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An aerial photograph of Tokyo, Japan, featuring the prominent red and white Tokyo Tower in the center. The city's dense urban landscape is visible, with numerous skyscrapers and buildings stretching towards the horizon under a clear sky.

PHOTOGRAPHING **URBAN** LANDSCAPES

WHILE WE MAY TEND TO THINK OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE AS A SCENE FROM NATURE, A CITY CAN PROVIDE EQUALLY COMPELLING OPPORTUNITIES TO SHOOT LANDSCAPES, AS WELL

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN MATIASH

The dictionary defines the word “landscape” as “all the visible features of an area of countryside or land, often in terms of their aesthetic appeal.”

When you hear the word “landscape,” your mind likely summons a vast and sprawling natural expanse, perhaps with trees and rolling hills. It’s OK; the same thing happens with me when I think of that word. I believe that it has become a bit of a knee-jerk instinct for photographers to associate landscapes with nature. It’s why when you search for landscape photos, you’ll likely be treated with a bevy of beautiful natural locations. However, it’s worth pointing out that the genre of landscape photography is quite broad.

As someone who grew up in New York City and who didn’t leave it until I was 18 years old, the only landscapes I ever knew were urban ones. Instead of giant trees lumbering over me, I had massive buildings that scraped the sky. Instead of forest trails to navigate, I had grids of paved streets, avenues and alleyways. This was my landscape, and it served as the bedrock for how I began my journey into photography during my freshman year in college.

Since then, I’ve spent a lot of time teaching myself how to see the forest for the trees, as it were, and appreciate the abundant nuances of urban landscapes. I’d like to share some of my favorite tips so that you can also learn to appreciate the diversity of city life.

Admittedly, when I think about landscape photos, I instinctively think of natural scenes. However, it’s also important to remember that there are urban landscapes to consider as well, like the vast expanse of Tokyo.



This is one of my favorite examples of a “gimme shot.” I can’t begin to imagine how many photos of this composition I have in my photo library, and yet I keep taking it every time I visit.

GET THE “GIMME SHOT” AND MOVE ON

Every photographer knows what the “gimme shot” is. Whether that’s how you refer to it or not, you’ve taken many of them and likely have lots of examples in your photo library. The “gimme shot” is that de facto photo that virtually every photographer takes, especially when it’s of a popular place or thing. It’s the photo that requires almost no thinking because it simply documents the subject.

Getting the “gimme shot” is important, and I’d never imply that you should ignore it. However, the quicksand that I’ve seen so many photographers fall into is that they become fixated on the “gimme shot” and forget to move onto more creative approaches for capturing the subject.

One of my favorite examples of a

“gimme shot” is one of the Brooklyn Bridge I took years ago and have taken many similar photos of this scene since then. And when I return to this place, I’ll take this photo again.

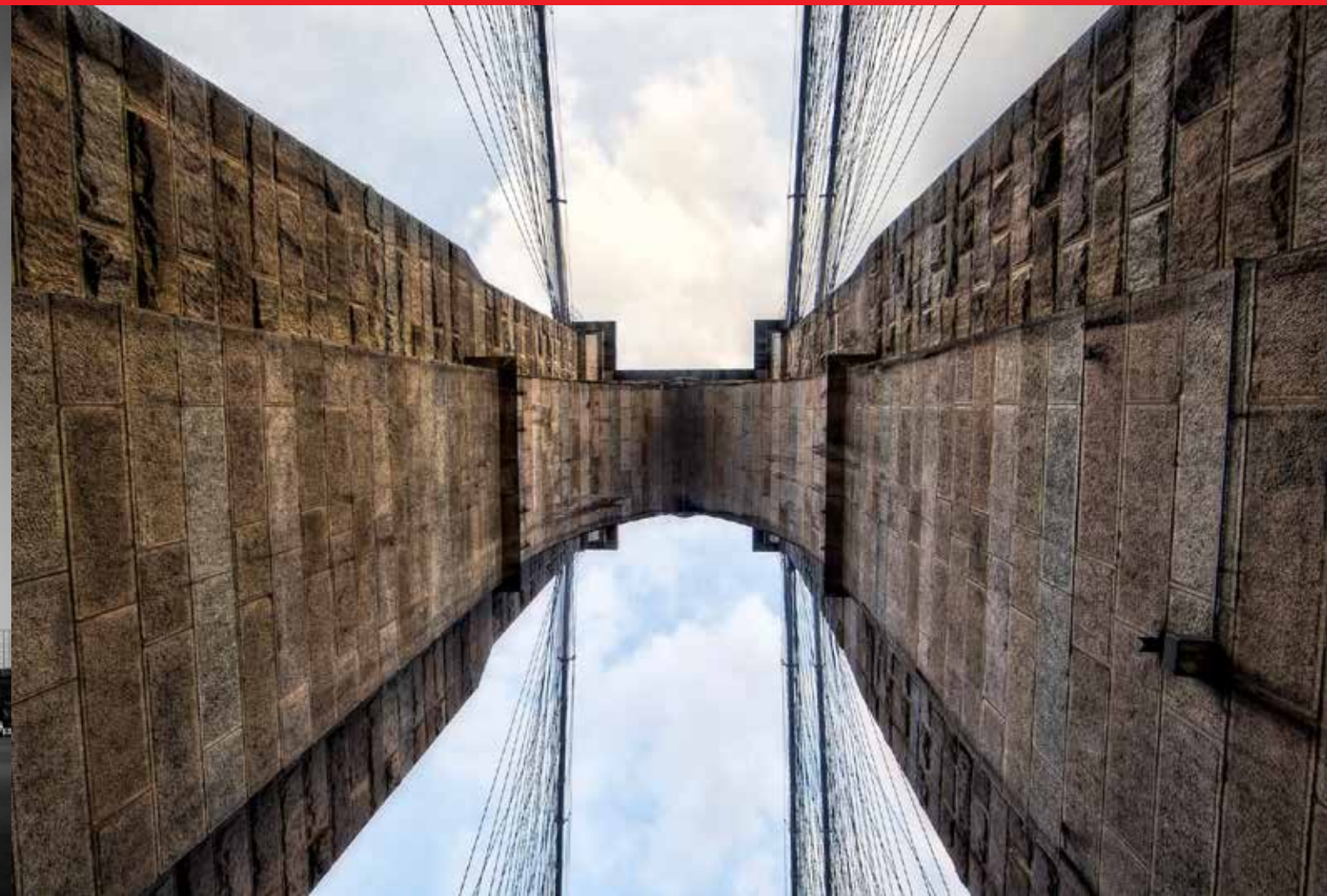
The reason is that once I get the “gimme shot” out of the way, I free up the need to get that particular photo and can begin focusing on more creative ways to capture the bridge. Look, I get that we all want to photograph the regality and beauty of such popular subjects. The important point to remember is that there are many ways to do so.

Once you nab your “gimme shot,” you should immediately begin looking for different ways to capture your subject. Maybe that means getting much closer or using a totally different lens. Perhaps you can get down on your back and shoot straight up. The key is to

break yourself out of getting the obvious photos and spend time looking for those hidden gems. In fact, despite my fondness for my “gimme shot” of the Brooklyn Bridge, I have far more love for my more obscure photos of it.

FIND THE CITY’S RHYTHM

Every city, especially big ones, has a rhythm. Sometimes it’s referred to as the “hustle and bustle.” To me, this defines the heartbeat of a city and its denizens. Photographically speaking, it’s the way motion can be used to convey the way a city breathes. In my experience, I’ve found that there are two primary ways to capture the motion of a city: by focusing on your subject moving through a scene and by focusing on your scene as something or someone moves through it.



Some of my favorite photos of the Brooklyn Bridge were taken when I took the time to find more creative approaches for my compositions.

Panning Photos. When I say that I want to capture a photo of my subject as it moves through a scene, I’m referring to the act of panning. In other words, I turn or twist my body so that my camera moves through the frame at the same pace and in the same direction as my subject. That’s how you pan.

Typically, I aim to get the shutter speed of my exposure between 1/15 sec. and 1/30 sec., and if it’s particularly sunny, that will require me to use a neutral-density filter. Doing so will reduce my chances of blowing out the exposure at those shutter speeds. It’s also helpful to set your camera to manual focus and manual exposure, as well as burst mode, so that it doesn’t have to hunt for focus, calculate the exposure or slow you down when firing off your shots.

The most important thing to



I’ve always been a big fan of panning photos. They can be tricky to execute but are usually well worth the effort.



There are many ways to leverage a slow shutter speed in order to capture motion. I find it helpful to brace myself against a wall or pole, though, since it's easy to introduce camera shake at those slower shutter speeds.



Some urban settings can change from looking dull and unremarkable during the day to brilliant and vibrant at night. Oftentimes, I'll note particular locations that I see in the daytime and revisit them once the sun goes down to see how they differ.

remember about panning photos is that it requires a great deal of patience, discipline and practice. You'd probably shudder if you saw the ridiculous number of failed panning photos I've taken just to get that perfect one. What's important is to find a compelling subject. I tend to find people who are moving fast on a bike or in a car when I practice panning. When done right, panning photos can provide an instantly striking and dynamic result in urban environments.

Stationary Photos With Motion. Another compelling way to capture the rhythm of an urban landscape is by illustrating motion within a static scene. This is especially easy to do when you find yourself in a crowded location or one with fast moving subjects like a subway car. Similar to panning, I tend to find

myself using between 1/10 sec. and 1/50 sec. shutter speeds. In these situations, I also find myself relying heavily on image stabilization—whether it's with my lens or camera (when available)—to reduce or eliminate shakes or vibrations.

The key to these types of photos is to find unique ways to juxtapose your moving subjects against your stationary ones. Maybe you can set a moving bicyclist against a sitting pedestrian. Or you can have a group of cars moving in one direction while there are others sitting at a red light. The point is that motion is a natural occurrence in any urban environment, and it can be fun to find all the different ways to photograph it.

NIGHTTIME IS THE RIGHT TIME

Cheesy rhyming aside, one of my

favorite times to explore any city is from dusk through nighttime. Most cities take on an entirely different feel once the sun has set and is a forgotten memory. Instead of dealing with sunlight and shadow, every street and alley is illuminated with myriad artificial lights. Neon, incandescent, halogen. White, blue, yellow. These light sources provide countless creative opportunities for urban landscape photos.

Here's one piece of equipment you may want with you: a tripod. Because of the limited amount of light, even in brightly lit areas of a city, you may find it difficult to get a sharp photo. Having a sturdy tripod can help eliminate that concern and open up all sorts of creative opportunities to capture light trails, for example.

PLANT YOUR FEET

I strongly believe that if you want to get to know a particular neighborhood of a city, you need to plant your feet. In other words, find a corner, stoop or wall—and wait.

Well, don't just wait. Observe life occurring around you. Pay attention to all of the little moments. Train yourself to anticipate an event that may be about to occur and get your camera ready to capture it. The more time you allow yourself to remain in one spot, the easier it will be for you to blend in and become wholly overlooked by other pedestrians. I recently put this practice to use when I created a series called "Chinatown at Dusk."

I didn't choose this neighborhood accidentally. It wasn't like I pulled a card from a hat or threw a dart at a map of New York City. Between my own experiences

and seeing photos of other accomplished photographers whom I admire, I made a mental note to spend more time in Chinatown at dusk. That neighborhood is such a wonderful medley of varying elements and factors, and when it all comes together, it's magical. Everything from Chinatown's residents to the colors of storefront merchandise—you can find a never-ending source of visual inspiration.

Because my challenge was based on a specific window of time, I made sure to get to the location about 90 minutes before dusk. This allowed me to leisurely scout the neighborhood and make mental notes of specific places I wanted to return to.

I also kept a running list of compositional ideas that I tested while scouting.

After a while, I realized that there were two primary compositions that I found myself leaning toward. The first was photographing head-on while standing across the street from a storefront. The second was shooting at an angle while peering into a doorway or window. What was helpful was because I had this figured out in advance, I could spend less time looking for places to put myself and more time on waiting for the right opportunity to present itself.

Investing time at a particular scene is a critical component of street photography and one that often pays back with dividends. The more time I spent standing in a single location, the more I began to notice nuances, like the way a barber shaved his customer's hair.

I gave myself the time to simply be

an observer. That afforded me the luxury of photographing the right moments as they happened instead of haphazardly spraying a series of shots and hoping one of them would be a keeper.

And speaking to the benefits of staying put, one of the most important is that it aids in being able to blend into your surroundings. Rather than frantically walking, then stopping to shoot, then walking again, I just leaned back against a light post or building façade and faded into my surroundings. People who may have noticed me initially eventually forgot I was there. I was just another guy, and that was enough to allow them to return to doing whatever they were doing. The less they were paying attention to me, the more I was able to get natural photos of them. DP



Initially, the customer getting a haircut was aware of my presence. But as I spent time basically just loitering, he forgot about me. This gave me the perfect opportunity to capture him at the right moment.

See more of Brian Matiash's work at matiash.com.



Finding the right head-on and angled compositions took more than positioning myself accordingly. Waiting for the right elements was critical in establishing a sense of place and depth.



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