

Amateur  
Photographer  
Technique

# Photo Insight

**TOM MACKIE**  
EXPLAINS HOW  
HE TURNED THIS  
UNLIKELY STAIRCASE  
INTO A STARKLY  
ABSTRACT AND  
BEGUILING THREE-  
DIMENSIONAL  
STRUCTURE

## The AP experts

Each week, one of our team of experts of Steve Bloom, David Clapp, Tom Mackie and Clive Nichols will reveal the secrets behind one of their great images. This week it's Tom Mackie

**TOM MACKIE** Architecture  
As an internationally  
respected architectural  
photographer, Tom  
brings a wealth of  
experience to AP



I FOUND this scene by pure luck during a photography trip to the Amalfi Coast in Italy. It was pouring with rain one day, so I decided to have a look inside a nearby hotel in a town called Ravello. The weather was abysmal, so I wandered around the hotel to see if I could find anything interesting to photograph. I went up one of the back staircases and stumbled across this winding set of steps. It was an incredible design, and the shapes and patterns fitted together in such a fascinating way that it jumped out at me.

Scenes with lots of shapes and patterns can be tricky to compose because there are so many contrasting elements. When I look through the viewfinder I'm constantly editing within my eye and asking myself, 'Would this look good another way?' or 'Should I edit that out?' I'll try coming in closer on one aspect of the scene or moving back with my camera. The hardest thing about this shot was physically manoeuvring the camera into position, as I was standing in a very confined space and there wasn't much room to work. I used my Pentax 67 with a 45mm lens very close in. The wideangle lens helped to open up the scene and accentuate the design of the staircase.

The well-known optical illusion in which the viewer sees either two faces or a vase came to mind when I was composing this image. The composition has a degree of

surrealism about it, and the shape of the staircase lends itself to a surrealist approach because of the way it has been constructed. I wanted to create an abstract image where the viewer is unable to figure out which way the steps go. The curving steps at the top seem to continue into infinity, creating an overall sense of endlessness. While I thought about placing a person in the top right-hand corner to create a sense of realism, I felt that doing this would blow the whole idea of the image, which was to create a surreal graphic composition. In a lot of architectural images you need to have people in the scene to show how the building is being used and its scale, but this image isn't about scale – it's about design. If I'd placed a model in the scene it would be a point of reference and spoil the mysterious effect.

While composing my shot, I was conscious of composing for the frame. Composing right to the edges has an impact on how the viewer interprets the scene and here it creates a slightly uncomfortable feel. I wanted the stairs to sweep up from the left-hand side and decided to place the dominant arch in the top third of the composition. The stairs guide the eye from the base of the composition towards the arch – the brightest part of the scene – in a fluid motion, before flowing back into the image. It is a case of balancing the curves within the composition to provide a sense of harmony.

The repetitive diagonals of the



steps create a sense of rhythm and give the image its concertina-like appearance, driving the composition upwards. Apart from the natural arch in the top right-hand corner, diagonal lines create the curves in this image. The curve of the steps, for example, is made up of a series of lines. By thinking about where you place lines in a composition, it is possible to give a static subject a sense of movement, as I have tried to do here.

A lot of my work is based on strong colours, so this image is a complete

departure from what I normally do. With a subject that isn't colourful you end up looking at the image not in a colour sense but in a tonal sense. You think, 'How are these tones going to work together?' The colour palette in this image may be sparse, but the tonal range is quite wide. It is this that creates the sense of contrast. The undersides of the stairs are in shadow while the sides are lighter, and together the light and shadow areas create a 3D impression – you can almost feel the sharpness of the

edges of the steps poking out of the frame. In any image, darker areas are recessive while lighter areas tend to leap out, so it's a case of shifting the camera angle until there is a good balance between the two.

The image holds together because the white arch at the top is surrounded by grey. If the arch had extended right to the edge of the frame, the composition wouldn't have worked because the white would take your eye out of the picture. Offsetting different tones against each other is

therefore key in giving a composition a sense of being 'whole'. It is a case of consciously thinking, 'If I include a light tone here, where will it lead the eye?'

I used a handheld spotmeter and took meter readings from the light areas, shadows and mid-tones, setting my camera to give an average exposure for all three. I didn't want the shadows on the underside of the stairs to be too dark because I wanted to keep the scene light and airy. If you underexpose too much, the whites start to become muddy. I veered my

exposure towards the highlights to prevent the stairs in the top right-hand corner burning out.

I also photographed this staircase as a vertical panorama, which gave a different composition. See *Talking technique* (right). **AP**

To see more images by Tom Mackie visit [www.tommackie.com](http://www.tommackie.com). Tom's book *Tom Mackie's Landscape Photography Secrets*, published by David & Charles, is available from [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk).



## Talking technique

When we turn our cameras vertically, we are making a conscious decision about how the frame will affect the way the viewer experiences the composition. When shooting a panorama you have to look at a scene slightly differently due to the different frame shape. Quite often you see panoramic images where the format has been used for the sake of it – where the image has been cropped afterwards, for example – and little thought has gone into how the format can be used to accentuate the scene. In the image above, the elements are in the same position as in the main image, with the stairs still sweeping up the left-hand side and the arch in the top right-hand corner, curving round to the left, but it's a totally different composition. I used a Fujifilm 6x17 panoramic camera with 90mm lens. I wanted to keep the fluid motion of the staircase, but extend the middle section further down in the composition. The camera format may be different, but standard compositional questions still apply: 'How can I draw the viewer's eye in?' 'What entry and exit points do I want?' 'How can I use the shapes to guide the eye around the composition?' All these things are important as you're trying to influence the viewer by how you compose your shot.