

Photo Insight

Amateur
Photographer
Technique

WHEN **TOM MACKIE** SPOTTED THIS BRIGHTLY COLOURED BUILDING IN ARIZONA IN THE UNITED STATES, HE KNEW THERE WAS AN IMAGE TO BE HAD. TOM EXPLAINS HOW HE BALANCED LIGHT, COLOUR AND SHAPE TO CRAFT THIS GRAPHIC COMPOSITION

FINDING this scene was a pure fluke. I had been photographing the City Hall, a Spanish-style domed building in the middle of Tucson, Arizona, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a flash of colour. With my interest piqued, I thought I'd go and investigate.

I stumbled across this business complex called La Placita that was built in the traditional Adobe style (made from sand and clay) and painted with these bright colours. It was incredible. I started wandering around, looking for interesting details and paying particular attention to the way the light was hitting the building.

I found this unassuming stairwell and started taking some pictures. What attracted me to the scene was the light streaming through the stairs, bouncing off the wall and creating these striking diagonal lines. The intersecting geometric shapes also caught my eye. The light hadn't come down as far as it has in the final picture, although the elongated light shafts were already there. I waited a little for the light to move round so the shadows were further down the wall. It is the lines that make this image – they are going in the same direction as the railing and stairs, which creates balance.

I positioned my tripod and Pentax 67 camera with a 75mm shift lens directly in front of the stairs, but the

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



composition didn't work. The shot looked straight through the stairs and out of the picture. The diagonal light shafts did not have as much impact and there were bins in the bottom of the frame.

Thinking about how to frame your subject is crucial. The strength of a composition like this comes from creating a frame within a frame. People tend to think of framing as using a tree branch or a window, but a frame can be more subliminal than that. In this image, the strong vertical bands of colour keep your eye firmly fixed on the centre.

I shifted my tripod to the side and

positioned my camera to include the strong colours on both sides of the image. I was eager to capture those powerful triangular shapes along the side of the staircase. I like concentrating on details to create smaller compositions within the overall image because I think it creates impact. When you look at this image you can see rectangles, triangles and diagonals, all working together to create a unified composition.

For me, deciding how to balance colour and shape in the frame happens simultaneously. If I had excluded the band of colour on the right-hand side, for example, it

wouldn't have had the same sense of balance. If you cover the purple and cyan strip you can see this.

Using the shift lens meant I could ensure the verticals were straight. I was too close to use a telephoto lens, and a wideangle optic would have caused distortion. The 75mm lens keeps everything in proportion. It's a case of knowing which lens will work best for the composition you're trying to create. On a standard DSLR with a 24–105mm zoom lens, you would probably want to shoot a scene like this at approximately 50mm or 55mm. If you get converging verticals, you can always

straighten them up in Photoshop (Edit>Transform>Perspective).

I took this image at around 1–2pm. I often photograph architecture at 10am or mid-afternoon to get a good quality of light and saturated colour. With architectural work, you can create really striking images during the day, but the light has to complement the building you're photographing. When photographing sections of a building, later in the day when the sun is higher in the sky tends to be best.

I was using a small aperture of around f/22 and a shutter speed of 1/2sec. I was quite close to the cyan and purple wall, so I wanted to get this

It is better to be slightly overexposed for a scene like this as the colours will 'pop' out of the frame

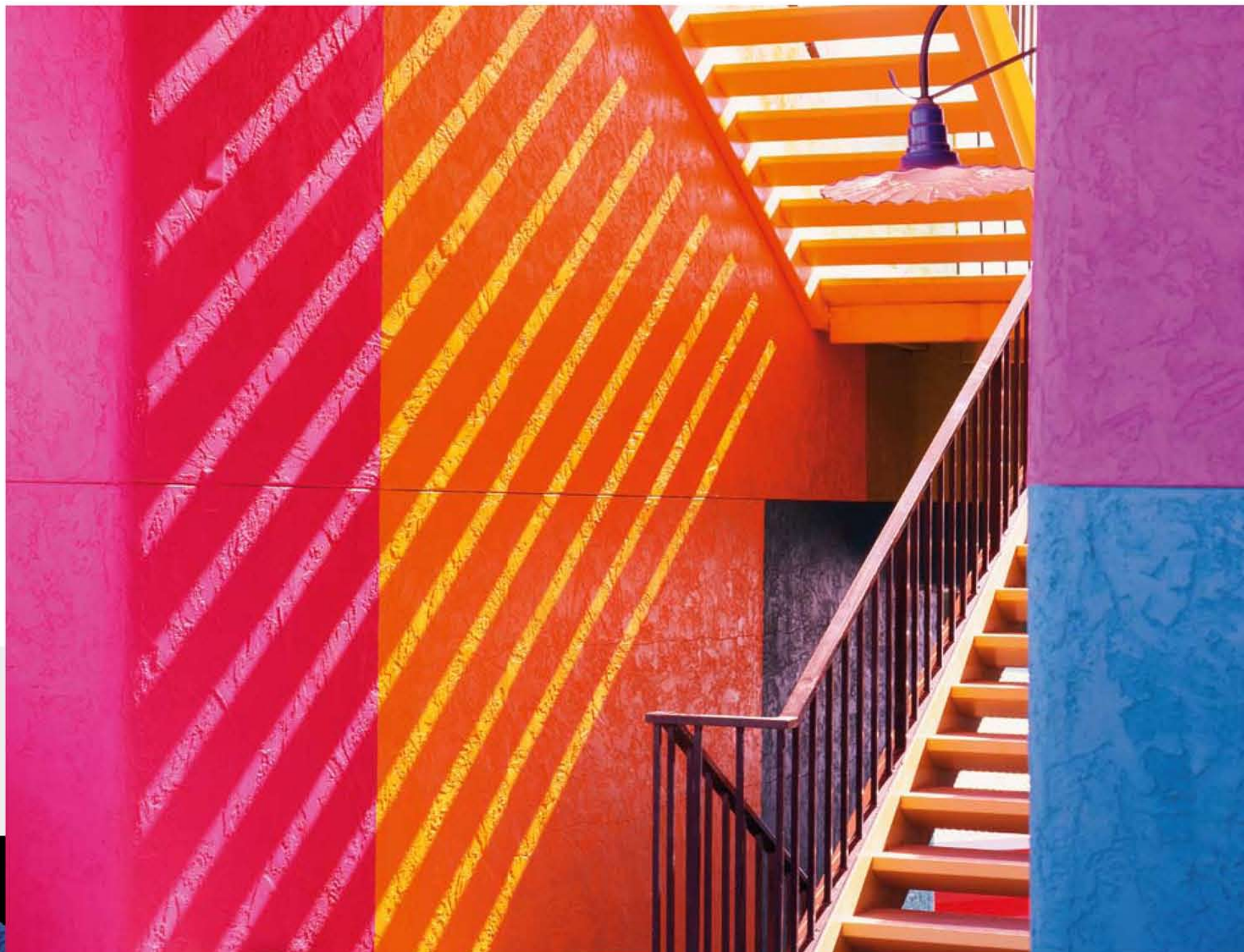
fairly sharp. I took spotmeter readings from the purple and pink walls, and the shadowy darker orange area in the background. I did not take a reading from the diagonal lines of light, as this would have thrown my exposure out.

There was a difference of four to five stops between the readings for the darkest areas and the lighter areas in the foreground, so I made sure the shadows were correctly exposed. I bracketed my exposures because sometimes you get an overexposed frame that is actually very useful. It is better to be slightly overexposed than underexposed for a scene like this because the colours will 'pop' out of the frame. An underexposed image would look muddy. If you were shooting this on a DSLR and hadn't blown your highlights you could recover detail in the raw file by bringing the exposure down in post-

processing. I used Fujichrome Velvia 50 film, which helped bring out the strong, saturated colours.

A lot of people look at an image like this and say, 'I don't get it. Why would you want to take a picture of that?' It's not an obvious choice of subject, but the little intimate details often reveal more about the building than a photograph of the whole structure. I've tried to achieve something that is personal to me. If you create images you are happy with, that, ultimately, is what counts. **AP**

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



Talking technique

The picture above shows the same building, but compositionally the image is not as strong. When you look at this image you notice the strong shape of the cut-off window and your eye is also drawn to the white line in the centre, which doesn't lead anywhere specific. The other diagonals also lead out of the frame.

Understanding how certain colours work together in an image is key to creating a successful end result. A colour wheel will help you to judge this, and one can be found as part of *Photo Insight* in AP 18 April. Yellows and blues complement each other and create a really punchy image, but it is important to think about the balance of light and dark colours in the frame – dark colours recede while lighter colours jump out more readily. You have to decide how to crop the image so there is an equal balance between the two.

Pitting purple against a blue sky didn't create as strong a combination here because there isn't enough contrast. There is a lot of dark colour close together and although there is a bright yellow strip on the right-hand side, the composition doesn't hang together as harmoniously as the main image.