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PHOTO INSIGHT



TOM MACKIE

As an internationally respected architectural photographer, Tom brings a wealth of experience to AP

Tom Mackie explains how he wrestled with crossover light and a narrow window of time to capture this dramatic Seattle skyline

THIS is a particularly well-known view in Seattle, Washington, and I was keen to get a night shot of the scene. The tower is called the Space Needle. Standing at more than 600 feet (182 metres) tall, it has become a symbolic landmark not only in Seattle but also in north-west America.

I took this shot from a park that overlooks the city. It's a great location because at certain times of the year you can see Mount Rainier, or Mount Tahoma as it is also known, in the distance (see panoramic shot below).

People often ask me why I take pictures of a scene that has been photographed so many times. The answer is because it is an iconic image that people want to buy. In any iconic location, whether it's a city or a landscape, there are always one or two classic images – and those are the photographs you have to get. You can be creative with your shots, but the classic viewpoint will always sell.

When I'm shooting images to sell, there are a number of editorial considerations I make. For example, I shot this image so it could be used as a magazine cover. I deliberately included the trees in the foreground and a large amount of sky

above to allow designers to overlay text. Thinking about your composition in this way and accepting this element of 'shooting to order' is the reality of photography as a business. You have to think in terms of who the end user is going to be.

The only way you can make a popular view look different is by shooting in different lighting conditions. I took this shot early in the evening, as I wanted to capture the very last remnants of light on the buildings. As the dying light falls across the buildings it casts a warm glow, which makes them sparkle and come alive. These are mirrored buildings, so they reflect the sunset in the sky. I set up my Canon EOS 5D Mark II camera with a Canon 70-200mm f/2.8 lens on a tripod and adjusted the angle to maximise the light that was reflecting from the buildings.

When the sun goes too far below the horizon, you lose the light and the moment has gone. There is only a short window of time before the light disappears so you can't waste a moment.

With a shot like this the shooting angle is crucial. You have to know where to position your camera to catch the light as it moves across the scene. These buildings face north

and the sun is setting to my right, which is the west. I took this in mid-summer, but if I had shot this in winter the sun would have set lower in the sky and further to the south, which would have affected the way the light fell on the buildings – they wouldn't have reflected the light as strongly.

The lighting here is mixed – there are the artificial lights of the buildings and the warm afterglow of the sunset. I find matrix metering most useful in these conditions because it takes readings from a number of points to create an average meter reading. The white balance settings on most modern DSLR cameras handle mixed lighting brilliantly. Unlike with film where you have to use filters to remove incandescent, tungsten or fluorescent light, depending on the look of the shot, with digital imaging there is no need to do this.

I shoot in raw and adjust the colour balance afterwards, so if I adjust the white balance while shooting it is for reference only. If you are shooting JPEGs, adjusting the white balance during shooting will affect the look of your final image. I wanted a very warm, clean look to the skyline and a contrast between the golden glow of the light on the buildings and the cold, crisp sky.

My exposure was approximately 1/2sec at f/10. I used this aperture because it is the optimum for this lens. The lens has image stabilisation, so to avoid blur it needs to be switched off when using a tripod.

I had photographed this scene before, but with skyline images you have to keep shooting them. As new buildings spring up, the shape of the skyline changes, and when you're shooting for stock you need up-to-date shots of key locations. No one is going to buy an outdated city skyline shot. **AP**

Tom Mackie was talking to Gemma Padley

To see more images by Tom visit www.tommackie.com



TALKING TECHNIQUE

I photographed the same scene in different formats so the images could be used in several different ways. For this stitched panoramic I ordered my composition so the tower would be in the centre. I wanted to draw the viewer's attention directly to the main subject of the skyline. The composition curves up in the middle, which creates a sense of dynamism – the skyline is not static. Each building contributes to the step-like movement either side of the tower, leading the eye to the subject.

When working in crossover light, you have to work fast and it is especially high pressure when you're trying

to shoot five or seven images for a stitched panoramic. There were approximately five exposures in this composite image. You have to make sure the exposure is the same for each shot to be able to stitch them together seamlessly.

I found a position where I could capture all the shots I needed and set up my camera beforehand. I made sure my tripod was level, then straightened the camera on the tripod and adjusted the focal length. If your camera and tripod aren't level, your horizons will be off balance, making it difficult to stitch the shots together evenly, while if your focal length is too wide you may get a

'bow-tie' effect. This is where the image is pulled in at the centre causing it to be distorted. The central subject becomes smaller and is 'lost' in the composition. I try to shoot at a focal length of 50mm or longer to avoid this.

I panned the camera to work out the shots I would need, checking the spirit level and making sure the shots overlapped by at least 50 per cent. I used manual focus to make sure my focus was spot on in each shot. If I'm working in aperture priority I'll use exposure compensation, dialling the exposure back to my initial reading to keep it consistent.

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