

Photographing Your Work

by Denise David Baer

We builders tend to take two kinds of photos: hero shots, which show off the finished project, and CYA shots, which document the nitty-gritty details that get buried in the ground or behind the walls. I'd wager you have a mountain of hero shots, but that you either don't have or can't find the CYA shots.

I'll make that bet because I've been there. My first experience with job photos involved taking before-and-after photographs of a historic project. I took the early photos myself, but I hired a professional photographer to shoot some attractive exterior shots of the property after the project had been completed.

Unfortunately, the photos didn't quite work out as well as I had hoped, for a number of reasons. First, this job was one of many we did that first year, but I failed to photograph any of the others. Instead of showing off this representative project, the lone set of photos made it look as though we only did restoration work; we do new construction too. Second, because I didn't take any photos while the job was in process, I missed a golden opportunity to document any of the hundreds of decisions typically made during a historic restoration; as a result, marketing and training opportunities went begging. Finally, I had no evidence when our client complained about all of the extra charges; a good set of job photos would have served as a gentle but indisputable reminder of the additional work we had done.

Photo Record

After several years in business, I finally figured it out. While many of our projects still go undocumented, the larger or more complicated projects — and especially those with potentially

troublesome owners — get photographed extensively. In a court of law, written job records are still necessary, but a set of photos can provide compelling evidence. And even if we never need the photos for a court case, I still get my money's worth out of them, and then some. Here's how we handle a typical whole-house renovation.

Progress shots. Either just prior to the project start or on the first day, Gary or I will visit the site and photograph each exterior exposure plus each room, including the attic and basement. We pay particular attention to any problem areas, such as badly warped or out-of-level floors, special moldings, or damaged drywall or plaster. We also take wide-angle shots of the grounds, so we'll have a record of the condition of



The author stores prints and negatives of work in progress in binders labeled with the job name and number. The photos can easily be retrieved to answer questions about techniques and methods, or to keep out-of-state clients up to date on job progress.

the plantings or landscaping prior to project start.

Every week or two, we photograph those same rooms and details, thus chronicling the structure's transformation. We make a special effort to photograph any interesting or difficult applications, especially the solutions to any problems we encountered. It doesn't take long to take these photos, either — I can shoot a whole house in about 15 minutes.

Hero shots. Once we've completed the job, we hire a professional photographer to shoot our most impressive work. For example, we might ask for one or two exterior shots and one each of the most dramatic rooms. Typically, we wait to schedule these photos until several months after the project is completed and clients have decorated and settled into their new space. At that point, they'll eagerly welcome our photographer into their home.

Two Birds, One Stone

Once we have this pile of photos, we find plenty of ways to use them. First, we present the homeowners with a packet of 8x10 color prints of the "after" shots and the corresponding black-and-white "before" shots. (This is in addition to the thank-you note and bouquet of flowers we send the day after the photo shoot.)

Next, I use the photos as the basis for a story about the project in our quarterly newsletter. Almost all our marketing dollars go into the production of our newsletter — we have nearly 1,000 readers — and we always see a spike in sales calls immediately following each issue's release. Also, by mailing our newsletter to local newspaper and magazine editors, I often get requests to do a story about our featured projects. That

gives us added market coverage at no additional cost. Finally, I include the best photos in our album, which Gary takes with him on sales calls.

Granted, we make far more use of the before-and-after photos, but we never neglect the progress shots. All of the prints and negatives get stored in binders by project name and number. I mine those binders frequently for pictures that can serve any number of purposes, whether it's for marketing or design, or to answer a question about when or how a particular application was done. I kept one out-of-state client informed on the progress of his half-million-dollar project by mailing copies of each week's photo shoot. Another client used copies of his project's progress photos to satisfy his insurance adjuster's concerns.

Photo Tips

I'm far from being a professional photographer, but I have learned a few things about taking, storing, and using a photo collection.

Cameras. Invest in a decent 35mm camera with at least a 35-80mm zoom lens; an additional 75-300mm zoom lens will come in handy when you're standing on the ground trying to shoot details of a third-story roof. New cameras start at about \$300, and good lenses can cost just as much, but there are some good deals to be had for used equipment.

The best way to ensure you get a complete set of progress shots is to provide your job supervisors with cameras too. That way, if they happen across something during the course of the workday that should be documented or is particularly interesting, they can take a picture on the spot. Polaroid's JobPro works great, but don't rely solely on "instant photography": You need to have at least one camera that will provide negatives.

Shoot "before" and "in-process" photos in black-and-white, and get machine prints from a local process shop. Black-and-white film is less expensive to purchase and develop, and the photos cost less to reproduce later.



"Before" photos (inset) help with estimating, and when paired with "after" photos in a presentation book, serve as dramatic counterpoint to the completed job.

Also, black-and-white "before" shots make your color "after" shots look that much better.


Storage. If your camera can insert the date into the photo, do so. It will help you keep your photo histories in chronological order, and it will give you another key point of evidence, if needed. In addition, when you've finished shooting for the day at one location and you're heading for the next job site, snap a spacer (a blank negative) to separate photos from different projects. Instruct your process shop to not cut or strip the roll of negatives: This will enable you to separate the negatives by job and store them together with the prints under each job's name or number.

Store prints and negatives in binder pages available from most photography supply stores and catalogs. Write a descriptive note on the back of each of your prints — particularly your "in-process" photos — as soon as you get them back from the shop. Those notes could prove very helpful if you find yourself in a tight spot with an argumentative client.

Hiring a pro. Nothing looks worse than an amateurish hero shot, so hire a professional photographer to shoot



your "after" photos. Ask architects, interior designers, or other contractors for recommendations, and hire a photographer experienced in architectural photography. Expect to pay upwards of \$500 for a typical shoot, including set-up time, film, and developing. Also, be sure to accompany the photographer to the site: Your clients will appreciate your presence, and you can assist in staging the scenes.

If you have a particularly impressive project to photograph, instruct your photographer to use both large-format (2.25x2.75) color negatives and transparencies, and 35mm color slides. You'll need the color negatives to produce high-quality prints, many magazine editors will request transparencies, and you'll need the color slides if you enter your project into any competitions. 

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