spent scanning film and cleaning up the inevitable dust on the scans. A lot of unnecessary stress and uncertainty has been removed from my work with no more agonising over exposure, trying to make important decisions based on poor-quality Polaroid images, leaving a remote location not knowing for sure whether I have got good results. I am certainly enjoying my photography more these days!

High Contrast

As subjects, buildings often present very high contrast ranges, either because they are partly in shade and partly in direct sunlight, or because the construction materials themselves differ so greatly in reflectivity, from dark slate to shiny metallic surfaces. Interiors, especially when windows are included in the shot, present an enormous range of exposure values that are impossible to record on film.



Yet, I typically need to record detail over almost all of the picture area, losing only the occasional localised highlight or shadow. Shooting on transparency, all I could do to reduce contrast was to over-expose and pull the process (thereby increasing the dynamic range by about one stop), or provide some fill lighting.

If that failed and the budget allowed, I would do an extra scan of an over- or under-exposed version of the same shot and combine them in Photoshop (never an easy thing to get two scans to overlay exactly on top of each other).

Shooting with the H 25, not only do I enjoy a greater dynamic range to begin with, but when I do require the extra shadow or highlight exposure, it is simply another press of the shutter release and the resultant exposures are perfectly aligned when layered in Photoshop. So, typically, my photographs of high-contrast subjects will have a minimum of three layers: a best average exposure, an exposure that records at least a minimum of detail in the shadows, and an exposure that does the same with the highlights. I do not even need to concern myself with evaluating exposures based on how they appear on the laptop screen; Capture One's levels histogram is a much more reliable indicator of how much information has been recorded.



At least half of the photographs I shoot are interiors and I have not had to use any supplementary lighting since I switched to the H 25. This saves hours of work on location, and means I no longer have to worry about unwanted hot spots, reflections and flare. The results also tend to look more natural.

Pictures in Parts

Another difficulty of shooting buildings on film was that everything had to be perfect at exactly the same time, something that is extremely hard to achieve when there is so much included in the shot, and so much changing uncontrollably within the shot.

Now, with difficult subjects I tend to break the picture down in to its component parts and make exposures whenever conditions are right for those parts. For example, the light might be absolutely perfect for most of a building, but the sky is too cloudy and there is a delivery van parked at street level. So I expose for the building first, wait until the clouds clear and then expose for the sky, and wait again for van to drive away before shooting the street. It is not unusual for one of my images to be made up of six or eight layers, each doing something slightly different.



Thinking about a photograph as being a mosaic of different parts can also be useful for creating new objects. In a recent shoot of a new bar, only half of the chairs had arrived in time, so I set them up in the background, ran through my exposures, and then set them up in the foreground and repeated the process. And hey presto, a fully furnished bar! It is also easy to make objects disappear. I was asked to photograph a new house, but there was a huge children's trampoline in the garden that was too large to move completely out of shot - so one exposure with the trampoline at the extreme left of the shot was combined with one with the offending object at the extreme right. Five minutes of layering and masking later and no more trampoline!

Wide-angle

The lens I use the most is a 35mm Rodenstock, ideal for tight interior spaces and tall buildings. Using a 35mm lens in combination with the highly-flexible camera movements of the Linhof m679cs is really pushing the Phase One H25 to its limits, but it succeeds. I regularly perform shift and tilt movements to preserve verticals and to increase the area of sharp focus.

An important thing to remember with wide-angle lenses is that they are particularly susceptible to producing uneven green and magenta colour casts and that these casts change position when camera movements are employed and as lighting conditions change. Therefore, it is vital that Capture One's very effective lens cast calibration tool is used on every new set-up.



With architectural subjects, maximising depth of field is also very important, so I find that using the Capture One focus tool is extremely useful for checking whether sharp focus has been achieved all the way from foreground to background.

Colour Balance

Shooting interiors with mixtures of two or three light sources, each with a different colour temperature is always a headache with film. Even with a decent array of filters and gels, it is almost impossible to avoid some kind of colour cast on the transparency, and the cast is often exaggerated by the scan. Achieving correct colour balance using the H 25 and Capture One could not be easier.

On location, I do not even think about it other than to select the most appropriate film curve and ICC profile. Critical decisions are made back in the studio while processing the RAW files on a fully-calibrated monitor. The fact that Capture One's colours can be perfectly synched with Photoshop means there is a consistency of workflow, and minimal changes if any need to be made to the RGB image after conversion.

Freedom to Experiment

Since exposure and colour balance are no longer things to worry about, and focus something that can be inspected in detail, I find that my time on location is now spent on more creative matters. I can try out various set-ups, slightly different compositions, different arrangements of furniture, and each experiment only costs me a little extra time. With film, every Polaroid and every extra sheet of film exposed represented a reduction in profit margin. A tethered set-up also means that I am looking at a large colour image on a Mac Powerbook rather than peering through the ground-glass screen or at a small monochrome Polaroid, so assessments of composition and framing can now be made much more confidently.

The Bottom Line

The shift from film to digital capture can be a daunting one, not only technically, but also financially. Fortunately, the technical transition was not too traumatic for me because I was already familiar with the post-production end of a digital workflow. All I had to grasp was the capture part, and that proved remarkably easy with Capture One's elegantly designed software that can be learned in a couple of days. The financial side is also proving to be painless. I have calculated that in less than three years the amount I save on film and processing will easily have paid for the new camera and digital back, and the extra productivity I am experiencing translates directly into increased profit.

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