

# NIGHT

By Kent DuFault



<https://unsplash.com/photos/QEgWIY1uxwM>

*Patrick - Fujifilm X-T1, 10mm lens, f/13, 1 second, ISO 100*

Above is a classic nighttime architectural photo. I love shooting at night. It creates an entirely new universe of opportunities while at the same time presenting some pretty exciting challenges.

Some of those challenges include the following:

- Avoiding dense shadows that have no details
- Balancing the exposure of multiple light sources
- Dealing with motion blur
- Creating visual excitement
- Proper camera handling technique for both exposure and camera shake



<https://unsplash.com/photos/9kKXszmZ0Pc>

*Emmanuel Appiah - Canon EOS Rebel T6i, 55mm lens, f/5.6, 1/125<sup>th</sup>, at ISO 6400*

In general, this is what you don't want to capture in your nighttime architectural photography.

Most of the frame is dense black, and even where the lights are turned on, there is very little detail.



[https://unsplash.com/photos/milUxSbp4\\_A](https://unsplash.com/photos/milUxSbp4_A)

Florian Wehde - Canon EOS 600D, 18mm lens, f/13, 10 seconds, ISO 100



### Key Point:

One way to avoid large areas of dense black is to shoot when the sky hasn't lost all of the reflected light coming from the setting sun.

The trick here is to shoot when the exposure value of the sky is close to, or slightly less than, the exposure value of the buildings and other architecture that you're shooting.

A little bit of dark, dense shadowing in a non-important area of the frame is acceptable, such as the lower-left corner in the image of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

**Important:** For most of the assignments in this creativity prompt, you will need a tripod or some other form of firm camera support. It's also beneficial to have a remote shutter release. That release can be wired or a wireless electronic remote. I like the wireless electronic version because nothing touches the camera once it is set up. They are also very inexpensive these days. You can pick one up on Amazon for less than USD \$20.

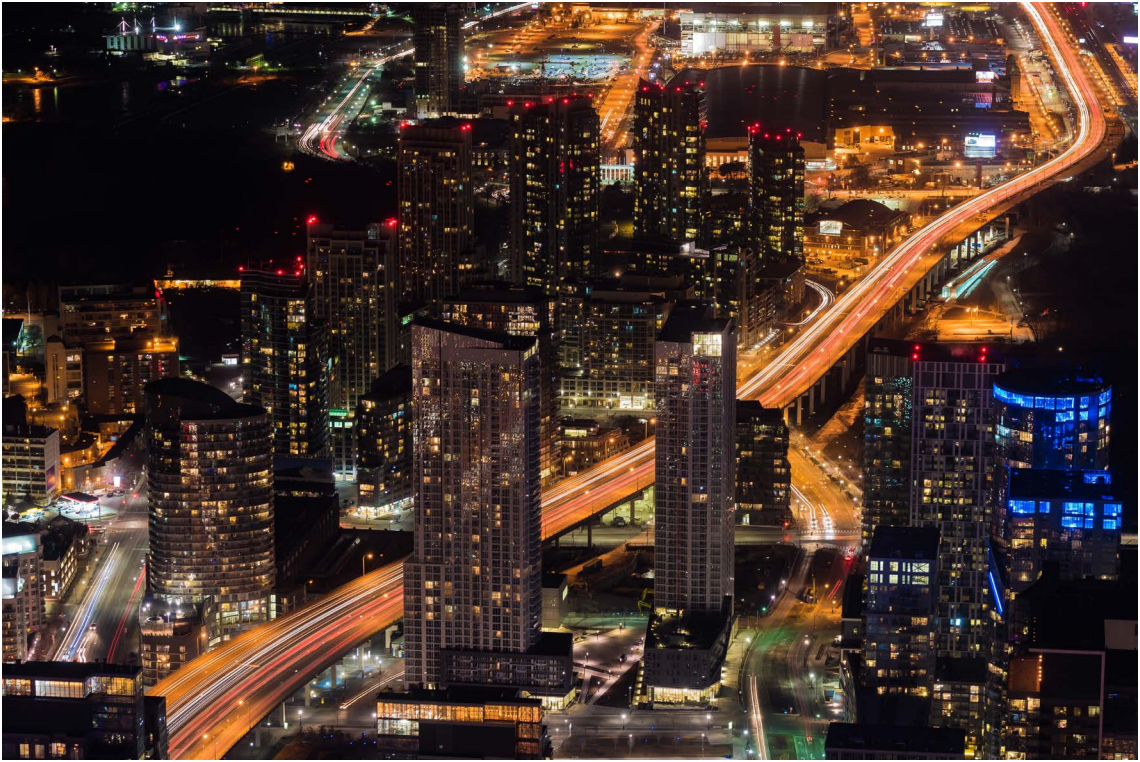


### Assignment:

- 1 Select a building to photograph. Pick a structure that will be well lit at night.
- 2 Select a camera angle that places the sunset behind and to one side of the building.
- 3 Compose your shot with an eye toward dark, unlit areas. Try to eliminate them or place them in an unimportant part of the frame. Composition is essential here.
- 4 Support the camera, focus the camera, and then lock the focus; set up your remote release.
- 5 Use manual mode on your camera. Set the file format to camera RAW. Set your ISO to 400.
- 6 As the sun drops below the horizon, determine your proper exposure and start taking pictures. Wait 30-60 seconds between frames.
- 7 During the first five frames, do not change the exposure setting. The last couple might be a little dark, and that's okay.
- 8 After the first five frames, begin increasing the exposure by ½ stop every two minutes by **increasing the shutter speed**. Don't change the aperture or the ISO.
- 9 Continue until the sky is totally black.

**Evaluation:** Look through your frames and find the exposures that **balance** the exposure of the sky with the exposure of the building and lights in the foreground. In other words, nothing should be dense black with little detail. This is an excellent training prompt to learn how light sources balance out in exposure.





<https://unsplash.com/photos/sB1WoY4-Fnw>

Alex - Nikon D810, 70mm lens, f/5.6, 20 seconds, ISO 100



### Assignment:

- 1 Find an architectural subject that you can photograph from an elevated camera position. This camera location could be from another building or a high landmass with a view from above.
- 2 Set up your camera, as noted in the first assignment.
- 3 Start taking pictures about 30 minutes before the sky turns completely dark.
- 4 Vary your exposure using the shutter speed.
- 5 Work on balancing the exposure and creating interesting light streaks from moving objects.

### Important Consideration:

Just because the sky has gone completely black doesn't mean that you have to stop shooting.



### Pro Tip:

Once the sky has turned completely dark, find an elevated camera position. This allows you to shoot downward and thus eliminate the giant black hole created by the night sky.

**Evaluation:** This prompt is meant to help you identify scenes that will work well for nighttime architectural photography while excluding the sky as a factor.



[https://unsplash.com/photos/dfbrZ0twX\\_E](https://unsplash.com/photos/dfbrZ0twX_E)

*Juli Kosolopova - Nikon D750, 86mm setting on a zoom lens, f/4.2, 1/160<sup>th</sup>, ISO 320*

Before we get into using the moon as a prop or focal point for nighttime architectural photos, I want you to look closely at the balance of lighting (the exposure value) between the moon and the buildings in this shot.

Notice how even though the architecture is dark, there is visible detail in most of the picture. Letting the architecture go darker and including a focal point accent, like the moon, is an excellent technique to create a 'mood' in nighttime architectural photos.

Including a lovely bright moon is an excellent idea. To make the moon large and a dynamic element, you must use a 'long telephoto' lens—something in the category of 300mm or longer. Anything shorter than that and the moon becomes mostly a white dot in the sky.

Suppose you don't have a super long telephoto lens. In that case, the next option is to pick up an existing photo of the moon from a free source such as Pexels and then use software to 'place' the moon into your shot.



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/full-moon-821718/>

*Alex Andrews - Nikon D810, 300mm lens, f/10, (no shutter speed attribution), ISO 200*

I found this moon picture on Pexels in a matter of seconds, and there are hundreds of free options to choose from.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/stpfUt8CuS0>

*Kevin Wiegand - No EXIF*

If you insert a moon into your shots, be careful of telltale amateur artifacts that give away what you have done.

- Watch the shape of your inserted moon. It should be round, or if it is in a waxing or waning phase, don't eliminate the shadow, as was done in the example to the left. Leaving out the shadow creates an unnatural oblong moon shape.
- If there are clouds, the moon cannot be pasted 'in front' of the clouds. It needs to be blended with the surrounding cloud cover.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/wKHIfwOSwqg>

*Andres Garcia - Nikon D80, 70mm lens, f/4.5, 13 seconds, ISO 100*

**Critical:** Your inserted moon should have a natural shape and blend well with any surrounding clouds, such as this example.



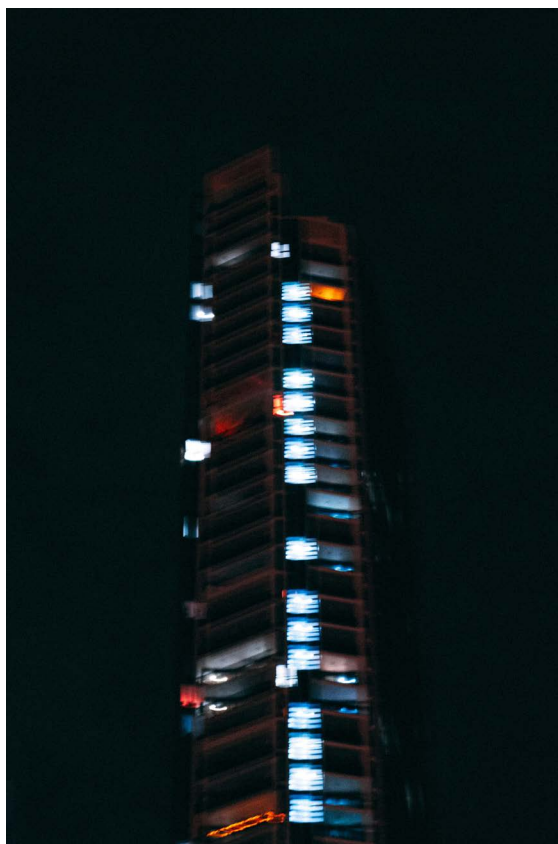
### Assignment:

- 1 If you have a telephoto lens that is 300mm or longer, get out there and include the moon in your nighttime architecture photos.
  - a. Be aware of extended exposures because the moon is moving. Use a shutter speed of at least 1/125<sup>th</sup> of a second and adjust the exposure with your aperture or ISO.
- 2 Try inserting a moon shot into an existing architectural night photo.
  - a. Make sure the moon isn't completely sharp. That is a dead giveaway.
  - b. Make sure that the shape is correct.
  - c. Using cloning and layer blending techniques, blend the moon with the surrounding night sky.
  - d. Strive for realism and refer to the above photo as your example.

**Evaluation:** A full moon, or an almost full moon, always creates excitement in a nighttime architectural photo. Were you able to create a shot in-camera? If so, did all the elements of your shot reproduce technically acceptably? Did you try inserting a moon, and how did that go? Does the final picture look real? Did you share it with others to see what they thought?

**Let's do some quick inspiration!**





<https://unsplash.com/photos/TgDu9M8hI1o>

*Christine Aflak - Fujifilm X-T30,  
55mm lens, f/4, 1/5<sup>th</sup>, ISO 320*

When wandering around at night with your camera, try some ICM with architecture that is all lit up. ICM stands for 'Intentional Camera Movement.'

The technique involves using a slower shutter speed and intentionally moving the camera as you expose the image. This technique can create some inspiring abstract or semi-abstract architectural photos!



#### Assignment:

- 1 When attempting ICM, set your shutter speed to somewhere between 1/15<sup>th</sup> of a second and 1 second.
- 2 Use guidelines listed previously, especially trying to avoid black holes in your composition.
- 3 When starting out, move your camera methodically back and forth in one direction until you get a feel for how the motion will record.
- 4 Try to maintain the feel of the architecture. Don't let the image become so abstract that viewers cannot tell what they are looking at.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/IP1rSwr8R6o>

Jayme McColgan (left) - iPhone 7, 4mm lens, f/1.8, 1/7<sup>th</sup>, ISO 100

[https://unsplash.com/photos/wGAR4\\_380Ro](https://unsplash.com/photos/wGAR4_380Ro)

Siti Rahmanah Mat Daud (right) - Samsung SM-G935E, 4.2mm lens, f/1.7, 1/15<sup>th</sup>, ISO 160

One tried and true method for adding drama to nighttime architecture is to include fireworks. If you're not a fan of fireworks, check your local area for laser light shows, which are just as dramatic.

**Note:** Both of the images with fireworks and lasers were created with cell phone cameras. Cell phone cameras are an excellent resource for nighttime architectural photography! Many cell phone camera models have built-in technology that allows the photographer to handhold the camera for nighttime architectural photography. Give it a try! You'll be amazed.



### Assignment:

- 1 Create some nighttime architectural shots with fireworks or lasers in the sky. You'll need to follow the guidelines for camera setup, as discussed at the beginning of this creativity prompt. Experiment with your length of exposure for widely varying effects. Start at about 1/8<sup>th</sup> of a second and slow all the way down to one or two seconds. Set your aperture at f/5.6. Set your focus and then lock it down. Start with an ISO of 800 and adjust as necessary.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/qkJ8sTSg0hk>

*Boban Simonovski - Canon 70D, no other EXIF*

Putting colored filters in front of your lens can create a futuristic effect! Or try whacking out the colors in your photo editing suite. Break some rules!



<https://unsplash.com/photos/uxIU0kYGu-k>

*Lucas Davies - Sony ILCE-6000, 6 seconds, ISO 100, no other EXIF*

Use water to reflect lights and fill in dark voids!

Most cities and towns have lakes, water fountains, or other water features. Reflections from these water features can bring back some life into what would otherwise be unusable dark areas.





<https://unsplash.com/photos/erMq-MgZDjU>

*Nicolas Savignat - Nikon D5300, 28mm lens, f/4, 1/60<sup>th</sup>, ISO 6400*

This technique is what I call “The Lone Outlier.”

Search for architecture that is the only lit structure within your frame. Be sure to set up and time your exposure so that the rest of the frame doesn’t dissolve into utter darkness.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/MzguYL3I668>

*James Cousins - Canon 70D, 13mm lens, f/4, 25 seconds, ISO 1600*

**Note:** To capture a night sky that includes interior lighting, do the following:

- 1 Establish the proper exposure for the interior lighting.
- 2 Establish the exposure for the night sky (which will be much longer).
- 3 Start the exposure. After the correct exposure for the interior lighting, have someone shut those lights off, or carefully cover the lens with a black card until the lights are turned off.

The Lone Outlier technique can be applied to any structure. It doesn’t have to be fancy to be effective.





<https://unsplash.com/photos/qk3x9BDXG4Y>

*Patrick Baum - Pentax K-r, 40mm lens, f/7.1, 13 seconds, ISO 100*

## In Conclusion

Our final inspiring photo includes a little bit of almost everything we discussed in this Creativity Prompt.

- Shot at post-sunset with light in the sky
- Surrounding areas are in balanced exposure from light to dark
- The subject building stands out as the primary architectural subject
- Reflections added drama and lighting density
- A colored amber filter over the lens created a dramatic post-sunset dramatic effect