

# A changing facade

## 3 architectural photography

It is a widely held misconception that architectural photography is an amazing image of a great building. Anyone can do it, right? And what about all that global jet-setting? For this feature, Alli Harper gets the facts from some of the world's leading architectural photographers. They discuss what great architectural photography means to them and share their views on changes in the profession, and what the future might hold.

**Buildings** say a lot about culture. They say a lot about us and can inform the way we live. Traditionally, people who enjoyed engaging with design and architecture could do so via professional publications or specialised magazines. These were characterised by high-end production values and glorious photographs that took readers on a journey of the buildings and their surrounds. Now, anyone can explore and engage with architecture with the click of a mouse. Images of buildings are everywhere, so what is architectural photography and what makes it different to other genres?

### Reality check

Dianna Snape is a Melbourne-based photographer specialising in architecture, interior, and landscape photography. Her work features regularly in leading architectural and design magazines. For Snape, the commercial reality and discipline of documenting a building is very different to the pictures of buildings so prevalent on Instagram. "It's about respecting and understanding the space, and telling a story. That's what differentiates an architectural photographer. Of course there are good images [on Instagram], but it's not what we do, and not how an architect would choose to document their life's work," she says.

Snape believes it's important that people understand that there are also different types of photography within the genre. "There is a big delineation between interior design-driven work and architectural work. Interior designers have perfected showing objects within a space, and their materiality. It's an object-orientated genre, versus photography where the architecture is dominant and there's a spatial quality," Snape emphasises.

Tim Griffith has been photographing architecture and design-related images for over thirty years. Melbourne born and working from offices in San Francisco and Singapore, Griffith travels extensively on assignments in Asia, Europe, and North America for a number of the world's leading architectural firms. He makes a similar point: "A lot of photographers shoot buildings, but not many shoot architecture. I believe it is entirely possible to shoot artful pictures, and, at the same time, satisfy the client's need for useful pictures," Griffith says.

### The Great Democratiser

London-based, architectural and interiors photographer, Simon Kennedy started out as an architect. He has been widely published and has a large client base of UK-based architectural practices. Kennedy describes digital as 'the great democratiser'. "Architectural photography is still highly specialised and carries certain expectations for image quality and composition that can usually only be provided by professionals," Kennedy says.

Cameron Bruhn is the editorial director at Architecture Media, a publishing and events company focused on architecture, interior architecture, design, and landscape architecture. "Digital has enabled a different kind of coverage for the better. Architectural photography has a life in a whole range of media, including social, which favours a different kind of representation. It's always been about responding to a brief, but it's become lovelier," Bruhn says. He believes that architects themselves are looking harder at the environment and the representation of people interacting within it. They are looking for ways to appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

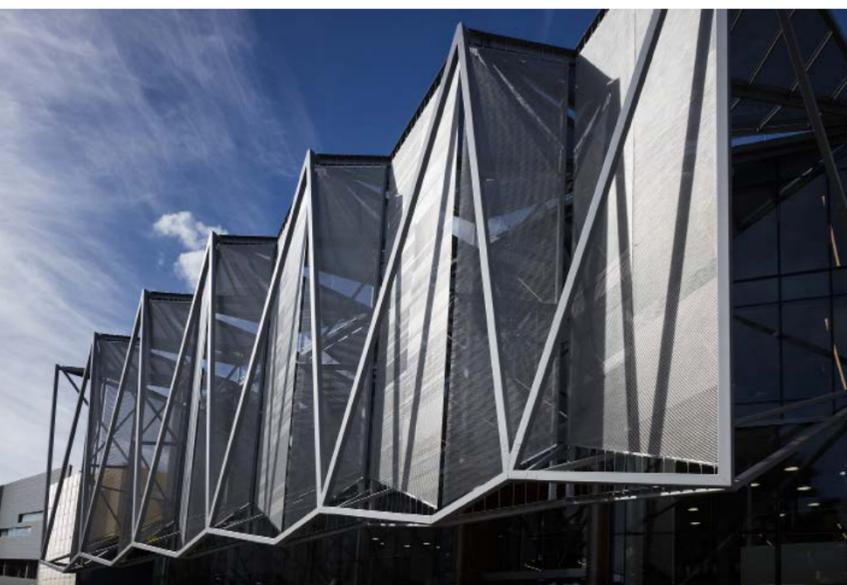
MAIN: Atrium Gallery at the Mandarin Oriental Barcelona.





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Melbourne-based Nic Granleese originally studied architecture, but has been working as an architectural photographer since 2011. “When information is collected online, there’s free movement and it makes the world a much larger place. Some people argue that the volume has watered down the content, but I think it gives architects a voice and brings more people into contact with architecture,” Granleese says. He is also co-founder of Bowerbird, a shared platform that connects architects with journalists. Architects create online media kits and the app plugs into a database of the world’s architectural media. “We are democratising via social media; all architects, photographers, and writers can share and tell more stories,” Granleese says.

### Harnessing technology

Canadian architectural and industrial photographer, Kristopher Grunert’s work for large corporations takes him all over the world. Grunert relies on technology to work more efficiently. “I guess the biggest thing for me lately has been the use of Adobe Lightroom Mobile and the iPad Pro. I really dislike using a laptop, especially to edit photographs, but the iPad Pro, with the pencil, is a pleasure to work on. At the end of each day, I load the images and sync to my Adobe Cloud.” Grunert likes being able to work on the move. “While waiting in the airport or on the plane, I am generally making selections and applying basic adjustments to the images. The latest version of LR mobile allows perspective adjustments which is huge for me.

Magically, when I get back to the studio the images are already accessible on my desktop and the adjustments I made have been applied,” Grunert says.

John Gollings is one of Australia’s most well-known and prolific architectural photographers. He has been working in the genre for over forty years. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Institute of Architects and member of the Design Institute of Australia’s Hall of Fame. Gollings now has his archive live on a digital server enabling him to access all of his work for clients from his studio 24/7.

As well as assisting with workflow and productivity, technology has seen the introduction of the use of more video and drones to architectural photography. Kennedy runs a film-making and animation studio at the Bartlett School of Architecture which makes him a great proponent of video’s increasing role in architectural photography.

### A new way of seeing

There’s no argument that in the past architectural photography used to be considerably more time-consuming and difficult – heavy gear, large-format cameras, expensive film, and no post production to fix up all those pesky perspective issues. Technological advances have enabled ease and speed, and provided the ability to experiment which the constraints of time and money once made impossible. Importantly, building materials and architectural styles are also evolving.

Roland Halbe is an architectural photographer based in Stuttgart,

Germany. He has been published in major architectural magazines all over the world and his clients include such illustrious names as Zaha Hadid, Richard Meier, and Jean Nouvel. “Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry have changed the world of architecture and their more fluid style has changed the way of traditional ‘classic’ architectural photography,” Halbe says. He also notes that architectural photography has become more journalistic with more human interaction/people present in the images.

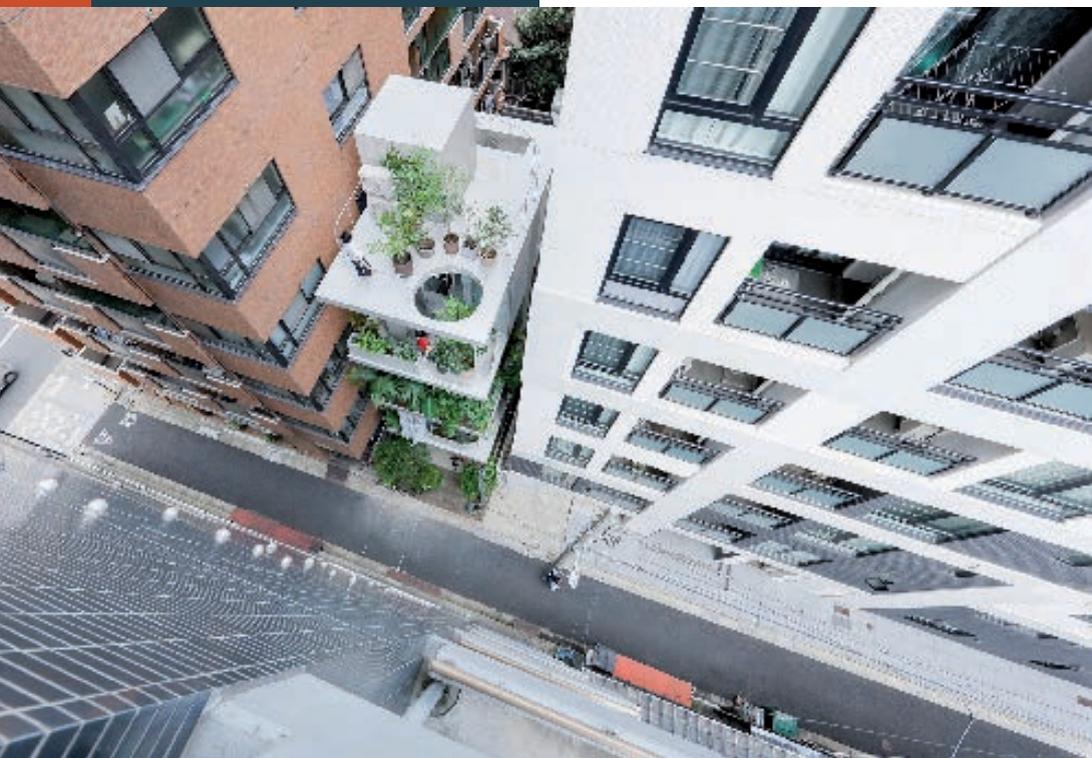
Melbourne-based commercial photographer, George Apostolidis agrees. Apostolidis has been photographing large-scale resorts for clients such as The Mandarin Continental Hotel Group and Crown Resorts, amongst others, having over forty years of experience behind him. “Guidelines for commercial work used to be pretty rigid; everything had to be vertical and horizontal, there was no other way. But now, some of the early rules no longer apply, in terms of composition. Being able to correct a lot in post production also changes your approach. The Egyptians had pillars and triangles, the Greeks used pillars and rectangles, and the Romans had pillars and arches. Until recently, [architectural photographers] have been continually presented with these rigid structures. With the advent of new building materials and techniques, architects such as Santiago Calatrava have created organic forms that are not bound by traditional thinking . . .” says Apostolidis.

According to Kennedy, it’s important to be mindful that what makes the best photo pictorially often does fulfil the needs of the architect. He

ABOVE: Macau Science Centre. Pei Partnership Architects

TOP LEFT: China Resources Building, Shenzhen. Shot January 2018. Architect: Kohn Pedersen Fox.

LEFT: Caulfield Library, Victoria. John Wardle Architects.



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believes that architectural photography has become significantly less formal. “The emphasis has moved from perfect lighting and composition to showing a building in context and populated by its users.”

Grunert believes that expectations about aesthetics have been heightened to new levels. This affords the opportunity for photographers to personalise their work. “Photographers can inject a bit more of themselves into the images, allowing the work to be more emotional than in the past,” says Grunert.

Iwan Baan has been described by the *Wall Street Journal Magazine* as “the most sought after architectural photographer on earth”, but interestingly he eschews that label, having originally specialised in documentary work. “What intrigues me is the people living in a space, how they occupy it, and that way architecture tells stories about people and their cities,” Baan says. A chance meeting with the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas resulted in Baan’s work documenting the construction of the Central China Television project. “It was a fascinating moment in time and I was particularly interested in it from a sociological point of view – the ten thousand workers who created their own informal housing and lived around the massive site,” Baan says. His ground-breaking imagery juxtaposed Koolhaas’ building with images of migrant workers’ communities in the foreground. He also met and worked with Jacques Herzog from Swiss-based Herzog and de Meuron, who built the Olympic stadium in Beijing. “I was fascinated by the project. The subject matter and the architecture provided the background for so many other stories and allowed me to combine documentary photography in the architectural field,” says Baan.

After his work in China, Baan received numerous enquiries from architects keen to have him document their work. While a third to a half of Baan’s work is commissioned by architects, he strives to continue self-initiated projects and collaborations. “From a global perspective, a large part of the population lives in areas that are not designed by architects or designers. People in the favelas or slums find ways to build things in what we might think are impossible circumstances. I feel strongly compelled to continue to do projects such as my photo essay on Torre de David, in Venezuela,” Baan says.

### What makes great architectural photography?

For John Gollings, it’s about creating an image that wasn’t imagined by the client, but that is memorable and efficient. “An efficient architectural image shows the most information in the one shot. For

example, an image made at dusk that describes both the interior and exterior,” Gollings says. “Working with buildings, it’s important not to get confused between the photographer’s description of the architect’s creativity and the photographer’s own creativity, which happens,” Gollings adds.

Great architectural photography goes beyond a mere record of an architectural feature’s existence. “It should capture and communicate some esoteric quality of a space that can be felt by the viewer,” says Griffith. “Great architecture has the capacity to convey such esoteric concepts of solitude, calm, sadness, euphoria, anticipation, and power, and only when you start to understand how to capture those qualities in a photograph, then you begin to become an architectural photographer,” Griffith says.

Halbe agrees that great architectural photography goes beyond conveying the usual elements such as light, form and function, and how humans interact within the space.

“It’s all about the balance between harmony and tension, what you see and what you can’t see, and how you actually feel. A good architectural image remains impressed upon your memory,” says Halbe.

Of course, relationships are also important. “The best work happens when an architect and a photographer nurture a relationship, whether taking a brief, chatting, spending time on site, or collaborating over a long period of time. The best work arises when architect and photographer both really understand where the other is coming from,” says Bruhn. Snape agrees. One of her most successful jobs was when the client indicated their level of trust by saying, “I want to see it how you see it”. And Grunert refers to that special ingredient of “happenstance” that goes into the mix of an inspiring design, beautiful light, and graphic composition.

“Architectural photography is so important because it documents culture. Buildings are like monuments that represent a culture, unless they cease to exist,” Apostolidis says. “So many structures are replaced or destroyed over time, either in wars or by progress. You are documenting what may not be there in the future for the next generation.”

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© JOHN GOLLINGS

**ABOVE: Garden & House, Tokyo Japan.**  
Architect: Ryue Nishizawa, SANAA.

**BELOW: Helical Vav Stepwell, Champaner, Gujarat, India.**



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## The reality of being an architectural photographer

“To turn up and nail it every day, you have to be able to handle a host of things. You need the ability to see and interpret, to work in different environments, to work quickly, to cope with weather, and to manage a business,” Snape says. “You need stamina and passion and the ability to handle the pressure that is consistently required to make great work. You need to rely on the co-operation of other people, the architects, the tradespeople, et cetera, and that’s why there will always be work for respected architectural photographers”.

Snape also emphasises the importance of good business management, licencing, and not losing creative control or originality. “New photographers in the genre are forging a new pathway and shaking it all up. I view that as a positive, but there are things to consider from a business perspective, like copyright protection – a minefield in the current realm,” Snape says. She cautions against trends that come and go and stresses maintaining your own style, especially if outsourcing post production, which can have a sameness to it.

Baan and Halbe also advise aspiring architectural photographers to find their own voice, create their own style, and find ways of being different and recognisable. “In such a niche genre you are promoting the needs of the architect, but you also have to find your own voice and develop your own language,” Baan says.

Gollings says that today you have to be better than the current practicing professionals and offer even newer technologies. Changes in the industry that he’s observed include clients doing their own photography, the use of virtual reality rendering, rather than shooting the actual space, and the growth in popularity of video. “Social media is a good platform for video which can effectively describe a building,

if done well. The standard architectural cameras can capture sound and motion along with perspective control, without any further investment. There will be more immersive walkthroughs, mostly prebuilt demonstrations, and 3D printing by architects, and digital rendering will continue to dominate marketing of architecture,” Gollings says.

So what’s the take away? Architectural photography is alive and well, but like any other form of photography, it is challenged by the need for speed, increased competition, and the associated pressure on pricing. The lives of architectural photographers at the top of their game can sound amazing – working with the world’s best architects, global travel, and acclaim. But behind this is the reality of dawn and dusk shoots, inclement weather, unfinished sites, and making the best of what you have on any given day. Baan has admitted to living out of a suitcase, but is driven by his passion to explore the world and balance his commercial work with his personal projects. In spite of it all, in the words of Simon Kennedy, “On a beautiful day with a wonderful building to photograph, it’s a fantastic job”. ■

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ABOVE: Casa Ghat, Cachagua, Chile. Max Nuñez Arquitectos.