AP guide to...

Shooting architectural interiors

Tom Mackie shows that there's more to a building than its exterior. He offers some tips and techniques on how to create great images of architectural interiors

WHEN you think of striking architectural images, it's usually exteriors that spring to mind, but it's often a building's interior that reveals the most intriguing and eye-catching picture opportunities. Photographing interiors involves a completely different way of thinking – about exposure, composition and lighting, not to mention working around overzealous security guards. However, with the following tried-and-tested tips for tackling these issues, you'll be able to create some amazing interior images.

KEEP IT STEADY

Before we even talk about how to create interesting compositions and how to cope with low lighting, it's essential that your camera is as steady as possible to obtain crisp, sharp images. Whenever possible, I use a tripod, but this isn't always possible with interior shots. Many places have restrictions on using tripods either because of health and safety issues (whether real or the result of some fevered bureaucratic imagination) or, even worse, because they think you're a professional photographer just because you're using a tripod.

It's always best to ask what the policy is for using tripods, as many museums, such as the V&A in London, will allow tripods if you obtain a permit at the reception desk. Permits are often free, which raises the question, why the need for a permit?

What about locations that don't allow tripods? There are several methods for keeping the camera steady. I often resort to using the next best thing – a GorillaPod. These are small, adaptable tripods that can wrap around railings and benches, or sit securely on the floor. They're great for getting impressive shots of ornate ceilings and, because there are no long legs to extend out, they are very discreet and quick to use. They also dispel that professional 'persona' associated with normal tripods, so security guards are less likely to take any notice of you if you're using one.

Another option is to increase the ISO enough to enable you to handhold your camera. Most of the latest DSLRs have a high ISO, low-noise capability, so loss of quality is not really an issue. Even if there is too much noise for your liking, you can always minimise it by using the luminance noise reduction in Lightroom. If I do have to handhold my camera, I tuck my elbows into my chest, breathe out and gently depress the shutter using a shutter speed of at least 1/60sec. Bracing up against a wall is another option. Often you can use items that you have with you to prop up the camera – try a jacket, umbrella or a glasses case (see picture, far left) – and use a cable release or self-timer to trip the shutter to avoid camera shake.

Above: Try to capture straight verticals, balanced lighting, and the size and space of an area in your image

Try using a glasses case to prop up your camera (far left) or use a GorillaPod (left) when tripods are prohibited

EXPOSE TO THE RIGHT

Lighting for interiors can vary from low light in cathedrals with no more than minimal daylight trickling through stained-glass windows to large atria flooding the interior with harsh light. The main objective is to capture enough information on the sensor without blowing out highlights or blocking up shadows, and a good tip in this situation is to expose to the right. This means exposing the image so that the curve on the histogram is as far to the right as possible without losing the highlights, giving you as much information as possible to work with in post-processing.

To achieve this, set the lowest possible ISO (such as ISO 100) on your camera, then choose the optimal aperture for the lens you're using – usually about f/5.6-f/8 – and let the camera determine the length of exposure (this assumes you're using a tripod, of course). If the histogram isn't far enough to the right, just increase your exposure in manual mode or use exposure compensation in aperture mode.

If the exposure range is greater than the sensor can record, make an HDR (high dynamic range) image with several exposures – one for the shadows, one for the midtones and, finally, one for the highlights – then combine them using HDR software such as Photomatix Pro or Photoshop.

'While much thought has gone into the interior at eye level, don't forget to look up'

The British Museum is an iconic space when it comes to shooting interiors

TIME OF DAY

The time of day and weather conditions can play an important role in capturing the best lighting for many interiors. If you have large expansive windows filling the interior with daylight, as you do with the Great Courtyard in the British Museum (see above), then overcast conditions are best as they will soften the light so you don't get any harsh shadows.

I chose to photograph the Great Courtyard just after the museum opened in the morning when there were few tourists around, but I still wanted to include one or two people to show off the huge proportions. Normally, I try to exclude people from my images whenever possible, but there are times such as this that a person in just the right position will add more dimension and a sense of scale. Besides, if buildings are designed with public areas, it makes sense to include the people who are using them. They don't always have to be static, either, as you can try using a slow shutter speed of around 1/8sec to create a blur of the person as they move through your scene.

This image of the Museum of Modern Art in New York shows how a human element has been included to finish off the composition

subscribe 0844 848 0848

DESIGN THE IMAGE

Now let us turn to the small matter of composing the image. Architects have obviously given a great deal of thought to line, pattern, space, balance and colour when designing their interiors, and for the photographer it's a matter of understanding these elements and using them to compose an effective image by exploiting angles and views.

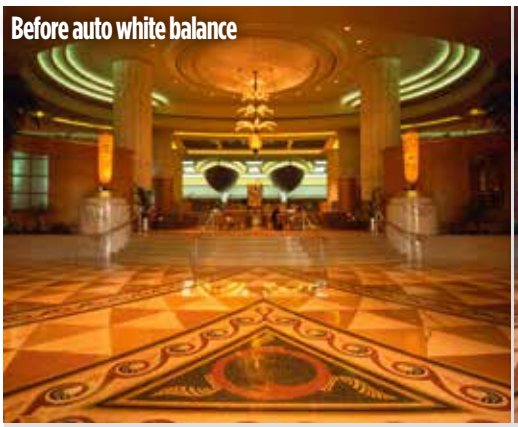
While much thought has gone into the interior at eye level, don't forget to look up. I tend to walk around looking at ceilings of grand interiors because often a lot of importance has been put into their design and how they interact with the rest of the space (see above). In the image of the USA's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (left), the opposing window showing the internal staircase is obvious as it's at eye level, but it was the geometric shapes of the ceiling and how they lead your eye to the staircase that caught my attention. This is an instance where a human element is needed to finish off the composition. I waited a long time and took many shots of people, but this solitary dark figure ascending the stairs was ideal.

Wideangle lenses work very well for capturing lines and patterns of large interiors and they can help small interiors look much larger than they actually are. I used a focal length of 14mm for the MoMA image and to capture the strong ceiling lines of Grand Central Station leading to the iconic clock (below).

ALL PICTURES © TOM MACKIE

There are times when corrected verticals would not be appropriate as the angular shapes and lines are what make the composition work

Look for interesting shapes and colours to help create unique photos



WHITE BALANCE

Interior lighting has a large influence on how your final image will look. In the days of film, we had to use a filter to warm up or cool down an image, depending on the type of lighting in a room. Now, with DSLRs, the auto white balance will neutralise any unwanted colour casts. It works especially well with the mixed lighting in this photo of the entrance to the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (see above), where there was a mixture of daylight, incandescent and fluorescent lighting. The white-balance settings on your camera will only have an effect on your image if you are shooting JPEGs. Of course, if you are shooting raw files, you can change the white balance in post-processing. It is possible to make minor adjustments to JPEGs in post-processing as well, but extreme colour casts are best done in-camera or with raw files.

There are times when you may want to keep the warm effect produced by incandescent lighting or the coolness of daylight, so in these instances, instead of neutralising the interior using auto white balance, switch to the appropriate white-balance setting. I often use cloudy white balance if I want to warm up an interior that is bathed in cloudy daylight.

To see more of Tom Mackie's work, visit **www.tommackie.com**

KEEP IT STRAIGHT

Producing perfect verticals in architecture is a rudimentary technique for the architectural photographer. A view camera or an expensive perspective-control (PC) lens can accomplish this for you, at a cost, but there are cheaper options. Verticals (see below) can be straightened using Photoshop. Better still, Lightroom 5 corrects the verticals with a push of a button. In the lens-corrections setting, there is an auto button that will level the horizon and straighten the verticals instantly, or you can choose to manually correct the image for more severe convergence.

So, when are you photographing public interiors, keep these tips in mind to come away with some compelling images. **AP**