



PHOTOGRAPHY MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

One important, but often overlooked project in the revitalization of downtown business districts is the photographic documentation of the entire commercial area. Having a solid photographic record of your downtown is important in marketing the successes of your community's revitalization efforts. After all, it's pretty difficult to get that nice "before" picture of a project after the work is underway (or worse completed!)

A photo inventory is useful for a number of different projects. These include building inventories, streetscape planning, storefront designs, historic or architectural surveys, business recruitment packets, and for marketing successful rehab projects to name a few. Creating this inventory is one of the very first things an organization should implement and update on a regular basis.

One of the biggest challenges in getting a good photograph of a downtown building is to eliminate perspective distortion. This occurs when a camera lens is tilted in order to get an especially tall building entirely in the frame. When the lens is tilted, the vertical lines of the build-

ing are distorted to a vanishing point, making the building appear even taller. There are at least two basic methods for dealing with the problem. The first is to use a perspective correcting lens. This is a special lens that actually shifts its position in relation to the camera body to eliminate the problem. Since these lenses are fairly expensive, most people elect to use the second option, simply elevating the position of the camera so it can remain parallel to the façade of the building.



A simple way to elevate the camera is to use a sturdy step-ladder or even to stand in the bed of a pick up truck.

Eliminating the perspective distortion in the photos is important so that the individual pictures can be put together into an accurate streetscape composite or elevation for an entire block. Without correcting the perspective the bottom of each building will be wider than the top, creating gaps between the buildings when they are put together. The photos should also be taken at a consistent distance from the building line so that the proportions remain identical. Since not all facades will sit in perfect alignment, things like a curb can be used as a reference line to keep

distances equal. Use the minimum distance needed to capture the tallest building without tilting the camera, assuming that the street width is adequate.

The best time to complete a photo inventory of the downtown is when there are very few cars on the street to block views of storefront details.

Also, a time when the sun is quite even and not very bright. High sunlight creates strong shadows and contrast making it difficult to get a nice uniform exposure of an entire building. Therefore early morning hours, evenings and slightly overcast days make good choices for lighting. You should also consider when the traffic is slowest in your downtown considering most photos will be taken in the street.

If the photos are taken during the day and it is sunny, buildings facing east should be photographed in the morning and buildings facing west in the afternoon. Remember to always try to keep the sun at your back as much as possible to eliminate glare and exposure problems.

The use of a tripod is highly recommended to be certain the camera stays at a consistent height and remains level. Even if one person is taking all the photos, keeping the camera level is a difficult task. It can be very tempting to tip the camera "just a little bit" in order to be sure to get that cornice finial or the flag-



pole atop the courthouse. When shooting the photos, be sure not to omit anything. Include vacant lots, parking lots, and all structures. Don't assume that a particular property is not important enough to warrant documentation, you will never know.

Another streetscape documentation technique is the "panoramic" photo collage. This type of photo is created by setting up a tripod in one spot. Consecutive images are taken while turning the camera in a series of individual pictures to capture the streetscape. This method can be particularly effective for areas like town squares or major intersections. This also gives a quick overall impression of an area or district without photographing each individual façade.

Technology has also impacted photography. No longer is the choice only prints or slides, but also CD, DVD or computer storage. Using a digital camera is very convenient and results are almost immediate. However, in order to ensure a high quality print, the resolution of a digital camera must be fairly high. This means individual images will be quite large files creating storage challenges, especially for large numbers of images. A recordable CD can be a good storage solution. A photo CD is also a good choice that provides access to computer technology with the benefits of traditional photogra-

phy. The photo CD is created by the film lab from standard photographic film. One big benefit from the photo CD processing is that regular prints or slides can be included with the processing. This gives the best of both worlds, digital images and a "hard copy" (print or slide). It's hard to beat the convenience of having photos or slides of your downtown buildings in conjunction with digital images.

The convenience of a printed picture is hard to beat in certain situations. The digital revolution has made it very easy to transfer and print images in a variety of formats. However, as a long term record, most commonly used printing techniques are inadequate. The inks will fade and deteriorate. The only solution is to insist on archival quality prints. Archival quality uses a special paper, usually linen or rag stock, instead of standard resin coated papers to insure long term durability and color retention.

Computer technology has also impacted the storage and sharing of digital images. Digital images can be saved in a wide variety of

file formats on a wide variety of storage media. Be careful to back up your images in more than one location, perhaps even in more than one file type. Lost digital images or corrupted files can be difficult, if not impossible to restore.

Various software programs, like Microsoft's PowerPoint, have made it incredibly easy to share digital images to a very broad audience. Stunning "Before and After" images can quickly demonstrate the progress

a revitalization program is making. More and more we live in a visual world, these images can be invaluable to your program.

A good photo inventory is not a cumbersome task. With some planning and the involvement of local "shutter bugs" a local program should have a great collection of current photos. And decades from now, the next wave of downtown preservationists will thank you for it!



For More Information:

*Design Consultant, Main Street Iowa
Iowa Dept of Economic Development
200 East Grand, Des Moines, IA 50309
515-242-4762
515-242-4792*