

**STEVE MCCURRY  
LESSON 6 - STREET PHOTOGRAPHY**

**BECOMING PART OF THE STREET - ON  
LOCATION IN HAVANA, CUBA**

**“Once you get into sort of a certain zone, sort of a meditative state almost, great things start to present themselves.”**

We are joining Steve on the streets of Havana, which is one of his favourite places to take photographs. It is completely different from most places on earth, very vibrant with charming and friendly people.

When you are photographing outside, abroad or somewhere unfamiliar Steve’s advice is to open yourself to what is happening around you. You need to talk to people, engage with them, make friends. You need to feel comfortable. You have to be ready and become part of the street and that is when great opportunities start to happen. The aim is get to a state where you’re hyper aware of sounds, details, architecture or whatever is around you.

**“I think it’s always better to photograph alone and to kind of follow your own nose and to go walk down the street.”**

Steve prefers to work alone, undisturbed, to find his own rhythm, develop his own feeling and follow what he’s interested in rather than having someone around with their own ideas.

Join him in the streets where he puts this advice in practice and take photographs of a wide variety of interesting subjects.

## STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT LESSON 6 - FIND THE RHYTHM OF THE STREET

Research your local area or an area that you are visiting and try to find a set of streets that you feel have interest for you and that are vibrant with a visually rich environment. This is important to Steve in order to try to find things that magically happen.

Walk these streets and immerse your self in the rhythm of the street over several periods of time and several times of the day. Always have your camera ready, but first get to know the patterns of the street and the way the light falls in the street. Steve prefers the softer light but you can experiment and find your own preferred light.

“When I arrive in a place for the first time, or even a place I’ve been to many times, I like to take some time, learn the vibe, sort of see...get the pulse of what’s happening. And then once I sort of feel like I’m acclimatized, I’m in that particular zone where I start to kind of feel one with the street. Then I start kind of jumping in with both feet. But there’s an initial period when I’m just trying to kind of put my toe in the water and walk around and just sort of see how things are and the vibe on the street”

Make a note of angles you like and light directions so that you plan your next visit for different times of day and you will know where the light will fall.

“We often talk about street photography and how do you move, how do you operate, how do you move around. I think the first point about walking around the streets with your camera is that it’s not only about photographing. I think firstly you need to meet people, talk to people, get inside the environment. You need to really sort of become one with the street.”

## TRANSCRIPT

So I was just walking down the street in Old Havana. And so many great things happened, within just 100 meters of the street, just like in five or 10 minutes there were three great situations.

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Guys playing dominoes, a woman invited me into her home, there's kids playing on the street, a lot of action. It's a really visually rich environment here. Once you get into sort of a certain zone, sort of a meditative state almost, great things start to present themselves. And you get into some sort of great space where things sort of magically happen. But you have to be open and ready and become part of the street. Meet some people. Talk to some people. Make some friends.

And I think from there, you'll be surprised at how many great situations will present themselves.

Well, here we are in Cuba. Cuba is one of my favourite places to travel to. It's my favourite place to photograph. I think Cuba has a great sense of style. It's a great vibe on the street, very friendly people. It has a great charm. And it's in a different place than much of the other parts of the world. There's-- one of the great things about Cuba is that there's like no advertising anywhere.

The streets are sort of clean. People-- children play in the streets, which is unlike most other places in the world, at least in the US. Kids where I live all are inside on video games or watching TV. But here, children tend to be outside. They're playing with their friends. And it's much more, I think, a much more vibrant-- it reminds me much of my childhood.

There's this wonderful patina of age. There's this sort of great texture which you see everywhere, like a grand old lady. I think that whether you're a photographer, or a traveler, interested in cultures and people, I would highly recommend you come to Cuba as soon as possible because Cuba, like the rest of the world, is changing rapidly. And you don't want to miss Cuba as it was at this period in its history. I think there's a lot of great things to see and to photograph.

And it's going to change. And you know, we love it the way it is now, but progress-- it's unstoppable. So you know, we want Cuba to be as best as it possibly can be.

But it's an interesting place to come to anytime, but particularly right now.

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We often talk about street photography and how do you move, how do you operate, how do you move around. I think the first point about walking around the streets with your camera is that it's not only about photographing. I think firstly you need to meet people, talk to people, get inside the environment. You need to really sort of become one with the street. And I would say it's more akin to working in Burma, or India, or someplace where it's fun to go up and engage people, talk to people. You know, explain who you are and ask them about their lives, maybe ask them if you can see their home or whatever.

But I think you have to really feel comfortable. And it's not sort of you and them. It's not really-- it should be, you're part of the scene. You're part of what's happening on the street. So you want to break down that separation between them and us, and where it's more friendly. You're kind of engaging people as you walk around. And you have a sense of confidence, because your intentions are honorable. And you're not afraid to look people in the eye and ask people for permission, perhaps, if you want to make a portrait.

I try not to work too much at arm's length, unless-- I think if you want to photograph somebody, a portrait of somebody on the street, you should go up and explain that you find them interesting. And you wonder if you could spend a few minutes and photograph them because you find them fascinating, or whatever. I think that's a much better approach than trying to sort of surreptitiously trying to work around and photograph them secretly.

I think if it's a portrait, then go ahead and confront them in a friendly, respectful way and then see what happens.

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I think it's always better to photograph alone and to kind of follow your own nose and to go walk down the street. You know, do I go left, do I go right? I think it's better to develop that instinct for how to move. And I think your mind should be kind of clear and you should be kind of taking in all the sights and the smells and sounds. I think when you're with somebody else, you tend to get lost in conversation and you start talking about things which take your mind off of where you are at that very moment. So I think it's better to really work by yourself, or with a translator, interpreter, whatever. That's fine.

But I think it's better not to go with a friend or another photographer because you really have to follow your own nose. You have to decide what's interesting for you. And if you're with somebody else, you might be following what's interesting to them and waiting for them to finish their shot. And so it kind of throws you off balance. I think you're better off, you know, better just pleasing yourself and going and photographing. And if you want to stop and play with a dog or talk to somebody, you're not slowing somebody else up. You are able just to go your own pace.

It's really important to find your own pace, your own zone, and do that sort of on your own without somebody else, the distraction of somebody else with you.

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A lot of people don't want to be photographed. And that's their right and we shouldn't worry about that. I think you have to really look at it as a percentage basis. And if you can get 80% or 90% success rate, then I think you're doing great. There's always going to be somebody who, for whatever reason, doesn't want to be photographed. And I think we move on. I think that rejection is part of-- all of our pictures aren't great, but if you come back at the end of the day with a couple of good pictures, I think that's been a very good day.

But it's really important to be in a good place, a good location that you enjoy, so that even at the end of the day if you come back without many great pictures, you've enjoyed your walk and your meeting people. And you've been in a great environment. I mean, here in Havana I could walk around for days with or without the camera. So you know, I think that you have to always be OK. You have to be accepting of people who don't want to be photographed.

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There's a couple of Cuba pictures I'd like to show you, which I made on the street here in Havana. And I think they're, for me, an example of where I like to work on the street. One is, I saw this lady who had this incredible face. She had this purple hair. I was really intrigued by her look. We started to talk. And I asked her about her life. She told me she'd actually lived in New York when she was a young lady.

So here's the picture. She has this really very stylish hair. And this really serious look, very dignified, very beautiful. And I've always kind of loved that picture of this person who is full of life and really still wants to present herself in

the best possible way, despite whatever age she happens to be. Another picture is actually sort of a self portrait. I was walking down the street and there was this man moving furniture. And he had this mirror, which he was moving down the street.

And I sort of followed him for a little ways, photographing myself reflected in the mirror. And I like it because as he was walking, just by chance my feet happened to be kind of in the same position as his feet. So it kind of created this kind of funny picture, just a little sort of funny snapshot. The last picture is of young boy who's playing football or soccer on the street, really close to the capitol building. So you really get a sense of where you are.

You're very close to the capitol building. These boys have this very kind of serious game of football or soccer. And it's at night, a picture which you could have never really made with film because I was shooting at some crazy high ISO. But I was able to, even though it's past dark, with just light coming from the street, I was able to stop the action. So I think it's a great-- I think it gives a really good sense of life on the street in Havana, full of life. People are out with their friends talking. There's all this activity going on.

And I think it really says-- I think it really shows what life is like here in Havana.

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I think one of the great pleasures in photography is simply walking around the streets of a city, or a village, or your town, and photographing whatever strikes you, whatever you find interesting. I think you get into another kind of a zone, almost kind of a meditative place, where you start-- you're much more hyper aware of sounds, and what you see, and details, and architecture, and whatever you see on the street.