

Part 1

Serial Photography General Themes

If you consider the photographic medium in general, you will probably end up thinking about individual artists or even specific, individual images—moments that changed history or simply images that left a lasting impression. The desire to produce this type of image yourself is a lofty ambition. A simple but effective alternative to the endless search for “the” defining, prize-winning image is to take a series of photos that deal either with single or multiple themes, and in which each individual image has its own formal qualities.

In addition to thematic collections, photographing images in series can also help to depict time and space. Here, it is important to understand the difference between a “series” and a “sequence”. A sequence either has its own overriding theme or serves to visually explain an accompanying text. Additionally, sequences are usually shot in a single session, although long-term sequences do exist, too. The photos in a sequence are usually presented in a uniform size and in strict order. Serial photography allows the photographer much more creative freedom. Many of the formal elements of a sequence are not required in order to create a successful series.

Once you have developed a taste for serial photography, you will notice that some images are suitable for use in a number of different series. For example, the first image in the *Umbrellas* series could just as well find a place in the *Triples*, *Reflections*, or even the *Blue* series. There is hardly any subject that cannot be developed into its own series—for example, photojournalists are extremely well placed to create a series about handshakes at every level of society. Multiple images with a common theme challenge the viewer to take a closer, more comparative look at the subject matter. A photo series encourages you to look for similarities and differences between everyday objects, and the mental sorting involved nearly always leads to the creation of additional sub-themes and alternative series. It is easy to imagine developing the *Manhole Covers* idea to make a series that includes just circular or square covers.

Some of the basic “rules” of serial photography are:

- ▶ You can shoot whenever and wherever you like
- ▶ You can shoot in portrait or landscape format
- ▶ You can always discard old images, or extend and augment a series with new material
- ▶ Serial photos can be presented in many different ways

1 Houses

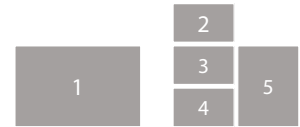
The Perfect Subject for a Travel Series



Villages, towns, and cities owe their individual appearance to the buildings in them. At some point in history, early huts and houses shed their purely functional role and began to visually symbolize status and wealth. The differences between them can take the form of formal architectural details or the simple use of different colors and patterns on walls and roofs.

In most cases, the cost factor dictates that residential buildings are built using simple square units topped off with a triangular roof gable. Free-standing houses can gen-

erally be photographed in landscape format, but need space at the sides and above to make a real impression in a photo. Space that you leave around a subject acts as a “negative form” that emphasizes the “positive form” of the subject itself. If circumstances allow, it is preferable to photograph houses so that the vertical and horizontal alignment of the building’s lines is mirrored in the finished photo. The vanishing point of such single-point perspective images is behind the subject in the center of the frame. If you are photographing larger buildings or if space is limited, you



will often have to tip your camera upward to capture the entire building, creating dynamic-looking images in which the vanishing point lies beyond the upper edge of the frame.

Most vertical lines in architectural photos converge. Initially, following the introduction of the first wide-angle lenses, converging lines in architectural photos were frowned upon. However, the famous Bauhaus exhibition of “New Photography” in Stuttgart, Germany in 1929 changed all that, and free use of the camera—including deliberate

use of converging lines—began to be accepted as integral aspect of modern image composition. If necessary, modern image processing software makes it child’s play to eliminate converging lines anyway.

A photographer should always consider how the compositional elements point, line, shape, and artistic contrast are used in an image. In the case of our *Houses* theme, the architectural façade forms a shape within a shape. Details such as windows, doors, and roof angle create tension of their own within the “house” element of the image. The

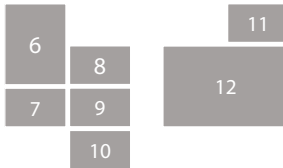


photographer can only influence the interplay between the building and its surroundings, perhaps by using an extreme viewpoint or the effects of changes in the ambient light.

About the Photos

Houses are an obvious subject for photographers who travel. You will always pay more attention to new surroundings than you do to familiar places. In #1 and #8, I deliberately used converging lines caused by unavoidable proximity to the subject as part of my composition. In contrast,





photos #2, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 11 were all shot frontally, creating a static feel, while the buildings in #6 and #10 have a more dynamic feel, thanks to a camera angle that makes a corner of the building the center of the viewer's attention. In #5 and #12, the buildings are part of a multi-dimensional composition and play second fiddle to the effects produced by the trees and the fence.

2 Stairs

Moving Up and Down



Stairs are an important and ubiquitous design element in public and private buildings, and serve to help negotiate differences in elevation in both upward and downward directions. Photos of stairs are largely defined by “line” elements in the form of primary horizontals and verticals, or rising and falling diagonals. The differences between the thickness of lines and the occurrence of stripes (the thickest of all lines) are a matter of subjective taste, and are underscored by the variety of designs and materials used to construct steps, banisters, and handrails.

Due to the nature of the subject, photos of stairs often follow strict compositional rules. The steady rhythm of the horizontal lines at the edges of individual steps is complemented by the additional rhythm of the vertical lines of the handrail. Handrails also provide their own rising or falling diagonals. Steps and banisters can form slanting patterns within the frame, depending on the photographer’s viewpoint and, if you tip your camera upward or downward, you can create an image in which none of the straight lines in the subject are parallel to the edges of the image. Depend-



ing on its steepness, a free-standing staircase can also be dominated by diagonal or slanting lines. These strict forms can usually be diluted by including elements of color, light & shade, changes in color, or other distracting details.

Outdoor stairs are usually well lit, but interior situations are more difficult to photograph effectively. Wide-angle lenses often produce interesting, exaggerated perspective, especially in cramped spaces such as stairwells. However, artificial light often causes unwanted color casts. A set of stairs can consist of just a couple of steps or cover the

height of an entire building. People tend to associate the word “stair” with an upward movement, and photos looking down staircases are rare. Stairs too, can have their own sub-themes—such as “people on stairs”—and can be made more dynamic if you include deliberate motion blur in a shot.

About the Photos

Shadow play creates additional tension in #2 and #5, while #1 and #3 show that intense colors can have a more dra-



matic effect than the actual content of an image. Full-frame outdoor stairs, as in #6 and #7, or in detail, as in photos #10, 11, and 12, don't always divulge the stair's real purpose. The indoor shots in photos #4, 13, and 14 all present views looking down and are variously lit by the sun and artificial light. The way the stairs in #8 and #9 lead nowhere gives both shots a surreal feel.

