



a clean, well lit place

By Jeffrey Jacobs

“The longer I am with a subject, the more it reveals itself to me,” shares Jeffrey Jacobs, a Memphis-based photographer specializing in architectural photography who counts Hnedak Bobo Group Inc. (architects), archimania pc, FedEx and Hilton Hotels as clients. “I have always been fascinated by the built environment and feel compelled to share my vision of what is real or what could be real. I try to create

a three-dimensional experience of space and structure that allows the viewer to appreciate the distance between objects and planes; to sense the depth throughout the entire scene. If I had to describe my style in one word it would have to be ‘painterly.’”

Park Avenue Perfection
A photography traditionalist whose work and ethics are marked by excellence, Jacobs

repeats two phrases: “I am only as good as my last image” and “I will only be remembered for my least successful image.” He adds, “Architecture will be studied, mimicked and appreciated in the future.” Continuing, “When I take on a project I’m aware of how huge a responsibility it is that I protect the visual reputation of the structure, the client and my own standing; I shoulder a personal responsibility for



preserving this subject for history.”

One of Jacobs’ many favorite shoots, which, like all his work, came with the stress of client reputation tacked on, was that produced back in 2007 for client RTKL, a multi-national architectural design firm based in Baltimore, MD. RTKL wanted Jacobs to photograph the offices of their client, a financial institution. Jacobs agreed to the opportunity and deftly planned the assignment in less than 24 hours (see pg. 19). “I love working in New York but there are a lot of logistical headaches to contend with there. When you travel with 2000 pounds of lighting and gear, plus crew of at least three, then consider parking and unpacking—it’s a challenge.”

Spying the venue with its location just a few blocks from Grand Central on Park Avenue, Jacobs reasoned the best time to move gear into the space would be a Saturday afternoon. He arrived at 3 p.m. and took about an hour and a half to reposition objects inside the room to his best advantage, then initiated lighting setup; capture commenced at 4:30 p.m. and ran until 9:30 p.m. in the evening.

“In this tight space, it was my goal to bring the outside in, expanding the scene to create an interior view of Park Avenue. We envisioned capturing the hustle and bustle of the city—the speeding taxis and activity in the street—to contrast against a soothing interior, thereby creating a transparent barrier between chaos and calm.” Shooting late in the afternoon and into the evening, Jacobs’ final photograph was a strategic composite of files that captured moments of the most beautiful light: images with natural light, images as the sun set, images at night with the blinds closed. To create his lighted base scene, Jacobs staged an elaborate chain of illumination magic that employed roughly 30 Lowell lights. The crew hung spots from the ceiling over each chair. A light was positioned just below the table to bring up texture and detail of the rug; lighting was added on the wood to enhance its grain and bring up tones; and a mixture of soft light and spots was added to make the dark granite plant stand glow.

An image like this would be much more complicated and nearly impossible with

film, shares Jacobs, who notes that digital post-processing allows him to pick and blend the best exposures taken over a time span. “The starting point uses a lighted base scene, the rest comes by blending a few more digital files. I rely on Phase One’s Capture One and Photoshop to manage and produce,” he reveals. “I started with the lighted base and added three more for a total of four. During edit I pulled in two outdoor motion scenes: one to bring in an additional taxi, one to add more executives. An additional file was added to display the subtle reflection on the table, taking special care not to obstruct the detail in the rug.”

Vertical Wonder

Not all of Jacobs’ assignments are so environmentally contained. Shooting indoors minus weather and passersbys to deal with doesn’t always happen, shares the master who has tripped a breaker or two, climbed up street poles to bag lights with Duvateen and attracted crowds of onlookers. “We do make a spectacle of ourselves sometimes,” acknowledges Jacobs, “but we seldom have any trouble. I carry so much gear that folks



think I must know what I am doing. I may be toting around 156 lighting instruments, power cords, all types of grip and rigging equipment, several stands (tiny ones to C-stands and Matthews Studio Equipment Beefy Babies). I'll even rent a baker's dozen of HMIs when needed." Fortunately, Jacobs has a background in motion picture lighting and a spectacular crew so he says there aren't many situations that surprise him.

Another divine image was taken in Memphis. "This was the first time I lit a 22-story tower from scratch," says Jacobs. "We were photographing the early 1900s Lincoln American Tower (above). Origi-

nally an office building, it was undergoing a conversion to apartments so only four tenants resided there at the time. This allowed lighting setup to go smoothly and the team was able to illuminate primarily from the interior."

During the scout session, Jacobs discovered that all windows could be opened, making his job that much easier. From the seventh floor (hidden behind the trees) he boomed three 575-watt ETC Source Four(s) out the windows to rake light up and onto the terra cotta structure, accentuating the intricately textured detailing. Hidden behind trees and boomed were another three

Source Four(s) placed out the windows of the fourth floor and angled to stream downward. A few 250-watt spots were placed to highlight the blue awnings. Topping the main structure was a combination of two more Source Four(s), plus a 75-watt flood bulb with Lowell L-lights. To three of the seven arches atop the structure, Jacobs accented rhythm with 75-watt floods in Lowell L-lights. It was a pleasant happenstance that a row of red curtains added color to the top windows, but Jacobs did strategically keep some windows dark. "I like the negative feeling that rises up," he shares.

Setup commenced at 4:30 p.m. with daylight still present. Using a Phase One P45 mounted on a Cambo Wide DS with a Schneider 47mm Digital XL lens set approximately 40 yards away, Jacobs captured images of the building and varied cloud patterns. From his vantage in the park he obtained interesting shots of the carriage, trolley and people. As darkness fell, Jacobs made sure some of the nearby lights were covered with black Duvateen. Then there was a final lighting decision—debate over whether to light the tower in a single shaft of light or two. Jacobs staged both, deciding on one ray in the end. "We were in the park for nine hours and yes, all the rigging does attract attention and conversation."

"My goal has always been to capture or create a fulfilling feel for the entire scene, so lighting is an important element."

What's Light Got to Do with It?

Lighting has always been a big element for this master. He employs products from Arri and Calumet and presently has 86 Lowell L-lights. "I'm heading to 100 of those." He laughs about light bulbs and says GE should sponsor him; he uses 75-watt through 250-watt bulbs with various beam diameters and may have as many as 150 shining at a time. With this much power, Jacobs is very aware of safety and electrical limitations. He'll engage the services of an electrician or gaffer if need be.

"My goal has always been to capture or create a fulfilling feel for the entire scene, so



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lighting is an important element,” explains Jacobs. “By fulfilling, I mean to bring out every minute detail throughout the whole scene so the viewer can visually understand the detail, not just ‘see’ it. I usually set my first lights at the farthest point from the camera and fill in from there. I’m into showing textures and layers, spatial relationships and depth. With some subjects these elements are obvious to the eye, while others are not so obvious; I enhance the obvious and accentuate the not so obvious to create the final experience.”

Price Points

Attracting business and then sticking to your guns when it comes to price and usage, especially in this economy, can knock a few photographers off their base. Nonetheless, Jacobs has ardently remained focused when negotiating. “Fortunately most of my work has come from word-of-mouth so a potential client usually has an idea of what to expect. But then again, there have been times when I am bidding against another photographer and there’s a gap in price and product quantity. They’ll call and ask why

I am that much more expensive. I can appreciate budgets but I won’t budge on quality and not often on price unless we come up with a simpler approach.” Sometimes Jacobs lets the deal pass or takes it because he sees value to be made up later in the stream of licensing revenue.

“The lifespan of an architectural image can be as long as three to five years, although I do license images as old as 20 years—this speaks to the long-term value I am able to instill into each image,” he remarks. “Photographs of structures are often timeless. I have bid on projects where I really didn’t make anything on the production portion, but I can see solid potential for future revenue in residuals and it has paid off big time.”


Timeless Classics

Creating a timeless and spectacular image is foremost and in the 28 years he’s been shooting, Jacobs has earned high regards among peers and is among the best paid in his field—but price comes with a price.

“I work for people, projects and occa-

sionally money,” he says. Meaning: There has to be connection with the client or the project has to inspire him, and if all else fails, then the motivator is revenue. “I know my bid will often be among the highest. But that’s because I am bringing so much more time and effort to the assignment. I’ve got a crew of between three and five (sometimes more) and a truck full of gear to transport. I also take the time and effort to enhance every single element within the scene.”

Jacobs adds that the biggest difference in cost, when competing with more accomplished photographers, usually comes down to production value and vision. “Architecture is one of the most historically significant subjects a photographer can photograph. I take that to heart with every commission and create an image that’s worthy of the structure’s legacy.”

You can view more of Jacobs’ work at www.jeffreyjacobsphoto.com. 

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