Real Estate Photography

The 10-Step Checklist

Charlie Borland

The 10-Step Checklist for Real Estate Photography

1-Introduction

If you are looking to get into professional photography and earn some income from your passion clicking the shutter, consider real estate photography. Generally, the housing markets run at a pretty good clip during a normal economy and real estate agents are always in need of high quality photography to aid in selling the property.

The markets have been pretty hot for years and demand for homes creates a demand for professional photography. Marketing real estate is similar to marketing any product: great photography sells products and research has proven that. A study in the last few years by a major real estate company, wrote that homes and properties professionally photographed sold 20% faster.

This is good news to photographers, but like any business, there is plenty of competition out there that's quite good at photographing architecture. So, to be competitive, it's important to develop a high level of artistic and technical competence and demonstrate that you have the skills to compete and that competence is crucial to owning a successful business. If you are new to real estate and architecture photography, here are some general guidelines get you started.

Camera Equipment

You can get started in Real Estate photography with as little as a camera, lens, and tripod, but you might quickly learn that many competitors are very proficient at using supplemental lighting and Photoshop processing techniques.

Many real estate agents photograph their own RE listings but do not use a tripod and that means a high ISO and fast shutter speed are required to obtaining blur-free images. Another reason is that some photographers, including myself, bracket their shutter speeds to get a variety of exposures in case they need to do exposure blending in Photoshop by combing the best parts of each of those different exposures.

Your camera should include features that allow you to add a cable release, a flash or wireless flash triggers, different lenses, and you should be well versed in how it all works. Wide angle lenses are the most widely used and the reasons are it makes a room look bigger. For DX cameras (APS or Cropped Sensor) there are several zoom lens ranges available in the 10 – 22 mm or 12 – 24 mm range or similar focal lengths depending on the manufacturer. For FX or full frame sensor cameras, a lens around 16 – 35 mm is perfect but don't use a fisheye.

A very important point, which I address in greater detail coming up, is that vertical edges on walls, corners, windows, exteriors, must all be vertical and not slanted. It is likely that your wide-angle lens will cause those edges to be slanted and require correcting those edges in Photoshop or Lightroom.

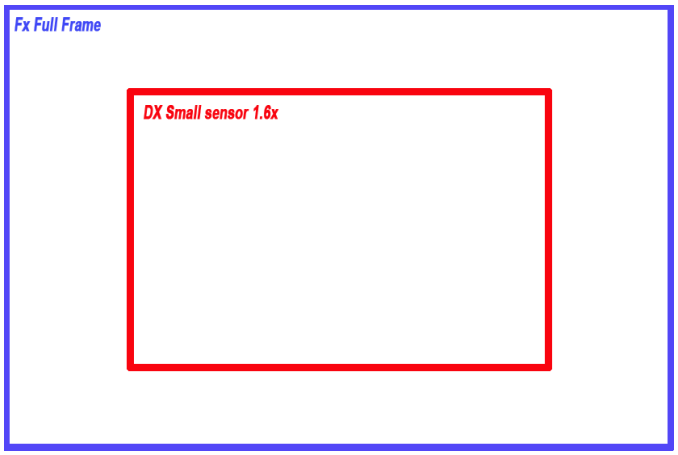
But there is another option and it is the Tilt-Shift lens and these lenses have adjustments that allow you to compose your scene and prevent those vertical lines from converging or diverging and that helps avoid all the Photoshop work.

There are several manufacturers who produce tilt-shift lenses including Canon and their amazing 17 mm TS lens. Nikon, Sony, and Samyang also make TS lenses with Samyang being the manufacturer who makes only the lens for several manufacturers. A couple more thoughts to consider regarding TS lenses is that you should only buy one if you are using a full frame sensor camera.

Canon 17mm TS

In my opinion, the lens should be at around 16-17mm for full-frame cameras and around 10mm for a DX sensor size. There are several reasons and they are related to the angle of view based on the cameras sensor size and the fact that when it comes to shooting real estate interior, a wider view is more popular with RE agents.

A full-frame FX sensor camera with a 16mm lens sees 16mm angle of view while a DX small sensor camera only sees 24mm with a 16mm lens. So this is why you want around a 10mm lens on a DX body so you get a 16mmm angle of view.



When considering a TS lens, and using Canon's 17mm TS as an example, I just mentioned you would only see a 24mm perspective on a DX camera with that expensive 17mm TS lens.

Now, I admit that a TS lens is awesome, but I don't own one for a variety of reasons and the main reason is they are fixed focal length. The Canon 17mm is 17mm only, so if you need a perspective that is for example; 19 mm or 22 mm or somewhere in between, you cannot zoom in because it is not a zoom lens. That leaves two options: crop your image captured at 17mm or move closer, but understand that moving closer, changes the perspective.

A 16 mm – 35 mm zoom lens on a full frame camera is a better choice in my opinion, even though it's not a TS lens. You can process the image file and correct all those vertical lines using Photoshop (or Lightrooms) lens correction tools and you have a lens you can use for everything else you photograph.

A 16 – 35 mm lens tilted down creates diverging vertical lines, seen best by the edge of the fireplace.

2-Shooting

Depending on your style of shooting, you may choose to composite multiple exposures of each scene, but to do this correctly, all exposures must be in alignment so the camera cannot be moved during that series of exposures.

To avoid camera movement during a multiple exposure set, use a tripod and the self-timer on the camera or better yet, a cable release allowing a hands-off the camera approach. More popular these days are wireless triggers allowing the camera to fire and from anywhere around a property provided of course, there is no interference with the radio signal.

Many manufacturers also have apps that will trigger the camera from a device like a smartphone or tablet that also provides a preview of the scene you just captured. There are also apps like the CamRanger, which triggers the camera to fire and the resulting capture will show on your tablet or smart phone. Besides the image preview, the app allows camera settings to be changed allowing the photographer to move around and work quickly.

The Vello Freewave camera trigger

For exposure settings, I use f/9-f/11 on average, whatever shutter speed the metering suggests, and ISO 400. These settings work well for me and result in enough depth of field, sharp pictures despite long shutter speeds. The RAW file format is still the best format because many properties have contrasty lighting conditions and the RAW file will make processing the file and retaining detail much easier than a JPEG file.

3-Photographing the Property

The first image a potential buyer sees (usually) when reviewing properties online is an exterior photo making that image a very important one to get right. Time should be taken to find the best angle that utilizes the best light. Consider taking multiple angles if the light works well for each angle.

It's also wise to ask the realtor what they feel are the most important features to highlight in their view and bringing the agent in while you take your photos aids in making sure the agent is happy and that avoids reshoots.

Other features that showcase the property and might be important are a deck or patio, landscaping and gardens, pool or hot tub, a barn, shop, RV parking, or other outdoor features. Each feature should be emphasized in the composition

and if you can include the surroundings of the features as compositional elements you have a more powerful image.

For example, if the property had a unique garden shed consider making it the prime subject in the composition followed by the flower garden right beside it rather than photographing a close up of just the shed.

Instead, consider composing the beautiful gardens in the foreground leading the viewer to the garden shed. This approach gives a better impression of the design and layout of the landscaping and showcases the garden shed at the same time. A swimming pool captured from an angle that shows the pool, the patio, and the backside of the home can tell a great story of the property in one photo. So, look for the best angles that tell the strongest story.

The client was most interested in the outdoor theater under cover on the back porch, which I captured, but I also captured this image showing the patio furniture and giving a broader view of the backyard.

4-Exterior Lighting

Most outdoor subjects benefit from early or late lighting, including real estate. Using Google Maps and Google Earth can help you determine the best time of day prior to the photo shoot. Searching only takes minutes and provides an idea whether a home faces the sunrise or sunset, or neither.

In winter, some homes facing south never have the sun hitting the front of the home, possibly forcing you to shoot into the sun. To avoid that, choose a camera angle where the sun is at the same end of the house as the camera allowing you to photograph away from the sun. If the perspective of the home is best from the right side wait for the sun to also be on the right side behind the home and that avoids shooting toward the sun.

This home has a huge yard and a street lined with cars. Photographing from the left put the sun right above the roof allowing the sun to shine on the lens, but moving to the right side was a better perspective and the sun was out of view.

Overcast skies can eliminate any problems with suns position, but shooting on poor days is a decision best discussed with the realtor. The advantage is you can shoot any time of the day but the disadvantage is white skies can lessen the impact of an otherwise great exterior image, so white skies may require time on the computer to replace the white sky with a blue sky using sky replacement.

An alternative strategy that has worked well for me with overcast skies is to shoot late afternoon to dusk when the outdoor light levels are lower. I then reset my white balance to around 4000-4500k, which makes the scene, and especially the white skies, take on a subtle blue tint.

This gives the impression of dusk and as long as the sky does not have dramatic clouds, it gives a subtle impression of a blue sky after sunset. I also will turn on interior lighting so windows inside the home have some detail, but this is different approach than a night time dusk/dark image.

The dusk/dark technique is often requested by clients because it helps sell properties. The home is photographed outside and from the best angle to showcase the house. Then all the rooms seen from the camera have their lights turned on and at a certain time after sunset the skies exposure will balance with the room lights exposure. This technique can also be accomplished by adding lights to the rooms and creating the same effect. The advantage to working this way is not having to wait for that perfect balance between room lights and outdoor light giving you more time to do several angles utilizing the same effect.

5-Interior photography

Homes come in all shapes, sizes, styles, and conditions. Some will be in immaculate condition and others will not. Some will be clean and prepped for the photoshoot and others will not. I always tell my clients that I am not in the house cleaning business and that all preparation should be ready prior to the photo session. To insure this happens, develop a task list that can be sent to the client ahead of time so the homeowner knows what needs to be done prior to the photo session.

Once inside, which rooms should you photograph? A simple answer is most of them, but not always all of them. The living room, kitchen, dining area, master bedroom, master bath, are all 'must shoot' rooms. Depending on the home there could be a library, office, large walk-in closet, and other specialty rooms that are important features of the home. I photograph them all because I know that the realtor will expect that and if I leave something out, they will ask about it after the job is done.

When you are ready to shoot, seek the best perspective for each room. I like to describe my approach when choosing an angle to using the inside elements: furniture, windows, and room layout, to create visual flow.

While there are no rules, I generally try to avoid placing something in the foreground that is large and prevents the eye from flowing through the room like the foreground chair seen on the right. Instead, I try to provide a visual pathway through the rooms in the photograph. I am photographing the room after all, and the furniture are simply props that complete the room.

It is also important to make each room look spacious but with a balanced approach. Wide angle lenses can make small rooms look much bigger than they really are and while this can be good, it can also be bad. Some buyers are 'put-off' when a room is much smaller than the photo that represented it, and many wide-angle lenses may also suffer from barrel distortion. That depends on the manufacturer of the lens and the amount of distortion, if any, will vary but the higher quality the lens. A lens less distortion might come with a higher cost for that lens.

6-Camera Height and Vertical Edges

I just mentioned that there are no rules. That was not true! There is one rule, or there is at least broad agreement among clients and photographers, that if there is to be a rule it will state: vertical edges must be corrected! (We just talked Tilt-Shift lenses.) In most interiors there are edges and corners of walls, door frames, and windows that have vertical sides and these edges need to truly be vertical.

When you use a tilt-shift lens this problem is solved, but tilting the camera up or down with a non-TS wide angle lenses makes vertical edges converge or diverge and they are no longer vertical. Edges that are angled are generally not acceptable in real estate or architecture photography.

The camera can be leveled using a hot shoe bubble level ensuring the edges and corners will be straight. While this is a simple solution, it is not always the best solution when using a non-TS lens. A level camera at chest height can result in foreground subjects, like furniture being cutoff at the bottom with too much ceiling at the top. Lowering the camera height will improve this problem but at what expense?

This image by one of my online course students, Simone B., illustrates this point. The camera is chest high and is leveled to avoid diverging lines. The problem as I mentioned to them was that the foreground furniture is cutoff and there is too much ceiling that lacks interest.

Another image from Simone B., Show a very low camera height and while the edges are straight, the bed and furnishings are in the lower one-third of the frame with 2/3 being wall and ceiling and this is not a great representation of the room itself.

So, what is the perfect camera height? There are differing opinions with some preferring chest height while others will photograph a room from doorknob height or even lower and all to avoid diverging verticals lines. The ideal camera height should allow you to see on top of kitchen counters, beds, and bathroom counters.

My preferred height is chest height or close, allowing the and correcting vertical lines using other methods. The TS lens is ideal but when I use a different focal length on my 16 – 35 mm lens, the Lens Correction Tool in Photoshop does a very good job of straightening vertical edges.

This image shows the use of Photoshops Lens Correction Tool. The bed and furniture consume 2/3 of the frame and provide a fuller view of the room while the vertical lines, like the door's edge, are all vertical.

7-Getting Good Exposure

The perfect interior exposure is challenging when conditions outside are bright, making interior exposure occasionally difficult. The brightness levels between windows and interiors can be extreme resulting in an interior that's very dark with perfectly exposed windows, or windows blown out and flaring when the interior is perfectly exposed. Fortunately, digital cameras, processing software, and supplemental lights can solve these issues.

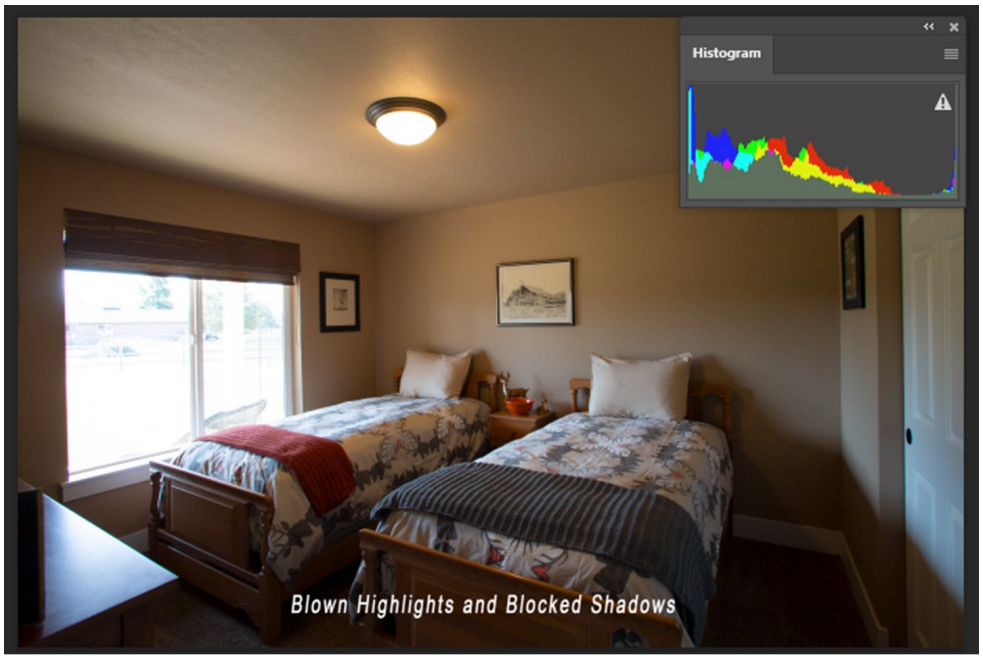
This room has a dark ceiling, dark furniture, window flare and hot spots. Too much contrast for a single capture.

You can deal with scene contrast many ways and one is to shoot when outdoor light levels are lower. Midday light will be much brighter outside than during or after sunset, or on a cloudy day. Turning on every light inside increases the interior brightness and if the outdoor brightness is lower, a RAW file can often capture the scene in one frame.

Captured on a overcast day, the interior exposure is quite good as well as the window exposure. A flash was bounced off the ceiling on the right to bring the right-side shadow brightness up higher.

I always start by determining my 'base exposure', the image that has most of the data centered in the Histogram. Some data may fall off the ends of the histogram due to scene contrast, but I start there and then bracket widely in +/- 1 stop increments to insure I have exposures with all the data placed properly.

Lightroom and Photoshop, and certainly other programs, allow you to selectively lighten and darken areas within a photograph to fine tune the balance between the shadows and highlights. The Adjustment Brush is a great tool for bringing down the brightness of a window and brightening the end of a dark leather couch.



Blown Highlights and Blocked Shadows

The Adjustment Brush was used to bring down the brightness of the window. There is still a little flare around the window, but this worked for the real estate website.

HDR is short for High Dynamic Range software and it's very popular with some interior photographers. It brings the scene contrast to a manageable level, but like all digital photography software, it can be overdone. Halos, grey patches on walls and in skies, as well as edges are often a sign of over processed HDR. Using the Exposure Fusion feature can help avoid those problems, but I personally only do HDR when necessary and instead prefer to add supplemental light.

8-Interior Lighting

Just like a finely lit portrait, interiors can benefit greatly from nicely styled lighting. HDR can manage scene contrast, but that software does not create highlights and shadows in areas that have no directional light. If you have a dark cabinet against a dark wall, adding supplemental light can bring that needed detail by brightening and adding subtle highlights to details and edges.

Most interiors have two light sources: window light and interior lights, both constant light sources. You can add constant lights in the form of 'hot lights' or 'cool lights' or use strobe or flash. Constant lights, unlike flash, are usually on or off just like the lamp on the table or window light. Changing your exposure to darken window light exposure also changes the brightness of your cold/LED lights effect in a room. Flash is not a constant light! If you change your shutter speed to darken the window light exposure, the flash exposure will not change and for this reason, flash or strobe provides more flexibility when adding light to interiors.

Photographers shooting for architects or magazines often have plenty of time to photograph a property with finely crafted lighting techniques, but real estate photographer's time is usually limited making flash the perfect tool. Some photographers have mastered the balancing act of using direct on-camera flash to fill in a scenes shadow areas while others use on-camera flash in a bounce capacity which creates a soft quality of light and fills in those shadows with the larger area of light due to the bounce approach.

Here the only constant lights are coming from a window on the left and the ceiling fixtures, leaving dark areas in front. The addition of bounce flash, handheld just to the right of the camera, filled in those darker areas effectively.

Also popular are multi-flash wireless set ups allowing the flash to be placed around a room for styled lighting. Becoming even more popular is the 'light painting' approach to interior lighting where areas are selectively lit, and the exposures are blended.

This image utilizes the Light Painting approach to interior lighting.

Color

One side effect of outdoor light mixing with interior lighting is 'lighting color balance'. This is different than camera white balance settings. Camera WB is set to either specific areas of your scene or set to average all light sources together.

This photo shows a blue color cast on the wall. right side of the window as well as the floor on the left.

When you have mixed light such as daylight colored window light mixing with tungsten colored ceiling lights and then throw in a fluorescent kitchen light, you have a veritable palette of different colors mixing. Walls closest to windows will be blue while the wall closest to a lamp will be amber and the ceiling in the kitchen will have a green tint.

In some cases, the effects of mixed light will be minimal and other times require attention. You can prevent mixed color in many cases by color matching the inside lights to the same color or use Photoshop color correction techniques to change color of specific areas using that software.

The final image on the right, shows color correction in those areas as well as verticals and window flares.

9-Drones & Pole Photography

While many houses sit on mostly flat ground, others do not, meaning a perspective with the camera down low and looking up is not ideal. Here a Pole Photography setup where the camera is attached to a long pole, like a painter's pole, allows the camera to be positioned much higher for a more level view.

Exterior pole photography with camera on a Pole Pixie Mount.

However, today, drones with cameras are becoming very popular, especially for homes on large properties where an aerial view shows the property and impresses buyers.

I mentioned previously that drones are today's go-to approach for elevated views of properties, and it makes sense to add this to your business at some point, but it depends on your business and where are located.

As an example, my friend near the big city gets asked to photograph aerials on almost every assignment. I on the other hand, now live is a much smaller mountain town and while I get as many real estate assignments as I want, I have only been asked by one client to shoot drone images and the reason is that the local

building inspector, who is the go-to guy that local realtors use, includes drone photos as part of his inspection package and that leaves little room for Me and other photographers. But add it to your business if they are willing to pay.

Now this is important: you will be required to take the FAA Commercial Drone License to legally do drone recording for anything with a commercial angle to it, even if you do it for free. This is required so don't overlook or ignore the importance.

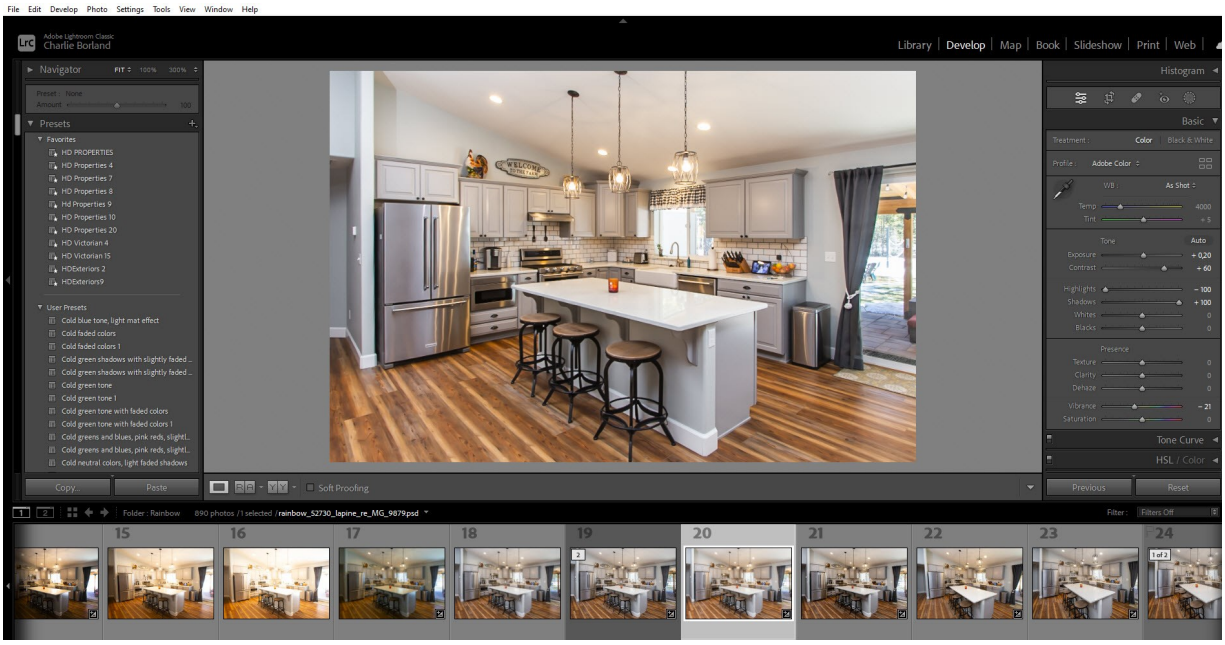
Why? An online search should take you to the 'photographer fined $162,000' for refusing to get the license. Then in 2022, the FAA announced they are going after realtors who hire unlicensed photographers to photograph aerials and are being fined $10,000 for hiring unlicensed photographers. Can you imagine being fined by the FAA and also sued by the realtor because you are unlicensed? The RE agent will want their $10k back ASAP.

Then, with drones or other services, the need to determine if your client base will pay for it will tell you whether to add that service. You will need the license, insurance, and the drone. I found resistance from some of my clients to getting another $100 for the effort to add drone photography to my service package.

10-Processing

When your photoshoot has been completed, it's time to optimize the image files prior to delivery to the client. Photoshop and Lightroom are both excellent programs, although there are others that can do the job like Affinity.

One advantage of Lightroom is its data asset management ability where you can file all your photos in a catalog system for easy lookup. Lightroom an excellent choice and it's pretty much the same 'engine' as Adobe Camera RAW in Photoshop.



In LR, you can lighten and darken, add contrast, adjust color, bulk process, and selectively enhance specific areas like the sky, add or change color, adjust contrast, and so much more with the masking and Adjustment Brush.

Photoshop also has most of the same adjustments in Adobe Camera RAW but the advantage of Photoshop is Layers and the ability to combine a series or registered images.

Remember the mention earlier about bracketing exposures when shooting? Layers provide the ability to use parts of each of those bracketed exposures to be stacked in layers and then exposure blended to create the final image. PS also has the sky replacement tool so you can add a sunset or blue sky to that image captured on the overcast day.

Summary

There are many styles and techniques you can use to photograph architecture and real estate. Since photography is a business, profitability will be a primary concern and the need to develop your own strategy ensures a profitable business.

Remember:

- You are not photographing for yourself; you are photographing for clients who will expect professional quality work.

- You don't need ALL the best gear, only what is required to do the job well.

- Master the creative side of photography such as angles, perspectives, and composition.

- Master the technical side of exposure, HDR, supplemental lighting, color matching, and exposure blending.

And always look to broaden your horizons by considering this point: Real estate photography is architecture photography, and you can photograph a home for a real estate agent for $300 or photograph a model home for a home builder for maybe $1000 or more. Then there are hotels, resorts, and more, that all use architecture photography and spend more money.

Charlie Borland has been a commercial photographer for over 30 years and has completed architecture photography assignments for hotels, commercial properties, developers, home builders, and realtors.

He offers a best -selling online video course: **Mastering Architecture and Real Estate Photography** course that includes everything mentioned here and in-depth videos on photographing residential properties, commercial, a hotel, lighting techniques, managing color, and extensive processing in Photoshop and Lightroom.

https://greatphotographycourses.net/mastering-architecture-photography/

And, we offer course on commercial, landscape, flash, portrait, nigt sky, and more.