Mike Butler: INTO BOGOTÁ

By Dan Havlik

Several years ago, when architectural photographer Mike Butler visited Bogotá, Colombia, he fell in love with the work of Rogelio Salmona. Widely considered to be one of Colombia's greatest modern architects, Salmona, who died in 2007, created buildings distinguished by their extensive use of red brick and seamless blend of pre-Colombian styles with natural occurring shapes like spirals and curves.

"I was spellbound," Butler recalls. One of Salmona's structures, in particular, caught Butler's eye, the sprawling Virgilio Barco Public Library in Bogatá, which was completed in 2001.

"[Salmona] really built the space to be inside it and feel the proportions. When I saw it, I thought, we've got to shoot this. We'll bring in the generators, we'll bring in the lights, we'll bring people and we'll do this," Butler says.

thing we wanted it to be. And we figured if we're going to do this, we're going to need to go big. But when we talked to someone at the library about our plan, they basically told us we were out of our element and it would never happen."

Luckily for Butler a Bogotá-based architect named Diego Estiban Pisa and a Colombian politician named Fernando Rojas, had taken up his cause and helped him cut through the red tape. After a successful meeting with Colombia's Minister of Education, Butler finally got the OK to shoot the library, as long as the Colombian government could use the images to promote culture. Oh... and he wouldn't be getting any funding to do his project.

"I paid for the whole thing myself," he says. "It just took one level of complexity out of it. It allowed me to do what I wanted to do. It streamlined the entire project and made it mine completely."

Lighting Out

But where to begin? While the Florida-based Butler has shot thousands of buildings for a range of clients, including BBG-BBGM Architects & Interiors (New York), TPG Architecture (New York), Francis Ford Coppola (resorts in Belize), and CBT Architects (Boston), Virgilio Barco library posed its own unique challenges. For

Of course, to do such a grand project on that kind of large scale required Butler get permission. He'd also need to get some protection, as he'd later find out that Bogotá is not the kind of city you want to be hanging around in at night with tens of thousands of dollars worth of gear.

Before leaving Colombia, Butler put out a few feelers to see if he could get the OK to photograph the library. Though he didn't expect much to come of it, Colombia's cultural board got in touch with him two months later and said they wanted to discuss his proposal. So Butler brushed up on his Spanish, packed up his laptop and headed back.

Though the cultural board liked his proposal, administrators at the library weren't initially very jazzed about the project. "We went to scout the library and it was every-

one, Bogotá can be dangerous at night, so the government insisted on providing him with an armed security force. In fact, along with two guards with automatic weapons patrolling the perimeter of the shoot, Butler had people assigned to personally protect him at all times.

And he also needed to attend to his own group of battle-weary volunteers who were assisting him, three who had come from the U.S., and one who was from Bogotá. Everyone at some point during the five-night shoot got sick, and a few had to return home. He's immensely grateful for

all the help he could get. "Without them, it never would've happened," he says.

As with almost all of Butler's shoots, lighting would be key, and while he's a master at illuminating a scene, even he was intimidated by the scope of this project. "I wasn't entirely sure how we were going to

do it," he says with a laugh. "The interior was easy. With the exterior, I had an idea where to start and where to finish, so I just took it from there. I started with as many lights as possible, and then I just started moving the lights, one by one."

Using a rented generator, Butler powered up to six lights at a time. As with most of his lighting setups, the plan was simple: light what you need, shoot a photo and then move the lights, and shoot again so each section overlaps. The shots would be assembled later in Photoshop to create a seamless image with an optimized exposure. Butler says he averages about 20 layers in Photoshop per finished image.

Puzzle Pieces

The signature photo from the shoot is a straight-on horizontal of the library (Page 70–71) showing the reflecting pools in front and the green manicured lawn of the surrounding park. That single image took eight hours to shoot and almost that long to assemble later in Photoshop. Getting all

the right pieces of the lighting jigsaw can be tricky.

"If you shoot one with a set of lights that are too dark, it'll never merge with the other ones. I also do my best to hide the lights. While they can be taken out later in Photoshop, it's easier to hopscotch them over each other."

Butler uses Lowel DP Lights exclusively for his nighttime shoots, fitting each with a 1000-watt bulb and a dimmer. Butler's other lighting choices include Lowel Fren-Ls and Dynalites for strobes because, he says, "they're lightweight and easy to transport."

"Every shot has its own vocabulary," he notes. "I've started a shot using a strobe and ended up with a tungsten. You have to be flexible. You have to look at a scene and say, 'What is the best solution for this particular image?'"

He credits his attention to detail to two photographers he assisted in the past: Dan Forer, an architectural photographer based in Miami, who taught him about lighting,

and Mark Lawrence, a corporate shooter who taught him to be very precise with every aspect of photography, whether it's color correction or packing a gel. "When people really focus on the details, their images are amazing," Butler says.

His interest in photography developed in his teenage years when he was living in Bangkok, Thailand, a visually stimulating city filled with ornate Buddhist temples and packed noisy streets. When he returned to the U.S., Butler got a two-year photography degree from the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale (Florida) and then spent six years assisting other photographers. Though he shot everything from fashion and weddings to aerials in his formative years, he eventually gravitated to architectural photography. "Architecture really suited my personality. The precision of it; everything needs to be just so."

The transition to digital also inspired him to experiment with multiple lighting setups that could later be layered together in Photoshop. Currently he shoots with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III that he feels offers him a good combination of portability and quality.

"I do like to control a situation, but at the same time I like to take huge risks," he says, while acknowledging that the Virgilio Barco Public Library in Bogotá was one of those risks. In the end, though, it paid off in ways that go beyond the photography.

"Let's be honest, architecture is boring in itself. It's just pictures of buildings. The question is: What are you going to do for the world? And my goal is to do something positive."

For Butler that means working with more non-profits, including a return to Bogotá, where he'll be reunited with his friends Pisa, the architect, and Rojas, the politician, again.

"We'll be working in a very poverty-stricken area of Bogotá. We'll be photographing slums from the air and on the ground. It's nebulous where it's headed, but I think we're moving in the right direction." ✐

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