The Ultimate Guide to Photographing Libraries

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Since the advent of accessible digital cameras, we have all turned into amateur photographers. We happily snap photos of our libraries at every stage of construction or refurbishment, mainly for our own interest but also as a historical record of what we have achieved.

It is only when we come to need quality photos for publicity material or presentations that we realise the photos we have taken are not quite up to scratch.

Taking the occasional photo for posterity is one thing but producing an image of suitable quality for professional purposes requires a bit more thought and attention to detail. For photographs taken during the renovation process, there's not always much time to play around as you only get one chance.

Over the years, I have taken hundreds of library interior shots of completed projects, often no more than a simple snapshot. Many clients like to see other library interior design schemes before planning their own and using photographs is a great way to promote finished library designs.

Since becoming a Library Design Consultant, I have worked with a number of professional photographers, I now ensure that all our key library projects are photographed in a high-resolution format to allow for use across many platforms including print and web.

Photographing libraries in this way not only means we have razor-sharp, high quality images for our own portfolio and promotional material but allows us to provide all clients with a digital collection of those same photographs for their own publicity purposes.

I have put together a few key points to consider when photographing your own library. This simple but practical advice will help you to produce professional images you can be proud of.

7 Tips for Photographing Library Exteriors

1. Let there be light

Photography is all about light and some of the most interesting light can be found early in the morning or in the late afternoon when the sun is low. However, shooting in midday sun can be great for bright, bold images although watch out for harsh shadows.

2. Not all doom and gloom

Don't rule out overcast skies. They can work well as a natural diffuser offering an even light source across the entire image.

3. In the detail

Trying to capture the whole building in one photo can cause a loss of detail. Focusing on certain details and patterns can lead to a more interesting shot.

4. The bigger picture

If you do have to get an overall view, a wide-angle lens can help to avoid any features being cut off in the final photo. Leave a generous margin either side to give the building room to breathe. Ideally, take the shot from an angle to add interest.

5. Take a step back

Using a wide-angle lens can distort the vertical lines within the shot. Short telephoto lenses work much better; however, you will need to move much further away from the building to fit it in the frame.

6.Simple but effective

Keep your images simple and make the most of any interesting architectural points. Consider including the grounds of the library in the shot such as having trees and flowers in the foreground.

7. Don't be afraid to get creative!

Don't be afraid to try different angles. Shooting from low to the ground or tilting the camera can produce an interesting viewpoint.
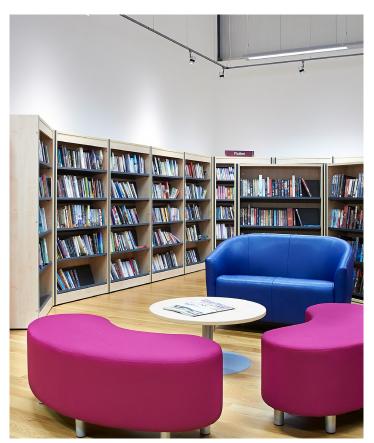
Interior Shots of your Library

- Think about your target audience and the aspects they will take interest in. Draw in your viewers with leading lines and points of interest within the frame.

- Follow the rule of thirds to develop a well-composed photograph.

- Use accessories and compose the shot around them. For example, if you are showing an easy seating area with chairs and a coffee table, use books on the table to add interest.

- Exclude unwanted clutter – clear tops of shelves, counters, straighten books and remove old posters. Hide any exposed cables under desks or counters.

- Use people in the photos to add personality and to eliminate the sense of sterility often found in an empty picture. People also add a sense of scale.

- Make good use of balconies, stairwells and mezzanines – anything that will bring your lens height closer to the mid-point of the subject will help you get a cleaner shot.

- Add shape to rooms and objects by aiming the camera at a corner rather than at a flat wall unless there is something specific you want to capture such as an abstract view of a row of books.

Practical Considerations when Photographing your Library

Resolution

Use a professional architectural photographer if possible – the result will be a well composed, high-resolution image.

Printed literature needs high-resolution images of around 300dpi in order to be sharp and clear.

Web images can be as low as 72dpi and still display clearly. However, you cannot increase the resolution if you shoot the image at this depth. It is best to shoot at a high resolution and reduce it later if needed.

Working with Professionals

If you do hire a professional, make sure you have seen examples of their work and give a clear brief about what you require. If possible, accompany them on the shoot and warn the library staff beforehand that you are coming!

Preparation

Think about the shots you want in advance – are they general shots of the environment and its users or specific products and displays?

Decide if you need to close the whole or a part of the library to get the shots you need or consider shooting when your library is usually closed.

In your own hands

If you decide to take the photographs yourself then use the best digital camera you can afford and consider using a tripod to avoid camera shake.

Try not to use the cameras flash unless it is absolutely necessary as this distorts the natural colours. Some photographers will use off camera flash which enhances shadowed areas when done properly.

The exception to this would be if you have to shoot in direct sunlight as this can cause details to be over-exposed. In this case, you can bounce flash or try to reflect some light into shaded areas with a large piece of white board.

Old libraries can have relatively low light levels so a slow shutter speed is required to get a bright picture. A tripod will help to eliminate camera shake.

A simple point-and-shoot camera will not have manual focusing. This can cause the camera to focus on areas you are not interested in. It also means you can't change the depth of field or shutter speed to create the perfect image. Using a DSLR, bridge camera or even a high-end smartphone will produce quality results.

It's best to get the photograph right in camera. However, with digital technology you can adjust the colour balance, exposure and saturation once uploaded to the computer.

If you include people in your photographs, ask them to sign a consent form so you can use the images freely.

My Last Word of Advice

When taking photographs of your library the most important factor is to make sure the area is clean, tidy and exactly how you want people to see it. Whether using a professional or doing it yourself, it is much harder to remove unwanted items once the photo has been taken.

Professional images are always the best option for publicity material such as on websites or flyers as the photographer will have experience taking interesting shots in different lighting conditions. However, if this is not achievable, do as much research as you can before you commit to the task.

Good luck photographing your library!

Photography guidelines kindly provided by Meryl Blanchard of FG Library & Learning, a UK manufacturer of bespoke shelving, furniture and display products for libraries.

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