

**STEVE MCCURRY
LESSON 22 - CITYSCAPES**

**SELECTING A VIEWPOINT THAT TELLS
A STORY**

“try to show the character, and show what's unique about that place that you're photographing.”

Listen to Steve's methods for capturing the personality and the feel of a city. Each city has its own character, and Steve's objective in this lesson is to help you find that intangibility of a perfect cityscape.

“I often find myself knocking on doors and asking people if I can photograph from their window”

Steve discusses getting creative when it comes to finding the right vantage point. Sometimes, this means asking to shoot from someone's window, sometimes it involves finding a carefully selected viewpoint. Steve tells us some stories on finding the best shot.

“An interesting time of the day is very late in the afternoon, or even just after sunset, when you get that sort of crossover light...you have that small window”

Lighting is a very important aspect of Steve's work and so shooting at the right time of day is paramount in capturing the essence of a city; it has to fit with the feeling you're trying to portray.

STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT LESSON 22: CREATE CITYSCAPES IN A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS

“try to show the character, and show what’s unique about that place that you’re photographing.”

Take some cityscapes of the city you live in or are visiting. First decide what interests you most and tells a story about that city. Then go to multiple vantage points. Sometimes you get up in a particular angle that doesn’t quite work, you maybe have to go to another place and try that again. Shoot in at various time of the day but particularly at the time just before sunrise or just after sunset using the “crossover” light, that’s when the street lights become the same exposure and intensity as the fading or arriving daylight.

So sometimes it requires a lot of work, effort, but often the reward is great. And you come back with a picture which really shows because the feel of the city and the vibe, and not just as a mere postcard rendition of a place

Try to capture what it feels like to be in that city or on that street.

TRANSCRIPT

I'd like to talk a little bit about cityscapes and photographing a city, and try to show the character, and show what's unique about that place that you're photographing. I often find myself knocking on doors and asking people if I can photograph from their window, maybe it's on a first or second floor, which will give a better overview of this particular city, or plaza, or square, or place that I find interesting. Being up will give you a better perspective, I think. And sometimes you just have to literally knock on somebody's door and ask them for permission, explain what you're doing. And I've always been surprised at how receptive and how willing people are to let me into their homes.

So people trust you if you have a certain confidence, you explain what you're doing, I think you'll find people very receptive and very open, and they'll let you into their living rooms and even their bedrooms. Like this particular picture I made in Calcutta, when I was on the street, I knew that if I was up a little bit higher that it would be a much more pleasing view of the street. And I wanted to show not only the sort of cityscape, but also what it was like, what did it feel like to be on the street in Calcutta. I thought the best way to show that was to be up on the second floor.

So I just knocked on the person's door, explained what I was doing, had a translator there, tried to convey that we were serious and we didn't mean them any harm. And they let us into their home and we went up. The best view actually happened to be from their bedroom. I went in, I photographed, I thought it was a great angle, great view. After we finished with the picture, they offered us tea, we stayed there for some time, and talked to them about whatever. And it turned out to be a very delightful time with them.

So I think sometimes you have to go to multiple vantage points. Sometimes you get up in a particular angle, doesn't quite work, you maybe have to go to another place and try that again. So sometimes it requires some work, some effort, but often the reward is great. And you come back with a picture which really shows because the feel of the city and the vibe, and not just as a mere postcard rendition of a place, which we're not really interested in.

I was trying to get a view of the street in Calcutta. And again, I thought the best angle would be getting up. I

thought the perspective of the street would be more pleasing if I was up a bit, so I found this overpass on this one particular street in Calcutta, which allowed me to be up 20 meters. And I thought it was a really wonderful way to show the city with all the signs, the buses, and the taxis, and all the bustling people walking around the street.

But that angle was simply just an overpass. I was able to walk, get out of the car, walk up onto the overpass, and I could shoot there as much as I wanted. But that was a very simple solution to another perspective, and I think at that low, just being up a little bit, again, it gives you a feel for the street, and I think it gives you a sense of the vibe of that particular city.

I thought the best time of day to shoot this picture was very late in the afternoon. When the sun was setting it was more muted, more low contrast, and I thought the colors were more vibrant. And I thought that it really showed the city up close, I thought it really showed the vibe of the city, the feel of what it was like to be on the street in Calcutta. So I think that low light helped to see into the shadows and make it a more dramatic picture without a lot of very hard midday sun.

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An interesting time of the day is very late in the afternoon, or even just after sunset, when you get that sort of crossover light, that mix of daylight. And when the city lights start to come alive and you have that small window when you have that balance of light, the ambient light. And then the light coming from the shops and the homes, it creates a very pleasing effect. And that's certainly a time of day which is really wonderful to shoot in. But I think you have to experiment, I think you have to photograph it in different times of the day and see what's working. Noon could be a great time if there's interesting clouds, if it's a certain quality of light.

I don't think you can really generalize and say that I want to photograph this time, or that time. Any time could be good, but it has to be interesting, it has to work, it has to make sense. But that's, again, up to you to decide what kind of impression you're trying to make, what kind of story are you trying to tell. You may find the best light after dark, after the sunset, all the lights coming on in the city. But it's hard to generalize about the best time of day for these cityscapes. Any time could be a good time.

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If I'm working in extremely low light, I suppose, in a cityscape situation, I take a tripod with me wherever I go.

If it's extremely dark and I'm trying to shoot at a very slow shutter speed, then I'll use a tripod. But in many cases, you can shoot just hand-held, but it depends on the amount of light, depends on where you are, depends on what are you trying to do. But I think that it's safe to say, when it's very dark, you may have to break out the tripod because you're going to be shooting at a quarter of a second, or two seconds, and you simply can't hand-hold at those slow shutter speeds. Maybe take a beanbag, maybe have a mini tripod, a table tripod. I mean, it just depends on you have to find the right solution for yourself.