
UTILIZING COMPOSITION IN ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by David Veldman



When I got my first camera, I took pictures of absolutely everything. I snapped shots of sunsets, railway tracks, and flowers. I even took pictures of my food!

While I must confess this foray into imagery clichés, I should point out that many of us begin our photographic journey like this. We are filled with inspiration, attempting to capture everything around us that we consider interesting.

Our enthusiasm is aimless, but it also gives us abundant opportunities to learn the technical aspects of photography – aspects like the exposure triangle.

As I continued to shoot, I remember coming to a realization over time: **just because something looks interesting or beautiful, it does not necessarily create a memorable photograph.**

This revelation had a profound impact upon my photography, but at first, it was a bit frustrating.

Why could I not create a good photograph in some situations, when the raw materials were so clearly there?

What I failed to immediately realize was that although the materials were present, I lacked the skill to properly utilize them. In other words, although I possessed a 'sense' for what could be used to create a good photograph, my vision and experience were insufficient.

Nowhere was this more obvious than my first attempts at architectural photography.

As a budding photographer, I was strongly attracted to buildings of all shapes and sizes. From soaring cathedrals to run down farmhouses, I felt a deep appreciation for the way that humans are able to imbue structures with emotion and personality.

That statement may seem odd to you. However, if you think about the most important buildings in your life (perhaps a home, church, or school), you may realize that they feel more like an old friend than a mere collection of bricks and concrete.

Despite that connection, my photos rarely pleased me. They seemed flat, even clinical. I was not capturing the essence of the building at all.

Looking back, I realized that my number one error was a poor understanding of composition.

I shot haphazardly, concentrating on capturing the entire building instead of tailoring my composition to suit the particular building.

This brings us to the meat of this tutorial.

I am going to detail several compositional techniques that are useful for architectural photography.

However, it is up to you to study your subject and then determine which technique is most applicable for it.

Each of these techniques relies upon elements of composition, such as balance, rhythm, lines, shapes, or contrast.

As you begin to familiarize yourself with these elements, you will also create your own techniques over time.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your composition skills to create better images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium composition series, [Understanding Composition](#) and [Advanced Composition](#).

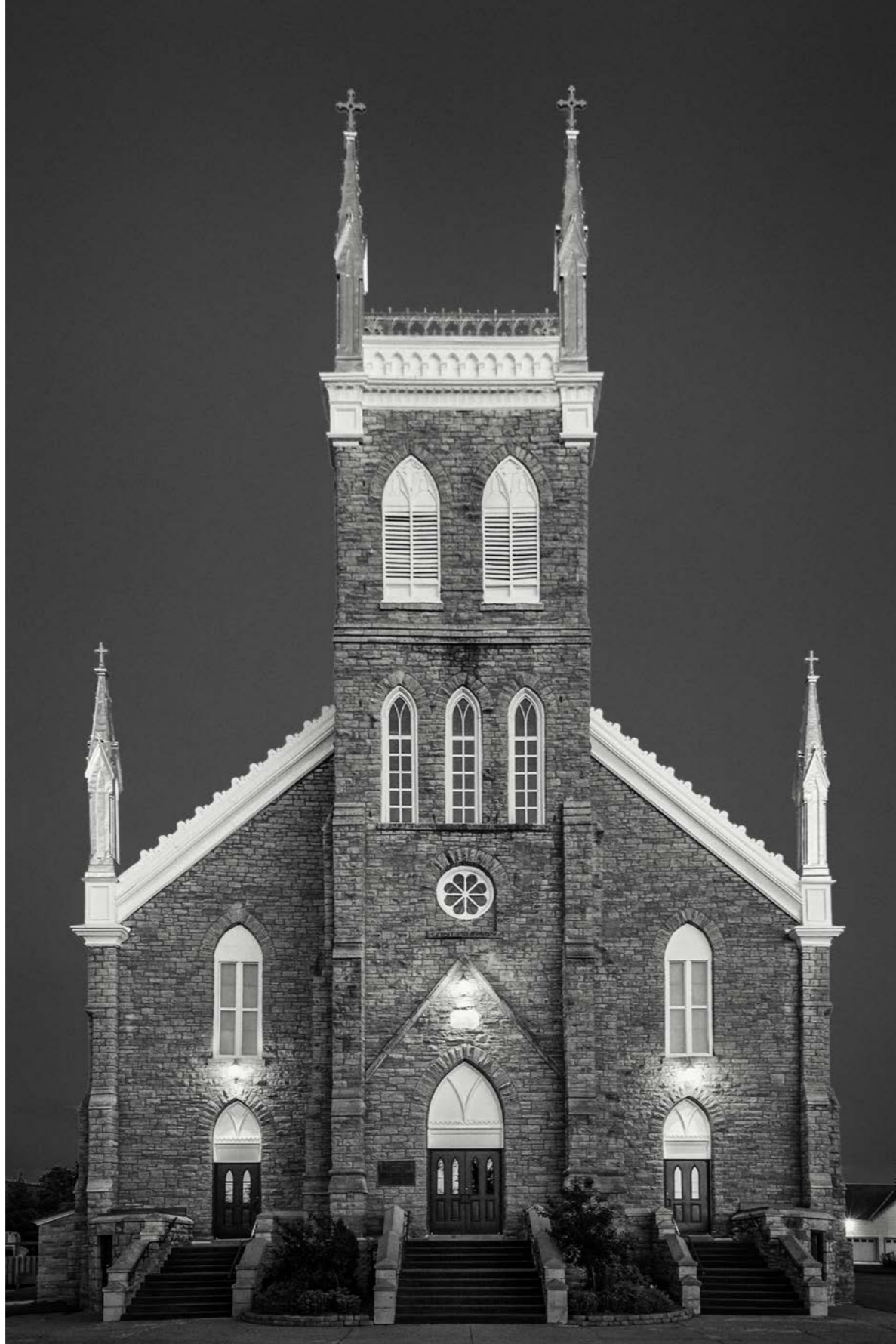


Photo by David Veldman

THE “FRONT AND CENTER” TECHNIQUE

This composition technique is the most obvious, and perhaps the most commonly used.

The concept is quite simple: place the front of the subject square in your frame, and center it.

The execution, however, is often considerably more difficult than it sounds. To begin with, you must strive to achieve perfect balance and symmetry.


In this image, I wanted to capture the grandeur and authoritative structure of the cathedral. The composition itself is simple, but capturing it was not. I had to ensure that I was dead center, otherwise the perspective would have appeared off – and even a slight shift would have created an entirely different image.

Furthermore, because of the height of the building and the physical constraints (another building behind me), I had to shoot in an upward direction to capture it.

This resulted in heavy converging verticals. Fortunately, I was shooting with an ultra-wide lens, which allowed me to capture a wide enough field of view that I could correct the massive distortion with post-processing.

Lastly, the photo has a distinct 'pop' to it because of the nearly ideal lighting.

Taken during the blue hour, the sky was almost completely dark, but remnants of the sunset were still illuminating the tallest portions of the building. This gave the image the strong contrast (from building to sky) that it needed.

 **Key Lesson:** Converging verticals is the optical illusion that a large building is 'leaning back' due to the vertical plane of the building being different from that of the camera sensor. Essentially, the more you angle your camera upwards to capture an image of a building, the more your vertical lines will lean inwards toward the central vertical point.

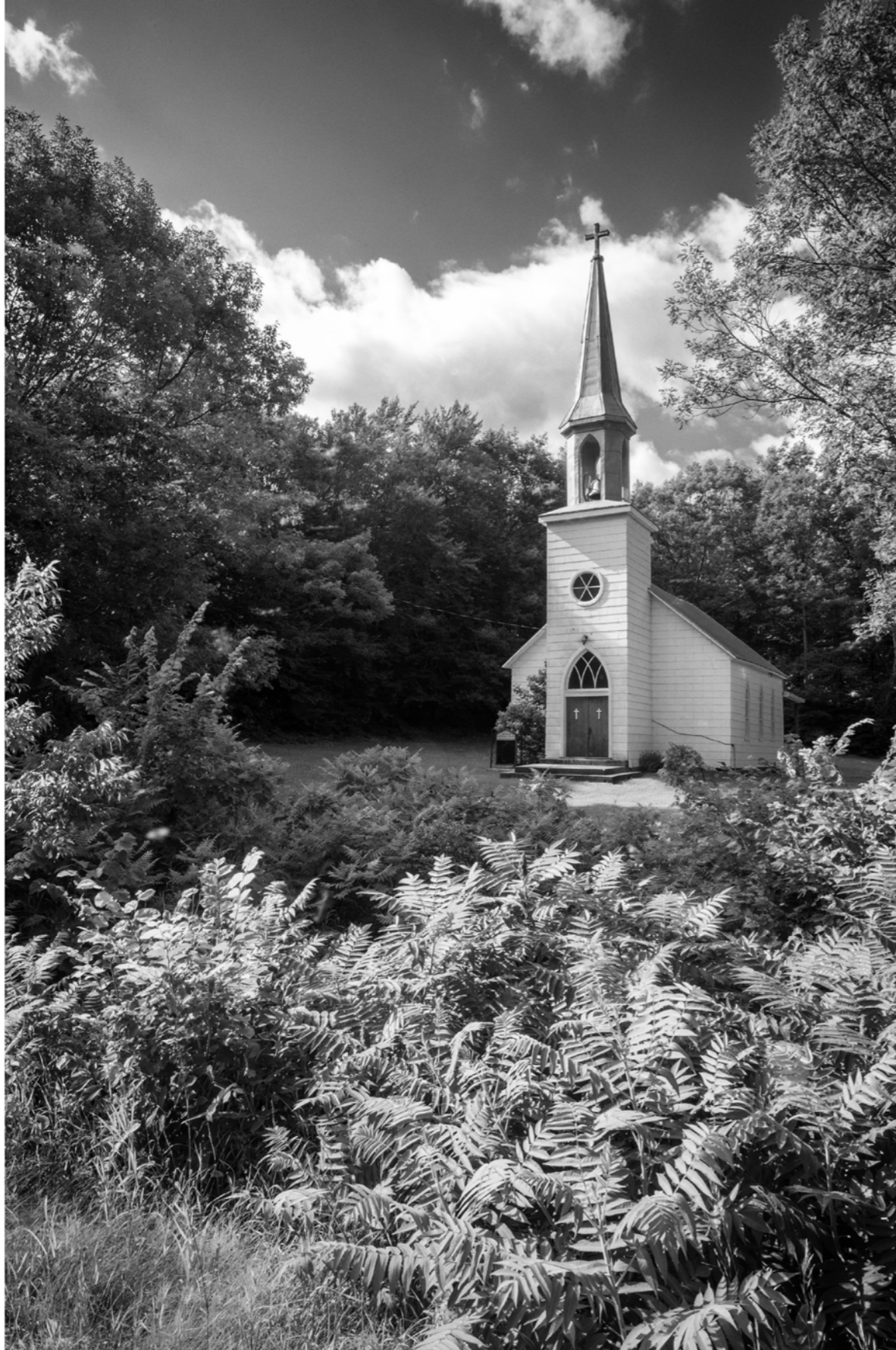


Photo by David Veldman

THE FRAMING TECHNIQUE

It is not always necessary to fill the frame with your subject as I did in the image on page 4.

At times, a building should be captured with its surrounding area as context for the best result.

There are many ways to go about this, and one of my favorite techniques is that of “framing” – using the surrounding area to create a natural border around the subject.

The image on the left is a small church in an abandoned hamlet, far down a forgotten back road.

As I wandered around the property considering my composition, I could not quite find the ideal angle.

Eventually, I moved away from the church, out onto the road. It was there that I discovered this composition with the surrounding trees that created a lovely, natural frame.

You can use anything as a frame – even other buildings. This works especially well if you can contrast your subject with its surroundings – a technique known as juxtaposition.



Photo by David Veldman

THE DETAILS - “GET IN CLOSE” TECHNIQUE

When we think of architectural photography, we often think of broad wide-angle shots that display the entirety of the subject.

However, while those broadly composed images are a key component when capturing an image of a building, there are also other useful alternatives.

Many buildings possess intricate details that exemplify the spirit of their construction. Shoot those details, and you may very well capture a bit of that essence.

In some cases, this may require a longer lens, or simply getting closer to isolate a singular area.

You will find these details in the interior of the building. The image on the left was taken inside the Center Block Parliament building of Canada, in particularly dim lighting.

The Houses of Parliament are vast, Gothic-style structures that look spectacular from the outside.

However, the elaborate details inside also carry their own meaning, and these carefully carved stone ribs are a testament to the skill of their creators.

Never hesitate to get close. Try to keep your eyes open for little details that embody the spirit of the building.

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THE BALANCE TECHNIQUE

You have probably heard of the compositional technique called the 'Rule of Thirds.'

The Rule of Thirds is an excellent tool for beginners, as it provides them with a visual framework that they can then use to create more dynamic images.


However, it is easy to become 'trapped' within that 'rule,' which can result in repetitive or similar images.

It's better to think of any photographic rule as a guideline, not a tyrannical law.

Another tool of composition that is just as important, although less well known, is that of 'balance.'

Visual balance is the method by which the photographer arranges the elements inside of a photographic frame.

Balance can be created within the Rule of Thirds, or it can be created with other compositional arrangements.

 **Key Lesson:** The trick to utilizing balance is to remember that not all elements possess the same visual weight.

A brightly lit element will generally have more visual weight than a dark one, as will a larger element to a smaller one (depending on placement), or an element that is in sharp focus versus one that is out of focus.

Learning to place elements appropriately by visual weight can be tricky. However, when you get it right, the resulting images will appear pleasant to the viewers' eyes.



Photo by David Veldman

Square photos lend themselves well to balanced compositions. In this photograph, I split the frame into two distinct halves, and each side was given visual weight by the bright highlights.

If you choose to shoot a 'balanced composition' in an architectural photograph, keep the square format in mind.

THE SHAPES AND LINES TECHNIQUE

There are many compositional elements that affect the way you frame your images. In fact, there are too many to list in full. Two of the simplest and most obvious elements are shapes and lines.

Shapes and lines are closely related, but the impact they have on your images can be drastically different.

When I shoot landscapes, I seldom deal with shapes or lines, as nature rarely produces such orderly arrangements.

However, buildings are often a visual feast of both shapes and lines, and in order to create a well-composed architectural image, it is imperative that you master their use.

Shapes have the ability to alter the entire dynamic of an image.

You can use this to your advantage, particularly if the shape is repeated throughout the frame.

You can also choose contrasting shapes. For example, circles vs. triangles.

All shapes possess their own qualities and have corresponding implications to the human mind.

Circular shapes are perceived as more organic or relaxing; quadrilaterals represent order and stability. If you keep these psychological effects in mind, they can empower you to create compositions that will truly capture the architect's original vision for the building.

Similarly, lines can exist in various forms.

Hard, angular lines conjure up feelings of order.

Smooth, or serpentine, lines feel fluid and natural.

Lines can be used as a framing method, or as visual cues to denote size, or even to lead the viewer into the image (such as a leading line).

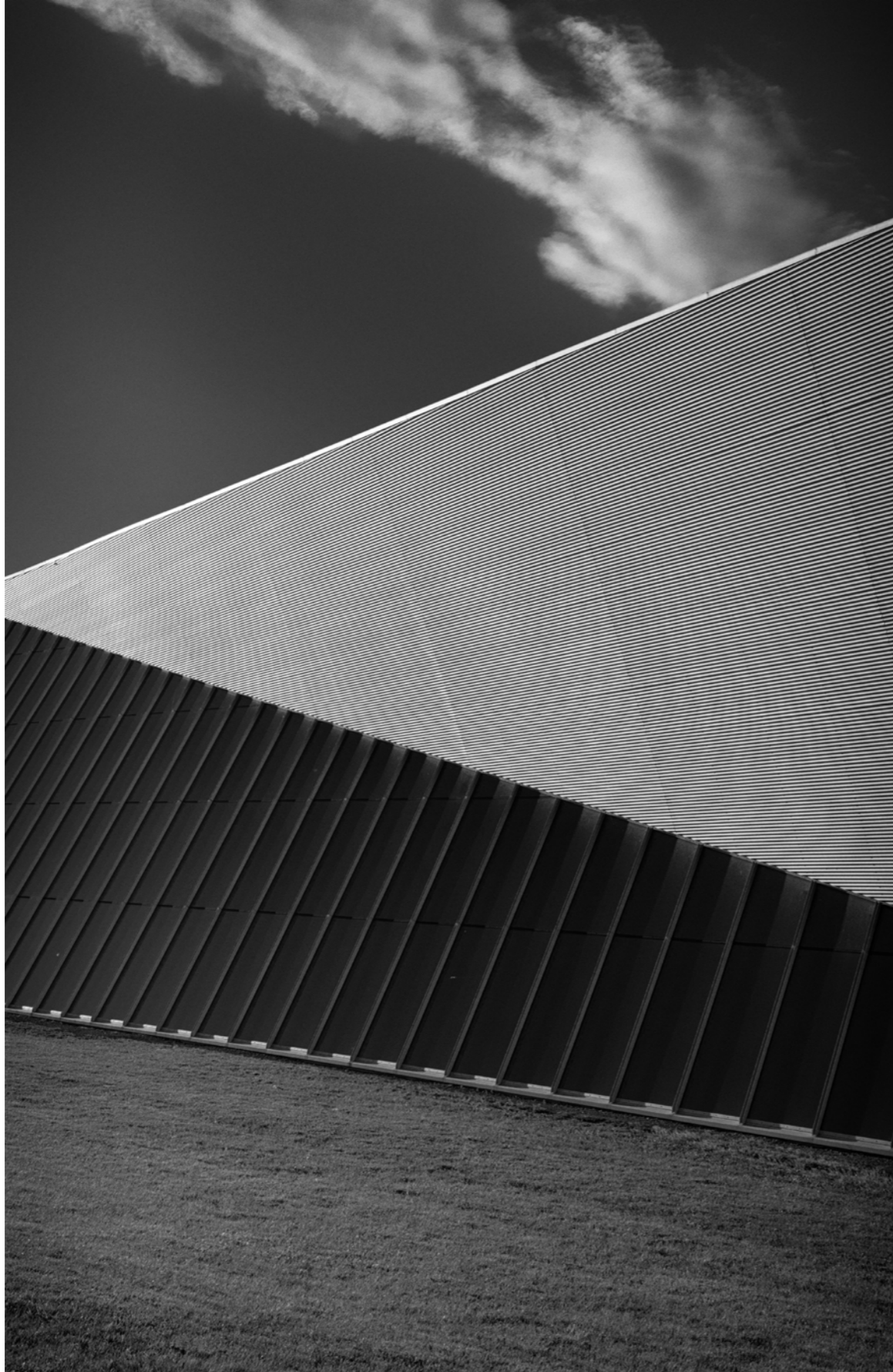


Photo by David Veldman

The Aviation Museum of Canada (image on the left) is a modernist, angular building.

I chose a tightly framed composition to isolate the contrasting shapes within its construction.

The image is dynamic, almost bordering on chaotic, and takes advantage of both shapes AND lines.

When you choose your architectural subject, always scan the area for prominent shapes and lines. Ignoring them can interfere with your composition, but working with them will create dynamic, balanced images.



Photo by David Veldman

MUCH MORE

At best, this tutorial can only serve as a quick introduction to the deep and detailed subject of composition in architecture.

The techniques listed above are by no means a comprehensive list; they are simply methods that have worked for me, which you may find useful as you continue to shoot.

As buildings are static, architectural photographers have the luxury of taking their time to carefully plan their compositions. Make the most of this time, and you'll soon be shooting images that you will be proud of.

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Self Check Quiz

1. What are the elements of composition mentioned in this eBook?
2. What are quadrilateral shapes associated with?
3. Which aspect ratio, or format, works well with balanced compositions in architectural photography?
4. Where can you often find details that exemplify a building's essence?
5. What is one of the ways to deal with converging verticals?
6. In your own words, what is framing?

Shooting Assignment:

After reading this tutorial, and checking your comprehension with the quiz, it's time to take the next step and put your freshly acquired knowledge into practice.

This assignment is quite simple. Find a building that you are interested in photographing.

Don't worry if it isn't a grand cathedral or a castle – any building that catches your eye is worth your time.

Study the building and consider the possible elements of composition that are at play within the architect's design of the building.

Are there leading lines? Does the building feature any prominent shapes? Are there high-contrast areas?

Once you have completed your study, take a picture using one, or more, of the techniques that I listed above.

Experiment with different methods, and compare your results to see which one worked best.

David Veldman, and the rest of the team at Photzy would love to see your results. Please feel free to post them onto our [Facebook page](#).

About the Author



David Veldman wants to be a better photographer, and he hopes you will join him on the journey of learning. Best of all, he's doing it on a budget! When not taking pictures, David and his wife are hiking, snowshoeing, or discovering new culinary delights.

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