



PHOTO INSIGHT

BRINGING YOU ESSENTIAL EXPERT ADVICE EVERY WEEK



TOM MACKIE

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

Tom Mackie discusses his approach to photographing the KIO Towers in Madrid, Spain, and explains how shooting in daylight and after dark can produce two very different images

SOME buildings are so striking you can't help but photograph them. The KIO Towers, also known as the Puerta de Europa towers or Gate of Europe, stand more than 100 metres high. Commissioned by the Kuwait Investment Office in the mid-1990s, they tilt at a 15° angle and are an imposing sight on the Madrid skyline. With the statue in the foreground standing immediately in front of the monolith-like structure and the two towers leaning in

either side, this is a classic photographic location and a classic composition.

I was keen to photograph the towers in daylight and at night to see what moods I could create. There was about 45 minutes between each shot. The vantage point may be the same, but the mood in each image is very different – one is bright and clear, the other is brooding and sinister. These contrasting atmospheres are entirely due to the use of light. I took

these images the same day that I took the KIO Towers image that appeared in AP 19–26 December 2009.

It's an interesting experiment to photograph the same building during the day and at night. Different factors come into play – namely, the interaction of light and subject, but also changing weather conditions such as the appearance of cloud. On this day, the clouds rolled in just after sunset. I would have preferred a clear sky for my night shot, but sometimes you have to work with the weather you have. Even in bad weather architectural night scenes can look striking if handled correctly – it's all down to the illumination of the building.

In these images different parts of the scene stand out, depending on where the light falls. The lighting in the daylight image gives prominence to the towers, while in the night image the artificially lit statue becomes the focal point. I always try to use light to pick out parts of the scene that are most interesting and to show the subject in literally the best possible light.

In the left-hand image (daylight) I arrived as the sun was hitting the central pointed building, but I felt it was too overpowering. Instead, I waited until the light moved round and the foreground was thrown into

shadow. I think the shadowed foreground works well because it gives more prominence to the KIO Towers on either side. The intense blue sky contrasts with the buildings, causing them to stand out even more in the composition.

With the night shot the main challenge was finding a way to balance the light that was shining upwards onto the buildings, statue and fountain, with the darker sky. The towers aren't lit up at night, so I switched the focus to the statue and fountain instead. In this image I had to be careful not to blow out my highlights – for example, the spot of light immediately behind the statue – but I also had to be careful not to underexpose the scene so the buildings would blend into the sky. I would have preferred the whole sky to be the colour you can see just poking through the clouds on the left-hand side as this would have helped the towers to really stand out, but the dark sky is just light enough for the buildings to be seen. The 13sec exposure in the night shot has captured the slow, silky motion of the water in the fountain.

Usually when I'm shooting architecture I'll check how the building is lit and where the light falls before the shoot. I'll use this to work out the best shooting angles. Where you stand in relation to the sun will

obviously affect where the shadows are going to be, so it's best to spend time trying a few vantage points and looking closely at how the light intersects with the building and how it changes over a period of time.

If you choose a west-facing viewpoint, think about how you could create a dramatic sunset image, or if the building is facing east, look at where the light is coming from first thing in the morning. Cathedrals, for example, can look especially startling and imposing if you find an angle that allows gradation of light across the composition. Try a three-quarter angle facing west and see how the light illuminates the building. Comprehensive research about where the light is going to be at what time is vital if you want to come back with an image that is dramatic, has character and depth. If you are making a special journey to photograph a particular building, make sure you find out how it will be lit in advance.

Lighting aside, there were additional factors to contend with when taking these images. Passing trucks kept driving in front of me, so timing was crucial to avoid capturing these in the shot.

In my architectural work I like to incorporate symmetry where possible and on this occasion I wanted an image that

was symmetrical. The difficulty was trying to get the alignment of the statue perfectly straight with the building in the centre. The central line frustratingly falls just to the left of the statue as you are looking at the scene. Lining the two subjects up wasn't possible due to the way the building and statue were designed; it niggles me to think the statue is just off centre, but there was nothing I could do!

For a scene like this the most effective shooting position is facing the scene straight on. I set up my Canon EOS 5D camera with a 24–105mm lens on a tripod and waited in position until the light faded. It may sound ironic considering the array of slanting angles in this scene, but I could have used a tilt-and-shift lens to ensure any vertical lines – the central vertical line of the pointed building, the statue and walls – were absolutely straight. In Photoshop I used the Free Transform tool (Edit>Transform>Perspective) to correct perspective distortion. If you are working from eye you have to be careful not to overdo it. Watch out for foreshortening of buildings or long, distorted buildings. **AP**

Tom Mackie was talking to Gemma Padley

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

'The towers aren't lit up at night, so I switched the focus to the statue and fountain instead'

BOB PICTURES © TOM MACKIE