SHOOTING
ARCHITECTURE
WITH YOUR SMARTPHONE

By Andrea Bosio - Architect and Professional Photographer
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People ask: “What camera do you use?”
I say: “You don’t ask a writer what typewriter he uses.”

Man Ray

Nevertheless, I really wish to tell you that all the photographs you will find among the pages of this book have been taken with a smartphone.
A book on architectural photography with a smartphone?

Really?! Architecture has always been photographed with view cameras and tiltable/shiftable lenses, digital camera backs that cost tens of thousands, and now you’re here telling us how to “Photograph architecture with your smartphone”?

Well, yes!

I’ve written this book with the purpose of revealing a few tips and tricks to take extraordinary photos using only your smartphone.

Why?

Because seeing beautiful, well-made photographs, especially in the field of architecture, is a pleasure for the photographer and the viewer alike.
In addition to this, as we live in a time when everyone has access to a camera phone, I believe that it’s important to have a background of skill and knowledge in taking these photos, in order to achieve the best quality results.

Who is it for?

This book is meant for you and for all those who wish to improve the qualitative level of their architecture photography production using their smartphones.

It is meant for people who travel and want to come home with gorgeous shots that are sure to leave friends and family speechless.

It is for professionals such as architects, engineers and surveyors who use images in their profession and who wish to make the best of this.
I’m thinking of architects conducting a survey before embarking on a new project, and how they might want to document the phases of construction with fine and exact photographs, or to create high-level, clean and neat reports.

It is meant for those who want to keep their clients updated on the progression of works with high-quality images.

It is for anyone who wants to share firsthand fresh pictures of their creations on their social media, on those channels that are nowadays unavoidable, such as Facebook and Instagram.

The quality of camera phones nowadays makes this possible: even in the field of architectural photography, it is possible to create little masterpieces if we know how, where and when to aim our lens.

**I want to provide you with a few simple but effective tricks that will drastically improve the quality of your shots.**

I certainly do not intend to steal work from professional architectural photographers who go about their work with quality and passion - because I’m one of them myself, among other things. Heaven forbid!

I just want to help all those who use photography daily, both amateurs and professionals, be able to take better pictures.

Professional photographers specializing in architecture will continue to do their work with professional equipment and create images that are perfect for print or publishing and for the designer’s online or paper-based portfolio, and that are of the highest quality in terms of composition, chromaticism and resolution. They will also put a part of themselves into their work, making it unique, es-
sential and desirable for any architect who wishes to enhance and valorize a project by sharing it with high-quality images.

Hundreds of books have been written about photography; why, then, the need to write another one?

This, indeed, is not a book on the theory of photography, but a compendium of simple tricks that are within anyone’s reach and can help create excellent shots.

I got this idea while working with Italian and international architects, and especially by looking at the photographs that they’d taken of their projects, on construction sites or during surveys.

I was inspired to write this manual after meeting several architects who’d ask me to take photos similar to those taken with their phones that, surprise surprise, weren’t bad at all!

However this is a rare occurrence, and more often than not I come across shots that have been taken too quickly and did not turn out great, hence the thought that a short guide on how to take photographs of architecture using a smartphone would be useful to spread some quality in the world of amateur photography, and not just that.

Good.
Now we can get started!
Rid your vocabulary and your mind of sentences such as “I can’t take photos” and “I am not a photographer” and the likes. These believes are the first obstacles that keep you from evolving and improving and, in general, to gain satisfaction from your work.

Try to be kinder and more collaborative about yourself.

This will make you feel more at ease and comfortable when you are out shooting.
The term ‘photography’ evokes the idea of a trace left by light, and that’s just what it is.

A photograph is the sign that light, emanating from any light source, impresses on a surface.
The term ‘photography’ evokes the idea of a trace left by light, and that’s just what it is. A photograph is the sign that light, emanating from any light source, impresses on a surface. Indeed, the first manifestation of the concept of photography as an apparatus that is able to reproduce reality through its luminous reflection can be found in the human being, in particular in the eyes; did you know that the human eyes work just like a camera?

In short: light, a luminous flow made up of photons and generated by the sun or by an artificial light source, is reflected by the surfaces of the objects it hits and immediately diffused in the surrounding atmosphere. If we are around and our eye or a camera lens (whether digital or analog) intercepts this light, it is channeled and forced to pass through a tiny hole, that is the pupil in the eye and the diaphragm in the photographic device. Now the photons, if they are intercepted by a surface, will light it up
point by point and recreate the image of the initial object. Imagine light as an avalanche of spots that land on the object and collect a tiny piece of information in the form of an image before they bounce away and are reflected. They then take the information with them to their next destination - in this case, a photosensitive surface like a piece of film or a digital sensor.

This is the foundation.
One of the first scholars to notice this phenomenon was Aristotle who, during a solar eclipse, was able to make out the image of the sun, partially covered by the moon, projected on the ground through a tree’s branches.

Later, with the contribution of Leonardo da Vinci’s experiments, the principle was distilled and resulted in the Camera Obscura, a very simple technology that used the pinhole principle to reproduce reality on a surface, so that it could then be reproduced manually, using a pencil or brush on paper or canvases. Artists such as Canaletto and many others have made use of this principle in creating many of their paintings.

Real photography wasn’t born until much later, in quite recent times - a mere 200 years ago - after several experiments that aimed to “fix” this latent image onto a surface. Around 1825, the experiments carried out by Daguerre and Niepce gave their first extraordinary results that showed the world how it could be possible to capture an image of reality.

This concept was then applied to photosensitive film and, over time, became the foundation for the commodities that are now known by the general public. Recently, film has mostly been replaced by digital sensors, more and more sophisticated and high-res, that react to light just like the photosensitive material in film and translate it into digital data that are visible on a display. Basically, in the case of film, light - which we are still picturing as an avalanche of luminous spots, would hit the film and imprint its surface by causing a chemical reaction in tiny portions of photosensitive material. With the advent of digital cameras, light hits a sensor that is equipped with special electric photoreceptors, that transform such luminous impulses into an electric signal. This signal is then sent to a CPU that uses software to translate it into colored pixels that perfectly recreate the image on the display.
I will now describe a few key elements that characterize architectural photography and take a look at how they affect the final result; the goal is to seize their essence and learn how to implement it when taking pictures with our smartphones.
Photography and Architecture

We photograph the building itself but we also frame the context in which it is built.

We photograph its shape and how it reacts to natural lights. We photograph its full and empty spaces, natural light and shadows.
There have been attempts and experiments in depicting architecture since ancient times, when the tridimensional space was depicted on the bidimensional surface of paper or canvases. We can say that photography that chooses architecture as its central subject is the modern version of that art.

Nowadays, when we talk of Architectural Photography, we refer to the aspects of photographing architectural artifacts within the space of a city or a more or less urbanized context. The term refers to photographing both a single building or a set of buildings, such as a street or a city.

We photograph the building itself but we also frame the context in which it is built. We photograph its shape and how it reacts to natural light. We photograph its full and empty spaces, natural lights and shadows.

In many cases, we also photograph the building’s function by framing items that have to do with it. Sometimes we photograph people, other times we choose to leave them out. If we are indoors, we will add, move or replace pieces of furniture or decor so as to create the right composition, and we use artificial light to light up the spaces.

One of the aspects that have always distinguished architectural photography is most certainly composition, and thus also the equipment with which we shoot: it is common to use cameras mounted on tripods and equipped with shiftable lenses, or large format cameras that allow to compose images quite freely, along with high-quality lenses and film or sensors that favor the production of extremely high-quality images.

A shiftable lens makes it possible to change the chosen framing without moving the camera, keeping it in an orthogonal and perfectly leveled position.

It allows us to take pictures of extremely tall buildings without having to tilt the camera, thus removing the third vanishing point that would otherwise cause those dizzying and annoying perspective aberrations.

With the same focal length, a shiftable lens creates a much larger image compared to a fixed lens: it exceeds the perimeter of our fra-
me on the film or sensor. This allows us to “navigate” within the image, vertically or horizontally, using small cogwheels that control the movements of a shiftable part of the lens so that we can select the portion of image that we want to see.

When we use a much less sophisticated device, such as the camera on our phone, we don’t have access to all the same settings as with professional equipment, but I will reveal a few tricks that will allow you to take awesome architectural photographs using the same principles.
Photographs as teacher

One of the best ways to learn is to observe. Below are a few suggestions of photographers whose work I appreciate or find inspiring. By googling their names, you will easily access a whole stream of images that you can use as reference. You could select the photographs that most get to you and create your own personal collection to use as an inspiration for your own shoots!
JULIUS SHULMAN
IWAN BAAM
FERNANDO GUERRA
ADAM MØRK
HUFTON + CROW
HELENE BINET
GABRIELE BASILICO
DAVID LEVENTI
BAS PRINCEN
RORY GARDINER
SIMONE BOSSI
XIA ZHI
LUIGI GHIRRI
Taking architectural photographs

As its chosen subjects are mostly static, Architectural Photography allows you to devote much more time to the composition of your shot compared to other types of photography. You will have time to find the perfect frame by studying the best perspective from which to shoot, and most importantly picking the perfect moment: for example, by waiting for a cloud to cover the sun and create the veiled light effect that you were looking for.

Architecture is a rigorous art, based on technique and engineering; it is neat and exact.

We will look at how to find these elements in Photography for Architecture by using a simple smartphone.

The basic rule to take good architectural photos has to do with precision and tidiness.

The first pieces of advice I can give, that are always applicable aside from exceptional cases, are:

**VERTICAL LINES MUST BE PERFECTLY PARALLEL TO THE FRAME’S OUTER MARGINS.**

**THE HORIZON LINE MUST BE PARALLEL TO THE LOWER AND UPPER MARGIN OF THE FRAME.**

Just by following these two simple pieces of advice you will see extraordinary improvements in your photographic production.

To this end, I highly recommend that you enable the grid on your camera. It will be essential to help you compose and ensure that the lines within your frame are parallel.
VERTICAL LINES
MUST BE PERFECTLY PARALLEL TO
THE SIDE MARGINS OF THE FRAME.

THE HORIZON LINE
AND HORIZONTAL LINES
MUST BE PARALLEL TO THE LOWER
AND UPPER MARGIN OF THE FRAME.
An installation by Ann Veronica Janssens at the Institut d’Art Contemporeine de Villeurbanne in Lyon.
Practice observing

The cameras on our smartphones aren’t nearly as powerful as professional digital SLRs. They have a low number of megapixels and they lack the manual settings that make it possible to obtain depth of field and super-sharp photos of moving subjects. Also, photo editing and post-production apps can’t hold a candle to professional, expensive software such as Adobe Lightroom or Adobe Photoshop.

So where’s the advantage?

When you only have access to limited tools, it is important to go back to the basics. If you want extraordinary images, you need to think and look in an extraordinary way. You must focus on the light, on colors, lines, on the placement of the subject and on composition. Being forced to focus on these basic elements will help you take beautiful pictures with your smartphone.

Before you take a picture, you have to find it.

When you have technical limitations, you need to be able to make use of other methods to create an excellent photograph. As you will see when you take on the challenge and push yourself to implement a number of expedients and tricks, you will develop basic abilities and automatic actions that are among the fundamental tiles that make up great photography!

So let’s dive in and learn to take beautiful pictures with our smartphone.

Once we have defined the basic notions, I will give you a few ideas of things to look out for when you are out shooting, so that you can dive into architectural photography with your smartphone with the best possible results.

I will now give you some hands-on tips that will help you increase the quality of your pictures without too much effort.
Institut d’Etudes Politiques, designed by Chapuis Royer Architectes in Grenoble - France.
How to hold your smartphone

When you take pictures with your smartphone, you should always keep a firm and secure grip on it so as to avoid vibrations or unwanted movements that may make your photos blurry or less clear. Another trick I can suggest to avoid taking blurry pictures is to hold your phone with two hands and shoot by tapping the virtual button displayed on your screen with your thumb, or, if your phone allows for this option, by using your index finger to press one of the “real” buttons on the side of your phone. With certain phones, it is also possible to use the volume button on the earphone cable to take a picture; this can be very useful if, for instance, we want to use our smartphone mounted on a tripod to take pictures in low light conditions.

Observe your scene. When you are aiming your camera at the subject, choose carefully:

- What to include and what to leave out of your frame.
- How the lines and shapes that make up the subject interact with each other and with the photograph’s margins.
- The relationship within shapes that are heavier or lighter to the eye.
- Your perspective, which can be centered, accidental, or on a slanted plane.
- How to position your horizon line.

Choose the best framing by moving your phone around. Sometimes, it’s enough to change the angle from which we are shooting, by raising or lowering a few inches; in some cases we may want to get down on our knees or perhaps climb onto a step or a higher spot to find the right composition.
Somewhere in Milan.
photography vs Photography

I like to distinguish Photography with a capital P from photography; the information in this book will allow you to take capital Photographs as well.

As mentioned above, we’re talking about photography any time we are witnessing a trace left by light on a certain surface. Taking it to the extreme, technically, the pictures taken by speed cameras are photographs too, and so are passport photos, satellite views created by Google, or the photographs that are used in ads as well as group photos from your school days.

What sets Photographs with a capital P apart from these types of images?

When you observe Photographs taken by maestros and pros, as well as awesome shots by the many great photographers that fill the web and Instagram, you will easily be able to acknowledge that these images all have something in common, something that makes you go “Wow!” and take a second look at them.

I believe that the solution to this enigma can be found by looking at that near-metaphysical spot where the photographer’s technique, experience and mood all come together.

Some might say, where the mind and the heart meet.

Speaking from experience, I can tell you that the more I am present, focused and alert at the time of shooting, and the more the p tends to become P.

It may sound like achieving this requires a great deal of effort and concentration; however, just the opposite is true. You need to become one with the context and to get carried away before you can find the perfect composition.
An installation by Christo at Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence.
Composition is a choice.

What you choose to put in or leave out of your framing. What part of what you are seeing you decide to select and freeze in your shot.
What is composition?

Composition is, first and foremost, a choice.

What you choose to put in or leave out of the framing. What part of what you are seeing you decide to select and freeze in your shot. Basically, when you compose your shot, you are choosing how to arrange the elements you want to photograph inside a well-defined area: your frame. The resulting arrangement is your composition. One you have picked the subject, there are virtually countless ways to compose the framing and the shot.

In fact, if photography as a phenomenon can be defined as a physical, and thus “natural” process, framing and composing an image is instead a choice that the photographer makes, and this is where real Photography, capital P, takes shape: through composition. The choice of composition can turn your shot into either a simple photograph or a beautiful Photograph.

It’s all about finding the right balance for the elements within your frame: when you observe reality around you, you’ll see that certain items, due to their own shape or to how they are lit, stand out more than others. You can create visual relations and connections between these elements and balance their visual weight to get just the picture you want.

I guarantee that with just a bit of practice you will be able to notice the qualitative differences in a photograph where one shape or another prevail.

How we choose to compose a photo affects the viewer’s emotions: for instance, we can create a photo that causes peace and calm by using parallel lines, or, on the contrary, an accelerated perspective can give a sense of dynamism.

Look at the perimeter of your framing: before you take a picture, do a quick check of all four corners of your frame. Is something stealing focus from your subject? If so, you might want to recompose your shot in order to remove all distractions.
Cantine Antinori, designed by Archea Associati, near Florence.
By leaving some empty space around the main subject in a photograph, we create a sort of passepartout that enhances the subject. If there are less distracting elements, the main subject will appear more clearly in the forefront. Sky, for example, can be a great item to include in architectural photography in order to make our subject stand out! Often, leaving one of the edges of the picture free can help give stability to the composition and suggest how to read it. In other cases, however, in contexts that lack empty or neutral spaces and are filled with various elements, you will really have to give it your best shot to find a balance between the parts and create an image that is intentionally rich and complex but still fresh and interesting!
The eye needs gratification too. Let’s see how we can achieve it!
The grid and the Rule of thirds

As I was saying at the beginning of this book, one of the most effective tricks in photographing architecture with your smartphone is to enable the grid on your device’s camera to help you keep the lines parallel and take neat photos. When a line that is supposed to be straight - the horizon being the case where it’s most evident - is crooked, it can cause a distraction. So, unless you are trying to give your photo an unusual composition and one or more lines are intentionally slanted, be careful to keep your lines perfectly straight. Enabling the grid on your camera makes this so much easier!

If you are framing a building’s façade or taking a picture of a room, make sure that the vertical lines, such as walls and window or door frames are parallel to the grid and to the frame’s margins.

This same grid, which divides your screen into 9 sections with 4 lines meeting in 4 points, can be useful to you in composing your photos, for instance by aligning some of the subject’s lines with the ones in the grid. This is called “rule of thirds”.

Central frames often have a stiff feel to them and can become quite boring in the long run. Try to place your subject outside of the image’s center by using the rule of thirds. You can use the grid and try to place the subject along one of the grid sections where two lines meet.

Leave some space at the edges: if the subject is pressed against the edge of the frame, it can be unpleasant to look at.

Give your image a wider and lighter appearance by leaving some room between the subject and the edge of the photograph.

In my opinion, these tricks can be useful when you are just getting started, but I can guarantee you that if you practice a bit and get into the habit of carefully looking at photos by good authors, and at the layout of posters or ads, your eyes and your emotional apparatus will be your most faithful partner in picking the right framing.
You’ll find hundreds of photographs that will surprise you for their well-balanced complexity despite not following any strict rule of composition.
Light and shadows

As mentioned above, light is the number one ingredient in creating a photograph; thanks to light, an image can ‘travel’ from the three dimensions of reality to the two dimensions of film or a photographic device’s sensor.

When using a smartphone, you should always try to pick well-lit situations and settings. This is a ground rule to follow if you wish to obtain clear, high-quality photographs. In fact, in low-light conditions, our smartphone will tend to automatically adjust the exposure settings via its own software and artificially brighten up the scene, which often results in a grainy, unclear photo.

Also, light can greatly affect how your images will appear to the eyes of an observer.

The temperature of the light source, for instance, will influence the chromatic qualities of the subject and thus of the image, while its position will characterize the lighting and the surrounding shadows.

Picture the same scene lit up by the soft, golden light of the early morning or by the harsh, perpendicular midday light.

Light has an influence on the colors in your shot:

- daylight tends to be achromatic or slightly blueish;
- light at dawn or dusk tends to be warmer;
- light before dawn and after dusk has a stronger blue hue.

Shadows can also be an important element in the composition phase. Being the darkest elements in the image, they will make the rest of the scene stand out or, conversely, they can be used to create a silhouette on a lit surface.
Musée des Confluences, designed by Coop Himmelblau in Lyon.
Lines and shapes

Lines are extremely powerful elements! You see, our eyes just love lines. Regardless of whether they are wavy, straight or curved, our eyes will hook onto the lines and follow them all the way to their end.

In your head, try to simplify the elements that make up your chosen subject, abstracting their simpler elements, such as lines or shapes.

In architecture, you will find several types of lines, each one of which can be used and exploited in our pictures in a number of different ways.

- Horizontal and vertical lines tend to render a static quality;
- diagonal lines tend to give a sense of dynamism;
- curved lines give a gentler and subtler movement to our shots.

If you are looking to create a specific sense or feeling in a shot, try to frame the lines that work best towards creating that mood!

Reflections

Glass, lakes, mirrors, puddles...

Reflections are excellent elements with which to play in your photos! A reflection can either be the main subject, or interact with the main subject. Also, reflections can create other elements such as lines or frames that can be used to guide the viewer’s focus towards a specific portion of the scene. Feel free to experiment with them!
Bibliotheque Nationale de France, designed by Dominique Perrault in Paris.
Flats

Flats are an interesting element in setting up a photograph’s composition. They basically allow you to create a frame within the frame. You can use a door, a window, or even natural elements to frame a subject that is further off in the distance.

Just like empty spaces, frames can also help draw attention to the subject. Almost like they’re saying: “Hey, look this way! This thing here is so important that it requires its own frame!” Adding a flat or a frame can make your shot more interesting and alluring on a visual level, and can give depth and tridimensionality to your framing.

Colors

Colors can play a vital role in your photos!

Think about it! Colors can affect the mood that your scene will create in your viewer: a picture that is rich in bright hues will be perceived very differently from one that is marked by pastel tones, as a color photo will convey different emotions than the same photo in black and white.

Colors can also be used as a fil rouge to create a series of images marked by a specific hue.

Try and divide your shots into subsets by color: you’ll see that you will obtain collections that, while focusing on different subjects, will show a certain pleasant harmony.
A view of Paris from the terraces of Fondation Louis Vuitton, designed by Frank Gehry.
Sky and clouds

You will be surprised to find that when photographing outdoors, clouds play a key role in how the sunlight lights up the subject of your shot. When, on a beautiful sunny day, some clouds sweep across the sun, they will act as natural diffuser, magically softening shadows and creating a pleasant diffused light effect, that is perfect for certain architectural shots.

A gloomy day with grey, cloudy skies can be ideal for taking photographs that enhance certain materials and images where shadows are very soft, vague and nearly missing. On the other hand, on a sunny day shadows can, in turn, become elements of the composition and play a vital role in putting our pictures together.
Bibliotheque Nationale de France, designed by Dominique Perrault in Paris.
Symmetry

Often you will shoot a specific subject and realize that it almost “wants” to be photographed in a way that enhances its symmetrical aspect.

In architectural photography more than anywhere else, you will come across artifacts that have been designed and built according to this technique of composition.

Similarly to what Stanley Kubric did in his famous signature shots, it can be interesting to place the subject, for instance a building with straight lines and regular shapes, at the center of the shot, creating a very balanced image that almost feels monumental; or, if you are in a hallway or a space with similar shapes, you can shoot from its center, to exploit the effect of the central perspective created by the lines of the walls converging towards the vanishing point at the middle of the frame.
Chiesa del Santo Volto in Turin, designed by Mario Botta.
The dynamic range

If you are used to shooting with a digital SLR or another advanced camera, you will soon learn that your phone isn’t able to acquire the same dynamic range, which is the range of colors between the lightest and darkest points of the scene. But that’s alright! Darker shadows can give an air of mystery to your photos and dim lights can give it an ethereal touch.

When shooting with automatic settings, the camera’s software will try to balance the lights and shadows in your shot to the best of its ability. This can come in handy sometimes, but it can often be a limitation, especially in extreme situations like when you have very dark shadows and bright lights in the same scene: the risk is that some areas of the picture will turn out overexposed.

Remember that the “burned”, overexposed parts are not salvageable, while the darker areas can be lightened and balanced with a bit of photo editing.

Always make sure that there are no “burned” or overexposed areas in your scene and that all the parts of the photograph you are about to shoot are well exposed. Usually, a good way to do this is to tap the screen on an area with average lightning so that the software sets the exposure based on that area and reproduces a balanced image. A useful trick is to use manual exposure settings and try to prioritize the areas with more light.

If you absolutely need to capture a wider dynamic range, you can try to enable the HDR mode on your phone.

This mode takes two photographs that are identical but have different exposure settings (one based on the lights and one on the shadows), that are then automatically joined to create a single image with homogeneous lighting.
Bibliotheque Nationale de France at sunset, Paris.
The zoom

The cameras mounted on most smartphones available on the market have fixed-focal lenses, which means they don’t have an optical zoom like those mounted on certain cameras. This is because the devices are very thin and the distance between the camera’s lenses is limited. We usually find lenses that can be compared to a 28mm: a wide-angle lens with an angle of approx. 75°, that perfectly adapts to photographing landscape as, combined with the small-sized sensor, it can create a great depth of field.

There is, however, a sort of digital zoom that basically enlarges the image through a software-based interpolation. This trick should be used carefully.

In fact, if on the one hand it can help us “zoom in” on the subject we have chosen and play with composition by cropping our frame, on the other hand our image will be of lower quality and resolution, as it is blown up virtually.

My advice is to only use the digital zoom if strictly necessary and up to a maximum of 15-20%.

Try, whenever possible, to move closer to the subject.

The latest smartphones are equipped with two separate cameras, each with its own lens, usually a wide-angle lens and one with a tighter focal lens up to three times the basic one.

In this case, the combined use of the two lenses will allow you to obtain high-quality images.
The Matmut Atlantique Stadium in Bordeaux, designed by Herzog & de Meuron.
Cropping and trimming

Your phone takes pictures in a specific format that you will have the chance to modify when editing. For instance, you may need to “adjust” your composition by leaving out certain elements, or simply wish to create an image in a different format than the one offered by your phone. Always keep in mind that editing the image is a delicate operation because you will be varying the photograph's composition. Feel free to crop your images, but do it carefully, following the ground rules that we’ve laid out before.

A technique that I can recommend, which I’m sure could help you a lot in choosing your composition, is to shoot in full (rectangular) format and then crop them into a square. This trick will allow you to obtain original and unusual shots just by varying the position of your horizon line, which usually cuts the image in half, and choosing to enhance the more significant elements in your shot.
view of Sampierdarena, in Genoa.
**Photo editing and post-production**

Even when photographs were only on film, they were not considered complete until they had been processed in the darkroom - a real laboratory for creative chemistry - and then printed. Sure enough, photographs were impressed onto photographic paper and often manipulated or processed with specific techniques to obtain the desired results.

Nowadays, photographs are rarely printed and the most common output is, undoubtedly, the computer screen. However, manipulating the image between shooting and showing it is still a crucial step.

In fact, after taking the photograph, as you might already know, you can manipulate them using a specific type of software that can edit certain features and aspects, improving the result and appearance. In this case, the creative tools are digital and can be implemented through specific photo editing apps or programs.

The devices we use to shoot are often already equipped with software dedicated to these operations, that allows us to adjust contrasts, lights and colors, as well as cropping and reframing pictures. There are also real digital filters that offer a series of preset possibilities and simulate certain effects, such as “film” effects or black-and-white.

Personally, I don’t use filters much, but I like to manipulate the image to edit and improve it, for instance by stressing its contrast or by brightening dark shadows.

This is an area where you can let your imagination run free and play around with the endless possibilities that this virtual darkroom has to offer. The only important advice I want to give you is this: don’t go overboard with this type of editing - you’ll risk spoiling your image, making it lose quality and detail.
A detail of the structures of the Musée des Confluences designed by Coop Himmelblau in Lyon.
Correcting perspective aberrations

When we photograph buildings, we often find ourselves having to tilt the lens upwards in order to capture the whole artifact. This causes the vertical lines in our framing to converge towards a certain point, called “third vanishing point”. This type of perspective can give interesting results and is sometimes useful in creating original compositions. In principle, I prefer to keep all my lines parallel and obtain an image that is as true to reality as possible.

In this regard, I’d like to recommend an app, that I think is the best app to photograph architecture with a smartphone. It’s called SKRWT and you can find it both on the App Store and on the Google Play Store.

With this app, you will be able to correct lens distortions and aberrations in your images. You can rotate, crop and zoom the image and, thanks to a clear grid, you can easily address the vertical and horizontal distortions in your photographs and make the lines perfectly orthogonal and parallel to the edges of the frame. My favorite feature is the one that allows us to distort the perimeter of our shot, both horizontally and vertically, so that we can straighten our shots.

The same developers have also created MRRM, an app that allows you to play around with special effects and symmetries to create actual artistic collages.

There is also 4PNTS, that is useful to straighten your photos thanks to anchor points that can be positioned freely and super simply in strategic areas of your images. The software will do the rest and create a perfect image.
A view of Corte Lambruschi-ni in Genoa. Designed by Piero Gambacciani.
Selections and Series

One of the most interesting and important aspects of photography has to do with selecting images. The ability to select the best photos out of all the shots is the secret of all good photographers. Often, in fact, it is a good idea to take several photos of the same subject or the same view (sometimes as many as 10 or 20), varying the framing slightly or waiting for the right light or for a person to walk by in just the right spot. You will then be able to select the best shot carefully, taking your time, at a later stage.

Good photographs work well singularly, but they can also be collected in series that, for instance, tell a story or narrate an architectural project. A series can also be made up by images that, while portraying different subjects, share certain compositions or chromatic elements that characterize them.

Here’s an exercise you can try: pick a subject, such as a building you like, and try to narrate it in 12 photographs.

I recommend shooting freely and collecting all the photographs that “feel right” at the time. Once at home, you may transfer them to your computer in order to look at them on a larger screen, then skim them until you’re left with 12 pictures. You can also try to put your photographs in an order that you think will make the collection stronger and more appealing.
The Matmut Atlantique Stadium in Bordeaux. Designed by Herzog & de Meuron.
Other tips

Architecture is extraordinary and spectacular, because it reacts in a surprising manner to the conditions of the context in which it is placed: from day to night, shapes and materials react to the changing light conditions and offer completely different visual effects. Choose the right time for your shoots.

The same goes for climate conditions: a winter scene and the same photo taken in the spring will turn out very different! Use these variables to your advantage and capture the structure in all the various sceneries, or just in the one that suits it best.

Choose your subject, a specific structure or building, and go look at it several times; this will allow you to notice how the various levels and angles of light affect it. You'll be surprised to find out in how many different ways you can photograph the same building.

People are what make architecture come to life; try and include animated subjects in your shots. By putting people in your shot, for example, you will give a sense of the size and scale of your structure. The people might also interact with the subject, giving it a meaning and showcasing its function.

Remember that people are elements in the composition as well, and as such they should be placed in the right position so as to create a well-balanced photo.
A SHORT GUIDE TO CHOOSING YOUR SMARTPHONE

Megapixels
If you want to share or print your images in larger formats and higher quality, a rule of thumb to follow when picking a phone that suits your needs, may be to refer to its sensor size and to the quantity of Megapixels that define the camera’s sensor: the more the better.

Display
Take into account various aspects such as display size, resolution and contrast quality. These elements can all make a difference as they can make it much easier and more pleasant to use the camera, especially in difficult lighting conditions such as low lights or direct sun.

Image stabilization
Nowadays, some smartphone cameras are equipped with image stabilization, a feature that reduces the likelihood of taking blurry or messy photos due to the camera’s movements. This can greatly affect the quality of your photos and videos, especially in low light conditions!

Storage space
If you intend to take many pictures (and/or use many apps), you might want to choose a phone that has a lot of storage space.

Battery life
Battery life is important. You don’t want to miss out on the shot of a lifetime due to your battery dying on you! You should look into the maximum battery life for the phone you’re thinking about buying.

Other camera features
Are you interested in having double lenses, exposure controls, the possibility to take panoramic pictures etc.? If so, do your research and check whether the phone you are considering is the right one for you!
Conclusions

Good. Now that you’ve read through all these tips on how to improve and hone your skills in the field of Architectural Photography, all you have to do is grab your smartphone, go outside and shoot. Shoot, shoot and shoot.

My suggestion is to experiment as much as you can and try to implement the tips and tricks I’ve addressed in this book. Also, you can and should call into question everything you’ve read so far: there’s no better way to learn and find your own professional language!

Enjoy your shots!
If you like, you can visit my personal website at the following address:

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Andrea Bosio
I was born in Genoa in 1980 and I studied architecture and photography in Genoa, where I obtained my degree in 2007 with a photographic research dissertation on public spaces in the contemporary city. Since 2008, I have been both designing artistic installations and design items, and working with Architectural Photography. I collaborate with Italian and international architecture magazines and studios. Alongside with my professional career, I devote a part of my time to photographic projects connected to socio-anthropological research, the results of which have been displayed in various exhibitions both in Italy and abroad. In 2014 I took part in Space Caviar’s documentary “99 Domino” that was presented at the Biennale di Venezia Monditalia. My work has been published on various magazines, among which Wallpaper, Phaidon, ArchitectuurNL, Hauser, Perspective, AD, Domus, The Ark, Octagon, Vice, IO Donna, Amica, etc. I am currently living and working in Genoa, where, along with my professional activities as Architect and Photographer, I delve in being a versatile entrepreneur and artist.
Discover the tricks to take stunning architectural photographs just with your smartphone!