

Rudy Umans Imaging

Pitfalls of Interior Design and Real Estate Photography



Introduction

The real estate market is heating up again and people pay more attention to their home than they did before. The number of real estate and home improvement shows on TV is staggering and one of the indications that it is good business to be in nowadays. One of the important steps to be successful is being able to show your work or the property with a bang.



Anything related to a property, and especially interior pictures, are nowadays crucial to attract potential buyers to the property, or to showcase your products and/or services. A picture is worth more than a thousand words they say, but what if that picture doesn't really translate to what you would like to communicate? What if you try to sell your product or service and you take some pictures and those pictures, as it turned out, do not really show what you saw with your own eyes? They are too dark, too light, make the space look too small or too big, too cluttered, or they just don't look right somehow. These kinds of pictures don't show what you are trying to sell. They might even be a deterrent to the sale of the property or your services

To create interior pictures that are enticing to potential customers, you have to overcome a number of pitfalls that can absolutely ruin that goal of showcasing your services or the property in the best light you can. In this essay, we discuss in detail what causes those problems in order for you to recognize them and to try to avoid them. We will explain the pitfalls of light, perspective control, composition, and our brain.

A high quality Image is like your business card and the objective is a better visual representation of you, the seller, and your product.

Light

Dark shadows

The challenge with windows on only one side of the space is that the brightness of the window light can create a flood of light that can make the rest of the space look under exposed and too dark. This could result in an overall dark and depressing feel that needs to be avoided.

A camera with a small built-in flash can emphasize this problem, because these types of flashes are not strong enough to light up a decent size room. This usually results in even harsher and darker shadows. These types of flashes also do not offer any, or very limited, options pertaining to the control of the light. They put you at the mercy of the technical inability of the camera and the built-in flash.

Bright windows

Bright windows can cause extremely bright and very over-exposed areas without any detail. Usually over exposed window light and under exposed dark areas happen at the same time. One is the result of the other. Unfortunately, most cameras do not manage the difference between the bright and the dark areas very well. It is beyond their technical capabilities.

Light Balance

The dark areas and the over-exposed windows are the result of the amount of available light is not in balance. Too much light on one side and not enough on the other side makes the light very uneven and unpleasant. Staircases and alcoves are also notorious for creating uneven light.

White Balance

White Balance is the tone or color of the different types of light, such as daylight and artificial light. Daylight and artificial light have different "temperatures". This temperature is measured in degrees Kelvin. The higher the temperature, the more "blue" or "colder" the tone of the light is. Noon daylight is about 5-6000 degrees Kelvin. Light bulbs are more in the 3-4000 degrees Kelvin range and look more "orange" or "warmer". Unfortunately, camera sensors however are set for a fixed temperature range.

This can be changed by the photographer manually in some cases, or the photographer can let the camera decide. Either way, cameras can only handle one range at the time and cannot handle two or more settings simultaneously. They cannot be mixed. A choice needs to be made between daylight, tungsten, fluorescent, and a few arbitrary choices in between. The result of light temperature that is not in balance is a color cast in the whole scene or in part of the scene. A color cast in part of the scene due to mixed light sources is most common and unfortunately much harder, if not impossible, to correct later on in the post processing of the picture. Not to mention it would be very time consuming as well.

Color casting

Color casting can be caused by a dominated color of the interior. If the walls are blue, there is a good chance that the white ceiling and certain objects have a blue color cast. This color cast might not always be visible with the naked eye, but it might be visible in a photographic print or on a website. Our brain is very good in compensation for situations that are not natural, but a camera does not have our brain and the ability to detect this problem and therefore, it is up to the photographer to detect a potential problem and to find a solution.

Reflections

Reflection may be very distracting in your pictures and are visible not only on shiny objects, but also on other reflective surfaces such as windows, picture frames, kitchen appliances, highly glossy and polished wooden surfaces, certain leather furniture, etc. Reflections can be very distracting in pictures and sometimes downright ugly. In addition, reflections might also cause "Hot Spots". These are highly concentrated bright spots on a surface that are very distracting and unattractive. Due to our brains again these spots usually become only visible when it is too late.

Perspective control

Converging lines

Another issue with interior photography is that you have to work in relatively small spaces with the result that a wide angle lens is inevitable in most cases, and unfortunately an inevitable problem of wide angle lenses is distortion. We all know the perspective distortion we see when looking up a tall building. The building seems to fall over because of the converging lines. This problem is most visible with wide angle lenses. If the camera, with a wide angle lens, is not carefully positioned, tall and straight objects such as windows, bookcases, etc. will look like your tall building. This can be corrected in the post processing of your picture, but that is limited and objects on the edge of the original image might be cut off in the correction process.

Slanted images

Horizons are not only found at the end of the earth, but also in the living room if the camera is not completely horizontally positioned or is not parallel to the floor of the space. Objects might also look skewed, which is the same as converging lines, but horizontal. Sometimes, you can have a combination of the two and that is next to impossible to correct later one.

Relative object size

Relative object size could also be an issue with the use of wide angle lenses in interior design and real estate photography. Objects that are closest to the lens appear larger than they really are. When composing an image, this needs to be taken into consideration. Large furniture, such as reclining chairs or a four person couch, is big enough as they are and there is no need to make them look even bigger. Care needs to be taken with the placement of the camera in relation to the furniture.



The furniture looks huge in this image, which makes the room look small

Composition

Large objects

As briefly mentioned in "relative object size", large objects can be a problem. They are there, they are part of the space, they are part of the design, and they sometimes determine what the space is about (media room, bedroom, living room, and so forth), but they cannot be in the way of the overall composition, they cannot block the general overview of the space, and they cannot be too dominant in the picture. Sometimes large objects are used in the composition of a picture to create a notion of intimacy, but that only works after careful consideration and when visibly done on purpose.

Clutter

Less is more. Nobody likes a cluttered space and that includes the garbage can and dirty dishes. Too much "stuff" makes a space too busy and overwhelming. If there is a credenza with 10 pieces of precious artwork combined with evenly precious family photos, at least 7 will have to go. Many of us are so used to a lot of knick knacks and dust collectors that this is often overlooked.

Focal point

Most are familiar with the importance of a focal point in a living space, but does it have to be the 60 inch flat screen TV? Prior to taking pictures, a room really needs to be studied in order to determine the most attractive features, including the focal point.

Depth of Field

Without becoming too technical, this has something to do with the quantity of the light and the composition. Without the proper equipment, the photographer is dependent on the available light in a space. If the room is pretty dark for whatever reason and the camera is not set correctly or in automatic, the camera might choose a less appropriate setting if in automatic mode. The aperture determines how much in a picture is sharp from front to back. If this is not set correctly by the photographer, there will be a good chance that only part of the scene is in focus, and consequently part is not. This could be attractive in some cases as an artistic element in other types of photography, but interior

photography is about translating what the human eye normally would see. This means that it is generally preferable to have everything in focus, which might not be the case when the photographer is not in control.

Color

Due to the desire of feeling comfortable and at ease in one's own home many living spaces are very monochromatic. Wild colors etc. don't give most of us that comfortable feeling, or we are just not brave enough, this has the result that most living spaces are either all earth tones, pastel tones, or white, or have the same old magnolia everything. There is very often not much going on as far as color goes. The problem is that monotone interiors can make an image look flat and boring. A splash of color can however make a world of difference. If there is simply not much color available, the photographer can most likely compensate with a more exciting composition or point of view. Again, a good photographer will be able to diagnose a space and make or suggest the necessary corrections to make the space look more exciting.

Our brain

Our brain is very good at compensating for situations that are not natural. Our brain has the ability to compensate for almost, if not all, of the pitfalls as outlined here. One problem is our brain interprets scenes and views in a way we can handle. The brain compensates for the shortcomings of our eyes. Although we normally see the problems as outlined, the brain tends to block them out as being a potential problem. A camera does not have that ability. Modern digital cameras are dumb things that "think" in ones and zeros. What I see is what you get is the camera's motto. It doesn't care about what you see. The photographer is in reality the intermediary between the subject, the camera, and the viewer. It is up to the photographer to detect potential problems that are not obvious and are sometimes not detected with the naked eye simply because our brain is too good.

About the Author

Tapping into the passion of the beholder

It is all about passion for the medium photography, passion for the subject, and the passion to share.

I do not really have a favorite subject. As long as the subject opens up certain emotions for that subject and I am able to translate those emotions to an image on a flat piece of paper for the enjoyment of others, I am happy.

BIO

I have been taking pictures forever so it seems, and ever since my parents gave me my first camera during a family vacation I have been hooked to photography. I was 6 or 7 years old and the camera was a little plastic Kodak Instamatic. I still have it.

I grew up in a small town near Amsterdam, the Netherlands and I am married to a girl from Miami where I moved to in 1989. In the early nineties I was a full time professional photographer. In those days, I did mainly products for catalogs for Deltone clock radio's etc., Avanti small appliances and several importers of fancy perfumes and colognes. When Hurricane Andrew came along, it destroyed about 90% of everything we owned and forced us to move to Palm Beach where I had several government jobs in small business assistance. During this time, I photographed mainly landscapes with a large adjustable wooden camera with a bellow and a dark cloth in order to view the focusing screen.

In 2005, my wife and I moved back to Miami where I picked up my career that was so brutally interrupted by hurricane Andrew. I still do small business assistance, but since the digital era, the majority of my income is from photography, mainly fine art, architecture, agriculture, weddings, portraits and commercial photography. You can find my work on my website www.rudyumans.com and several commercial fulfillment partners such as several image databanks and on line art galleries.

My work is literally sold all over world to book publishers, web designers, ad agencies, private enterprises, and government agencies to name a few, including some National Geographic publications. I was honored with several solo art shows in South Florida and in Europe, called "Beyond the obvious" and one simply called "Wood".

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