

Selecting a Professional Photographer

Contributed by the Architectural Photography Specialty Group of the American Society of Media Photographers

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SUMMARY

Image quality relates to *persuasion*. You aren't merely documenting your work but are actively trying to convince other people that yours is the best of its class. Photography, like any other custom service, is never a "one size fits all" proposition, but a matter of finding the right person for the job.

WHEN ONLY EXCELLENCE WILL DO

Just as architecture is more than construction materials, photography goes far beyond the mechanics of focus, exposure, and composition. It requires an aesthetic aptitude for creating a unique and compelling presentation of a physical structure. It requires craft: knowing how to choose lenses and aim lights, caring for details of cleanliness and arrangement, understanding what color adjustments create the most impact on a printed page and making sure permissions and releases are secured. It requires professionalism, ensuring that finished images will be delivered reliably, on time, on budget and looking better than you expected. Photography requires a visual style that presents your work to its best advantage.

Images play a major role in defining how we come to know architecture and interior spaces. Because photography is pivotal in understanding the built environment, choosing a professional to photograph your project is a most important consideration. Here are suggestions to make the experience of photographing your project a good one.

IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS

Which aspects of your project might best represent your design? Would you like to highlight any specific concepts, architectural elements, or other features? Are some areas best avoided? Which areas would illustrate creative problem solving?

Next, ask yourself how will you use the photography as an integrated part of your marketing plan?



Private residence, Miami Beach. Architect: Charles Allem Designs. Photography: Liz Ordoñez, www.lizphotos.com.

- Show the photos to clients via Web site, portfolio or presentation
- Use the photos for in-house reference/ documentation
- Use the photos for internally produced publications
- Submit the photos for competitions
- Send to editors of trade magazines or books
- Use the photos in trade or consumer advertising

The answers to these questions will help you and the photographer define the assignment parameters and develop cost estimates.

Share costs. Inquire whether other parties in your project (such as the owner, contractors, consultants, product suppliers, financing sources, or even public agencies) might be interested in participating in the assignment and sharing the expenses. If so, all of the participants should likewise identify their needs and priorities.

It is important that the participants understand which costs are shared and which are not. As discussed in Best Practice 06.03.06, "Understanding the Estimate for a Photographic Assignment," the total price has

three components: creative/production fees, expenses and rights licenses. Expenses (e.g., travel; consumables; equipment or prop rentals; and fees paid to assistants, models and stylists) and production fees (the photographer's time, expertise and judgment) can be shared on any basis the participants choose. Rights licenses, in contrast, are based on the use each participant makes of the images and are not shared or transferable among the parties.

RESEARCH THE CANDIDATES

There are a number of possible strategies for finding the right photographer for the job. One is to scan architecture magazines for images that impress you and find out who made them. If an advertisement does not show photo credits, a call to the advertiser or ad agency may produce a name. Advertisements often do not show photo credits, but a call to the advertiser or ad agency might produce a name. Ask your professional colleagues for a recommendation.

To narrow the field of candidates, visit photographers' Web sites, request samples of their work or schedule meetings for portfolio presentations. Be aware that Web sites and portfolios often represent only a limited selection of the photographer's work. When asking to see portfolios, request images from assignments of similar scope and building type to the project you have in mind.

FIND A PHOTOGRAPHER

The American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) operates a free "Find a Photographer" service at www.FindaPhotographer.org. Only qualified professionals are in this database, and you can search by geographic location and photographic specialty. The search results include full contact information, sample photographs and Web site links.

Architectural photography is a specialty within the profession, requiring different tools and skills than, say, weddings or wildlife. Within the specialty are further specializations—interiors, exteriors, landscapes, aeriels, scale models—that may be important to your project. One criterion for evaluating a Web site or portfolio is whether the images indicate that the photographer has the skill and experience you want.

The photographer's "vision" or stylistic approach is just as critical. You want a visual style that complements both your architectural designs and

your marketing goals. Evaluating this factor is often the primary goal of a portfolio review.

ASK FOR ESTIMATES

Once you have identified the few photographers who seem to have the experience, skills *and* a vision that matches your goals, ask for estimates. You are not looking for a "lowest bidder" but rather a confirmation that each candidate understands the nature of the assignment. This understanding should encompass your budgetary and marketing goals.

Although photography is a competitive industry, it is not a commodity business; expect variations in the initial proposals you receive. The differences may reflect the photographers' experience, professional stature, different creative approaches and interpretations of your needs.

An estimate is not set in stone. If it reveals a misunderstanding of your requirements, call the photographer to discuss the matter. The photographer might make suggestions that could yield better results or lower costs. (For some concrete suggestions, see Best Practice 06.03.08, "Controlling the Cost of a Photography Assignment." For more information about interpreting the photographer's estimate, see Best Practice 06.03.06, "Understanding the Estimate for a Photographic Assignment.")

Don't underestimate the value of a photographer's enthusiasm and experience, as he or she can become an important part of your creative team.

CONCLUSION

Try to match your needs with a photographer's strengths, professionalism and compatibility with your style. The right photographer for you is one who understands your design ideas and can communicate them visually to the wider world.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 06.03.06 Understanding the Estimate for a Photographic Assignment
- 06.03.07 Preparing for Professional Photography: A Checklist
- 06.03.08 Controlling the Cost of a Photography Assignment

Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org.

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