THE LIGHTING ISSUE

SHOTS IN THE DARK

Three photographers discuss the challenges of lighting large subjects in dim shooting conditions.

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MIKE BUTLER: THE BIGGER, THE BETTER

An architectural photographer working for hotel chains, architectural firms and interior designers, Mike Butler is often called on to shoot nice homes and the interiors of new real estate developments. But what he has enjoyed doing the most since he launched his career is shooting large exteriors. The bigger the subject, and the more stamina the job demands, the better he likes it.

"I realized if I was going to make a go of it, I had to do something no one else was doing, and do it better than they could do it," says the Miami-based photographer. He knew he had endurance, and wanted to use it to his advantage in tackling long and complicated shoots.

"I am attracted to the intensity of it all, of looking at the most daunting structure and saying: How is this going to happen?"

It typically happens over the course of several hours. Butler shoots each piece of the scene for a final composite, usually from a distant location from which he can capture the full scale of his subjects, while directing his assistants via radio on where to place the lights. While it may sound elaborate, Butler insists he works simply and bases his lighting set-up on "whatever's practical" to get the shots he likes.

Butler taught himself to plan out complex composite shots before he shot digitally, by scanning his 4 x 5 negatives and then piecing them together himself. These days, he shoots with a Canon 1Ds Mark III and a 5D Mark II.

He typically lights his shots using Lowel DPs because that's the light he learned to use when he was an assistant. Though he arrives on location with eight of the DP lights—plus dimmers, stands and reflectors, and some strobes—he may use as few as two lights at a time. The Lowels, he says, "are lightweight, and fairly durable, and with spot reflectors they're very flexible. That keeps my lighting to a minimum."

Using the lights' dimmers, he can control the light output to match the ambient light at dusk, dawn or in the middle of the night. He also carries seven Dynalite strobe heads, which he turns to on cloudy days when shooting a smaller building.

A recent shot for Marriott demonstrates his typical approach. The building, built in the 1980s, wasn't attractive, so he chose to make the walled courtyard and pool next to the building the central focus of the image. "The building is about a sixteenth of the shot," he says. "We lit the courtyard piece by piece by piece with about 20 to 25 exposures."

Butler and crew began lighting the building by setting up six lights about five feet high, pointing up and at an angle to illuminate the texture on the building facade. He knew that the line of palm trees at the edge of the courtyard were going to go dark as soon as the light diminished. "So all the pieces that were around the trees were lit, so they would be dropped in easy" into the final composite. "That was straightforward," he says.

The trickier part came next: lighting the grass in the hotel courtyard. "With any surface, you have to find the right direction for the light to give it a textural look. Grass is so finicky. Light it one way, it looks great. Light it another way, it looks awful."

He chose to put his Lowel lights on stands about five feet high, at a 90- to 120-degree angle, to make the grass blades distinct and maintain a deep green.

Butler and his crew began shooting at 5 pm and finished at 9 pm. At the start of the shoot, his exposures were around half a second long, and as the daylight faded, he shot at longer and longer exposures, up to 15 seconds.

Butler took on an even more ambitious shoot last year when he photographed the exterior of the InterContinental hotel in downtown Miami. The city lights are visible below the building, and the Port of Miami is in the background. Butler estimates that in all, he had about 40 lighting set-ups during the shoot, which took roughly 14 hours. Shooting in the busy city, he was able to use the bounce light to fill shadows. "Even though the color temp tends to be quite warm, it is workable in post."

After scouting the location, he decided to set up his camera on top of a parking garage about a quarter of a mile from the hotel. From there he used a radio and laser pointer to guide his assistants on where more light was needed. They worked from right, the facade of the building, to left, a waterfront park where fans of the Miami Heat were out celebrating after a game. "We couldn't shoot until they left," Butler explains.

They did their first five lighting set-ups on the pool deck, moving four lights with reflectors into different positions. It was late afternoon, and he ran the lights at full

Top: To photograph the Miami Airport Marriott, Mike Butler decided to light the courtyard and pool. Bottom: Butler. Opposite page, top: It took about 40 lighting set-ups to light both the InterContinental Miami and the waterfront park. Near right: Light painting brought out details in the Double Arch, Arches National Park, Utah. Far right: Royce Bair.

power. Then they did lighting set-ups on the ground level using up to four lights, starting from the section of the building closest to the camera, then moving towards the bay. As the sunlight faded, his lights "probably were down 50 percent of full maximum potential," Butler recalls. Around 3 am, they were ready to move to the park.

"Some parts of the park are already being lit, but you want to highlight certain parts, namely the grass and certain structures." The sun was rising by the time his crew was ready to pack up, while back on the parking garage, "I'm shooting the Port of Miami and anything that would look good in the rising sun," he recalls. He shifted his camera upwards to capture more of the sky than he had shot at dusk.

Butler works instinctively, and eschews looking at photo books or learning lighting rules. "Why can't you drop that section of a night sky, shot at 3200 ASA, into an otherwise perfectly exposed and lit image shot at 100 ASA, if that gets the look you need do it? The only limitations are the ones you make for yourself."

—Holly Stuart Hughes

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