Enjoying Street Photography - Discussion/Techniques/Tips

by Arik Gorban

5 key considerations for creative photography:

1. The Thing
   • The subject is only the start. The photographer has to make the image unique and different from the way others will make it.
   • Make sure you capture and reflect your own experience, point of view, and impression.
   • Consider personal feelings such as conflict, contrast, humor, beauty, etc.

2. The Detail
   • Pay attention to fine detail that is not very obvious to the untrained eye.
   • Look for special texture, colors, patterns, lines, curves.
   • Also think of visual elements that the eye cannot see such as motion blur, selective focus, B&W, reflections.

3. The Vantage Point
   • Choose unique vantage points that are not from the standard eye level.
   • Show the subject from unusual angles and perspectives.
   • Capture it in ways that others don’t see (above, below, very close).
   • Animal, birds, and people should be captured from their eye level for a natural look, but you may want to make a unique statement.

4. The Time
   • Many subjects are not interesting unless captured at the right moment.
   • Consider:
     ➢ Light- quality, color, angle
     ➢ Motion
     ➢ Action
     ➢ Composition of moving elements in the picture
     ➢ Inclusion/exclusion of elements
     ➢ Weather conditions- fog, clouds, sun, etc.

5. The Frame
   • Composition affects dynamics, impact, and mood.
   • Think about what to include in or leave out.
   • Think about the best orientation (vertical, horizontal, diagonal).
• Keep the borders clean.
• Consider the placement of the horizon. High in the frame- gives feeling of depth and distance; low- feeling of space and volume.
• Use leading lines, diagonals, triangles, curves.
• Bright areas get the attention.
• Remember the Rule of Thirds; avoid the center.

Tips

Check the local paper or online for street events. Street fairs, parades, and events offer great photo opportunities.

Don’t forget other public locations such as bus/train stations, markets, flea markets, zoos, and parks.

Less is More - don’t take too much equipment and travel light. It’ll make you less obtrusive and you will be able to move around for the best shot quickly.

Don’t limit yourself to the touristy spots and subjects. Go to side streets to capture the real life scenes.

Anticipate action and interaction between people and be ready to capture the moment.

Always shoot in color. You may consider black and white in post work.

Watch the background. What’s going on behind your subject can make or kill the shot. Buildings, people, billboards, signs, graffiti, and other visual elements can make a statement in a shot, but a busy background that distracts from the subject will ruin it.

Experiment with camera angles. Don’t limit yourself to horizontal and vertical compositions.

Make it your own. Surprise the viewer. Consider unique perspective, composition, timing, and subject matter to make it your own image.

Practice by going back to the same locations. Your ability to see creatively will improve, not just your technical skills.

Always be ready. Things happen, so don’t miss them. When I’m not shooting a specific subject, I set the ISO to 200 and aperture to F8.

Stay in one spot for a period of time and wait for the right moment, action, and subject.

Street scenes are busy. Be clear on whether your picture is of a single subject or the chaotic street scene. Frame accordingly. Make sure that there’s a clear subject in your picture.
Don’t forget Depth of Field (DOF). This is your best tool when you need to separate the subject from a distracting background.

Street scenes in rain, snow, or fog are very interesting. Wet sidewalks and pavements and small puddles often have beautiful reflections. Protect yourself and your gear but don’t be afraid to go out and shoot.

Don’t stop at sunset. City streets at night offer great photo opportunities.

Your safety must come first. Be smart about it.

My way of photographing strangers

I introduce myself and give my card

I explain what I’m doing and why

I tell them what I intend to do with the picture. Maybe show a project checklist

I explain why I want their picture. If I can’t explain it, then I shouldn’t be taking the picture. It has to be a positive reason

I spend time talking to them and give complements as I shoot

I offer to send the pictures to them. I ask them to send me an email. I don’t ask for theirs

I respect my subject’s wishes and don’t push my luck

I prefer to walk the streets with a companion. Strangers are more comfortable with your intentions when you are not alone

Dealing with harsh light

Expose for your main subject. Let the background go bright or dark.

Get close to avoid mixed light and distracting backgrounds or get far to make the details less important

Pick subjects that are in the light or shade, not mixed

If portrait, have the sun behind the subject and have the head tilted down a little
Tips for Street Photography

1. Less is More - don’t take too much equipment and travel light. It’ll make you less obtrusive and you will be able to move around for the best shot quickly.

2. Off the Beaten Track - don’t just go to all the touristy shots - try to get ‘behind the scenes’ and ‘real life’ scenes.

3. Stolen Moments - anticipate moments between people before they happen.

4. True Colors - black and white is often where it’s at with street photography but at times colorful situations arise and can really make a shot - be on the lookout for these.

5. In the Background - what’s going on behind your subject can actually ‘make’ the shot. Billboards, signs, graffiti and other visual elements can really make a statement in a shot.

6. Dare to Go Diagonal - don’t just hold your camera horizontally - experiment with angles. Street photography is a less formal medium - make the most of it.

7. Opposites Attract - shots which challenge the ‘norm’ in terms of composition and story/subject matter can be powerful. Look out for ‘surprising’ subject matter and composition.

8. What a Performance - street performers, parades and other street entertainment can be great subject matter on the street.

9. Off the Streets - other places where people gather in number can lead to great shots in this genre - zoos, fairs, shows, parks, sporting events etc all can be worth trying.

10. New Angle - find ways to get up high or down low - these new perspectives on subjects that are familiar can lead to eye catching shots.

11. Practice makes Perfect - over time and with practice your photography will improve. You’ll not only get better at technique but also spotting the things to focus upon on the street.

12. Fortune Favors the Brave - sometimes the best thing you can do is to get close to your subject - this can be a little confronting but will produce powerful images

13. Fun in the Sun - often we try to avoid shooting into the sun and the shadows that direct sunlight can produce - in street photography breaking these ‘rules’ can lead to great shots.

14. Ready to Pounce - have your camera out and ready to shoot at all times. Things can move quickly on the street so if you’re not ready you’ll miss lots of opportunities.

15. Revise the Revisit - street photography is not all about spontaneity - if you see a scene with potential don’t be afraid to keep coming back to it until you get the shot.
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16. Frozen Motion - the street is a place of movement - to capture it and still get sharp shots make sure your shutter speed is fast enough. 1/125 or more with an ISO of 400 is what this article recommended as a base. I also think it can be fun to experiment with slower shutter speeds on the street - capture the movement as blur.

17. Street Wallpaper - blend in with the scene - shoot unobtrusively and unnoticed.

18. Life Through a Lens - ‘exaggerating perspective will help set your subject in context and provide a more forgiving depth of field’ - use a wide angle lens (or even a fisheye).

19. Expect the Expected - people can be suspicious of street photographers so shoot in places where people expect to see people doing photography. Smile, be polite and be willing to delete images if people protest.

20. Location, Location, Location - really this is what it is all about. Choose places where people interact with one another and times when they are present.

21. Learn to shoot from the hip, also I do the act like I’m aiming at something else, but watch my actual subject out of my left eye and when they have relaxed or are acting naturally very quickly recompose and shoot.

22. Noise can add to the gritty feel of the picture - especially if it’s not chromatic.

23. If I know I’m being intrusive I’ll smile and point to my camera to indicate that I would like to photograph the subject. A smile or nod will let you know it’s OK, a frown or black eye says back off.

24. The beauty of street photography is that you catch people in their natural behavior. To get the main essence of the scene, using a zoom lens will help in not make your scene subjects uncomfortable and you can get a nice photograph.

25. It is important is to sit back and watch scenes and not dive right into it. Follow human interactions, scout out potential shots, preset your camera, and when that magical moment open up just raise your camera and take the shot. Also pay close attention to the background and think about how it can enhance or detract from your shot.

26. Takes practice becoming comfortable, but the results are some of the most true to life.

27. No two situations are similar. Where adults are the subjects, it may be easier to take the picture first then ask permission afterwards. No sense hiding if you’re spotted. It will just create more problems. Explain yourself. In the instances where children are the subjects, that tack may not work. There’s bound to be a lot of hassle with parents, that’s why I suggest asking parents first. Doing so may ruin the spontaneity of the moment, but can be the difference between having the cops called on you.

28. Be a good sport about it. Respect your subject’s wishes and don’t push your luck.
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29. The best street photography advice I received is to stay at one spot for a period of time like 1 hour. Fine an interesting spot and wait with your camera until interesting things happen in that interesting spot. It works...

30. One area in street photography that’s often ignored is shooting at “litter” on the very street next to or below your feet. It could be a piece of gum, ant, common ordinary items dropped on the ground, or even a little oil spill from a parked car.

31. I dig taking pictures of street performers. My tip to other photographers: Before you start taking pictures of them, drop a few bucks into their bucket, and make sure they notice. They will be much more patient and permissive about you taking several shots of them. It is a small price to pay for a good shot.

32. Pay attention to the background. Try to avoid bright objects, especially large ones, such as a white truck or a big sign, unless they add to the story.

33. Expose for your main subject. Street scenes on sunny days make high contrast images. Make sure you subject is exposed properly. Let the background go bright or dark.

34. Street scenes are busy. Be clear on whether your picture is of a single subject or the chaotic street scene. Frame accordingly. Make sure that there’s a clear subject in your picture.

35. Don’t forget Depth of Field (DOF). This is your best tool when you need to separate the subject from a distracting background.

36. Be prepared to introduce yourself to strangers, explain what you are doing, why you want to take their pictures, and what you intend to do with the pictures. I spend some time talking to my subjects before I take the pictures. I also give them my card and tell them that I’ll be glad to send them the pictures, if they choose to send me an email requesting the pictures. I don’t ask them for their email.

37. I prefer to walk the streets with a companion. Strangers are more comfortable with your intentions when you are not alone.

38. Street scenes in rain, snow, or fog are very interesting. Wet sidewalks and pavements and small puddles often have beautiful reflections. Protect yourself and your gear but don’t miss these great photo opportunities.

Street Photographers on Street Photography

What exactly is street photography?

I’ve always seen my role as street photographer a little in the guise of a nutty guy wearing a straw boater, chasing butterflies at a leisurely nineteenth century picnic using a long net fixed to a short pole. The pure collecting element of the process is not to be underestimated. And yes, street photographers are attempting to make; art, document a time and a place, or give us an ironic chuckle – however to reach this end point, they must first collect. I would suggest that people who enjoy the ‘collecting’ hobbies or pastimes such as; stamps, coins, cats etc - invariably house a much higher proportion of socially reserved, or shy individuals within their ranks.

I know that in my case; the continual collection of photographs from the streets, the chase for images, pictures with a poetic and understated vein of pathos, so elusive as to hardly warrant more than nonchalant attention in a sane man’s world. Yet a routine now spanning a quarter of a century which has helped give a certain structure to my life: underpinning all other facets of me. -The process itself is a; discipline most valuable, a humbling quest … a reason. Read more from Andrew Stark

What is the best lens for street photography?

“I personally like to use a wide lens (24mm, 28mm, 35mm on full frame 35mm) to be pretty close to my subject and get that intimate look of my photos. It took me a while to get closer, so I’d suggest to start with maybe a 75mm or 50mm lens to keep some distance and get closer from there…” Read more about Markus Hartel

How can I learn to take great street photography?

“I probably spend more time looking at photographs than I do actually taking them. My shelves at home are lined with photography books. The work of the so-called master photographers - and the less heralded - have always been a source of reassurance and stimulation for my own photography.”

“Photographers such as Elliott Erwitt, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Mario Giacomelli, Robert Frank, Sylvia Plachy and Tony Ray-Jones, to name but a few. The list is endless and always open to change…” Read more from David Gibson

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“I think that a good street photo requires both precision and chance. What I pay attention to is not accidental, yet there is a certain amount of fate that must be injected - usually at the
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last moment - for a street photo to work. So my normal practice is to walk around with a few cameras and a rough sense of expectation but I never know exactly what I will photograph.” Read more from Blake Andrews

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“Photography for me is not a profession, but it is not a mere hobby, either. It is the way to see the world - by world I mostly mean its human race - and also communicate what I see. Composition is less important to me than emotion, and the more fleeting and subtle the emotion is, the better. That’s what photography is for, no?” Read more from Lev Tsimring

What are the best places to shoot street photography?

“As crowding increases, people’s personal space requirement decreases. Also, the space one needs and expects is culturally dependent. In some countries people naturally stand, talk and touch each other in public to a closer degree than in others. But there are general unspoken rules. Get too close, “In your face” — as the saying goes, and people get nervous, even if they don’t know exactly why.”

“At a fair, a midway at a carnival, a sports event, parade, concert or public ceremony, people’s need for personal space and therefore privacy is reduced. The level of sensory stimulation is also usually high at these events, which tends to reduce the need for space. As well, in most of these situations people are having fun so they are more relaxed.” Read more from Michael Reichmann

How do I deal with photographing strangers?

“Photographing strangers is probably one of the most challenging aspects of street photography.

While everybody agrees candid shots are the best deal in street photography, secretly photographing people raises a moral difficulty and should therefore be avoided.

Normally the street photographer aims for authentic looking snaps without her getting involved in any way, or changing the nature of the scene. Nevertheless, sneaking on individuals and secretly photographing them is a questionable practice and not only will provide street photography with a paparazzi-like reputation, you might also find yourself in a delicate position if you are discovered.”

“Asking people for permission to photograph them might not always be the best choice either: It is a well known fact when positioning the camera in front of them, people tend to drop everything they were previously doing, fix their hair, smile and stare at the camera...it may take some practice but in no time you can become a fast shooter. It worked in the Wild West
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and it can work for you.” Read more from Nitsa

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“I try to be invisible,” Ms. Cherry says. Thin and white-haired, clad in jeans and sneakers, she pretty much blends into the street. “Once somebody sees you, everything changes. You don’t get what you’re looking at.”

When somebody catches her eye, Cherry doesn’t hesitate. She explains wryly that if that person calls out, “‘Don’t take my picture!’ I just say, ‘I didn’t.’ And I walk away.” Read more about Vivian Cherry

What’s your take on photographing street people?

“In my street photography class, I encourage my students by saying that all things are photographable in any way. And this is true. I encourage my students, as well as myself, to go out into the world with camera in hand and no preconceptions that could interfere with openness to taking pictures.”

“But I have one exception to that anti-rule, and that’s street people. I feel that photographing them in their poverty is taking advantage of their difficult situation, and that they are not necessarily there voluntarily. Since for many people sleeping on the street it is their “home,” I feel it can be argued that photographing them is an invasion of the little privacy that they have. So, I do not go out of my way to photograph them. In addition to the moral issues surrounding photographing street people, they’re too easy to photograph. Where else are they going to go?” Read more from Mason Resnick

Does street photography have to be in black and white?

“Like many of the photographers I’ve admired over the years I initially did all of my street photography in black and white. I soon realised however that in order to differentiate myself from my predecessors, it would be better if I worked in colour. There were a few notable colour photographers such as Joel Meyerowitz, Alex Webb and Martin Parr whom I admired but I felt my style of work was more akin to the previously mentioned people.”

Working in London may not seem by most visitors conducive to good colour street photography, and indeed it certainly doesn’t have anything like the beautiful light that say Brazil has. But with such an infinite variety of colourful characters in an ever changing cityscape, it has become in recent times as synonymous with street work as Paris and New York were in their heyday. Read more from David Solomons

What are your inspirations?

“Though there are many, I always come back to Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Margaret
Bourke-White, Lee Friedlander, and Robert Frank. They've done the kind of work that I wish I did. And often think about doing.”

“And though I enjoy the work of a long and growing list of photo-bloggers/graphers, there are a few friends that directly influence my compositions or the thoughts behind them: Raul Gutierrez, Joseph Holmes, Michael David Murphy, and Peter Ross.” Read more from Rion Nakaya

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Street Photography Tips from Matt Stuart

1. Plan a street photography route
I have a street photography route. It’s made up from the places in London that are most fruitful - these are the places with the most people and also where the pavements are widest so there’s more room to work. Every now and then I’ll go ‘off-piste’ and try somewhere new.

2. When NOT to take photos on the street
The key to not interrupting a scene is to be quick. The longer you’ve been shooting street photography, the easier you’ll find it to take what you want and leave. It’s important to know if an image is worth taking, though. Ask yourself if it’s worth the hassle - for example, taking a picture of someone wiping a baby’s bottom is bound to get you in trouble, as is photographing a drug deal. I have a gauge of the people I’m going to photograph and if it’s worth it. I used to try to photograph fights when I saw them but I don’t now - it’s not worth aggravating two people whose adrenaline levels are soaring. All the attention can easily be turned to you, the person with the camera.

3. Street photography and the law
Whether or not you should worry about including commercial elements in your shots depends on what you’ll end up doing with them. If you sell them on to a stock library you may need to make sure that the image within the image is cleared. I don’t sell my pictures to stock libraries so I worry less about these issues. I’ve had a few run-ins with the police when I’ve been photographing on the streets - I stay polite and try to explain to them what I’m doing.

4. What to do when confronted
When people spot you taking a picture of them, smile - it works! Sometimes just looking at anything but the person you’re photographing is good too. A switched-off iPod is useful as if people ask you what you’re doing you can pretend to be listening to music.

5. Do I need permission to photograph people on the street?
I don’t get permission. I don’t interact with the people I’ve photographed. You only need permission/releases if you’re going to sell the picture for commercial use. I can’t imagine asking the people I photograph for releases, as it would take forever and probably be quite awkward.

6. How to avoid being spotted when shooting street scenes
- Wear dark clothes. Bright colors will make you stand out.
- Keep your elbows in when you’re shooting.
- Have the camera set. Don’t play around with exposures too much. Be ready to shoot and go.
- If you wear the camera around your neck, keep the strap high so there’s less movement between bringing the camera up to your face.
- Take the camera with you everywhere. Get so used to the camera that it feels like a second skin.
Street photography tips from Nick Turpin

7. Learn from street photography books and websites
The best street photographs are moments, they contain a happening and usually one that, a moment ago, you didn’t see coming - that’s the difference between street photography and reportage, you’re not photographing a ‘subject’, you’re simply out to see what comes your way in the busy change and flux of a public place. Generally, street photographs are self-contained. It’s the humor, a narrative or some drama that makes them work without the presence of other images - they’re one-offs. Look at a lot of good street photography in books and on the web. See why the pictures work. See how the photographer made the joke or framed the moment. See what devices photographers have used on the street.

8. Street photography locations
Don’t try to look at and photograph a whole city, it’s overwhelming. Instead concentrate on a small section of a street or a corner - that’s where street pictures happen.

9. Choose interesting street photography subjects
Finding a subject can take lots of time. Often I’ll find someone who looks interesting and hang around or follow them, in the hope that something will happen or come the other way that suddenly makes a wonderful scene. One day I followed two bald men in suits; they looked interesting but they weren’t a picture on their own. First they went past a hat shop with lots of hats floating on poles that made an amusing Magritte-type picture. Then on a corner two workmen came in the opposite direction wearing hard hats and a lovely juxtaposition was made. I often create a picture like this - find one element and then try to add to it. Occasionally you’ll turn a corner and find a picture just waiting to be taken and then you have a mad scramble to get into the best position to shoot it.

10. Always carry your camera
I think most street photographs are made during the course of an ordinary day. Of course I go to the city specifically to shoot, but the number one rule is to carry your camera at all times, always be ready to make a picture... this improves your luck vastly.

11. Learn to work fast
I get the most satisfaction from shots taken so quickly that I barely had time to think about why I was taking them; pictures that are a raw reaction to a small trigger. I took one shot of a man running fast, outside Liverpool Street Station, predicting roughly where he’d be by the time I’d raised my camera. It was over in a second but the photograph reveals a fleeing mugger being chased by the young businessman, whose phone he’d stolen. It’s this ‘revelatory’ aspect of street photography that I find appealing.

12. The best time for street photography
The moment is always paramount, good light can add or detract from it but it rarely ‘makes’ the picture in itself. I’m more concerned with quantity of light than quality of light because I need upwards of 1/250th of a second and a decent bit of depth of field in order to freeze my subjects. Having said that, the morning and evening are particularly nice times to shoot, especially in the summer months.

13. Where to shoot from in street photography
Stand close to people and shoot with a small, slightly wide-angle lens - you look more
conspicuous when you’re standing across the street.

14. Shoot plenty of frames
When something is good, don’t take a single frame and leave. Watch the scene develop and change, picking out the best moments to make your picture.

15. Street photography in crowded places
Put yourself in a place where there are plenty of people about and you should be able to make a good street picture at pretty much any moment. You’ll develop a sense of whether a particular place is going to deliver or not – it’s a bit like getting a few bites when you’re fishing. If there’s a buzz, then hang around. The trick is to maintain your focus and concentration and not let a photographic trip turn into a shopping or drinking excursion.

Street Photography Tips from David Solomons

16. Always have plenty of memory available
I’ve mostly missed shots where I didn’t have my camera with me or it was lying in my bag. In the film days, most pros – especially press and sports photographers – would burn off the last few frames of a roll and reload in case they missed out on an important moment. Much of street work involves taking a single frame of a specific subject matter but it’s important to try to work at any particular scene as most of the time you’re unlikely to get the best shot first time.

17. Pick the best focal length for street photography
Any small portable camera is suitable for street photography and the camera of choice has historically been a Leica, though I’ve never used that system. I’ve mostly used SLRs and other rangefinders like the Contax G2 and a Ricoh GR1. I think using a fixed focal length of between 28mm and 50mm encourages more discipline as it forces you to be more active and thoughtful in your composition.

18. How to avoid confrontation when shooting street photography
I think trying to remain unobtrusive as opposed to unseen is important. People become more suspicious if you try to take pictures sneakily or if you look nervous, whereas if you act as though you’re doing your job and you project a more positive body language, then you’re less likely to encounter problems.

19. Which camera mode to use for street photography
In most situations, I find using the camera’s Program mode to be very reliable and it certainly gives you one less thing to worry about in terms of reacting quickly to subjects. Because I’ve shot a lot of transparency film in the past, however, I’ve learnt where certain tricky lighting situations can fool the camera’s metering, so when I encounter that I switch to Manual. The great thing about using digital is that you can review exposures immediately and adjust accordingly. A quicker method is to use the exposure compensation setting if I feel I need a quick adjustment in P mode but, of course, you need to remember to zero it again when you’ve finished.
20. What type of lens to use for street photography
Using a long lens isn’t a good option as it isolates a subject from its environment and produces a very different type of shot to traditional street photography. Many interesting situations in the street involve more than one or two subjects, so that should be a major consideration when deciding how much of a scene you include in your pictures. Long-lens shots don’t allow for a wider, more intimate viewpoint, and the vast majority of memorable street work has been shot with lenses between 28mm and 50mm.

21. Quick reaction times
I think you have to take into consideration where you’re taking pictures. For example, when I’m in London I’ll always have my camera in my hand as opposed to hanging on my shoulder as I know that events can unfold very quickly so it’s important to be able to react fast to things. In really busy areas such as Oxford Circus or Piccadilly Circus, I’ll sometimes just put the camera to my eye for 10-15 seconds at a time and if I see anything interesting come into frame – I know I can react to it within half a second. I think in a less congested area it’s not as important to go to those levels but I’d say it’s always good to have a small point-and-shoot compact to hand wherever you go.