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# URBAN JUNGLE

Marek Neumann talks about his approach to commercial architecture photography as Peter Fenech joins him on a walking tour around London



**Marek Neumann**

Inspired by a passion for the geometry of urban structures, London-based Marek Neumann specialises in interior, architectural and fashion photography. He has been published in *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, *London Informer*, *Grazia France* and *The Rough Guide*, and worked with corporations such as Serrano Evans Architects, RLG designed by Zaha Hadid and Google. [www.marekneumann.co.uk](http://www.marekneumann.co.uk) [www.linkedin.com/in/marek-neumann-18471552](https://www.linkedin.com/in/marek-neumann-18471552)

A quirk of the City of London, one of the most important and bustling financial centres in the world, is that at weekends it is empty – a ghost town. This brings with it incredible photo opportunities and irritable quests for open coffee shops in equal measure, but it is a predictable facet of London’s character.

So I am somewhat perplexed, upon leaving my hotel on Fleet Street, to find the road packed with horses and police heading east towards St Paul’s. It turns out that Marek Neumann, whom I’m due to meet, and I have picked the Saturday on which the Lord Mayor’s Show 2021 is to take place. I’m trying to reassure myself that we can work around it, when I am swept up in a climate change protest. So much for a quiet afternoon of architectural photography.

I meet Marek at Two New Ludgate, a modern building where he is keen to start our shoot. Straight away, he highlights the need for discretion to avoid attracting the attention of security personnel. He then explains what he looks for when approaching a subject for the first time.

“The first and most important thing is the light and the shape of the structure, as well as its surroundings. I can spend some time walking around the subject looking from different viewpoints for the right perspective, the perfect angle or a distinctive detail that can make a good photograph. If I have time, I try to

visit the site at different times of day, to find the best light,” he says.

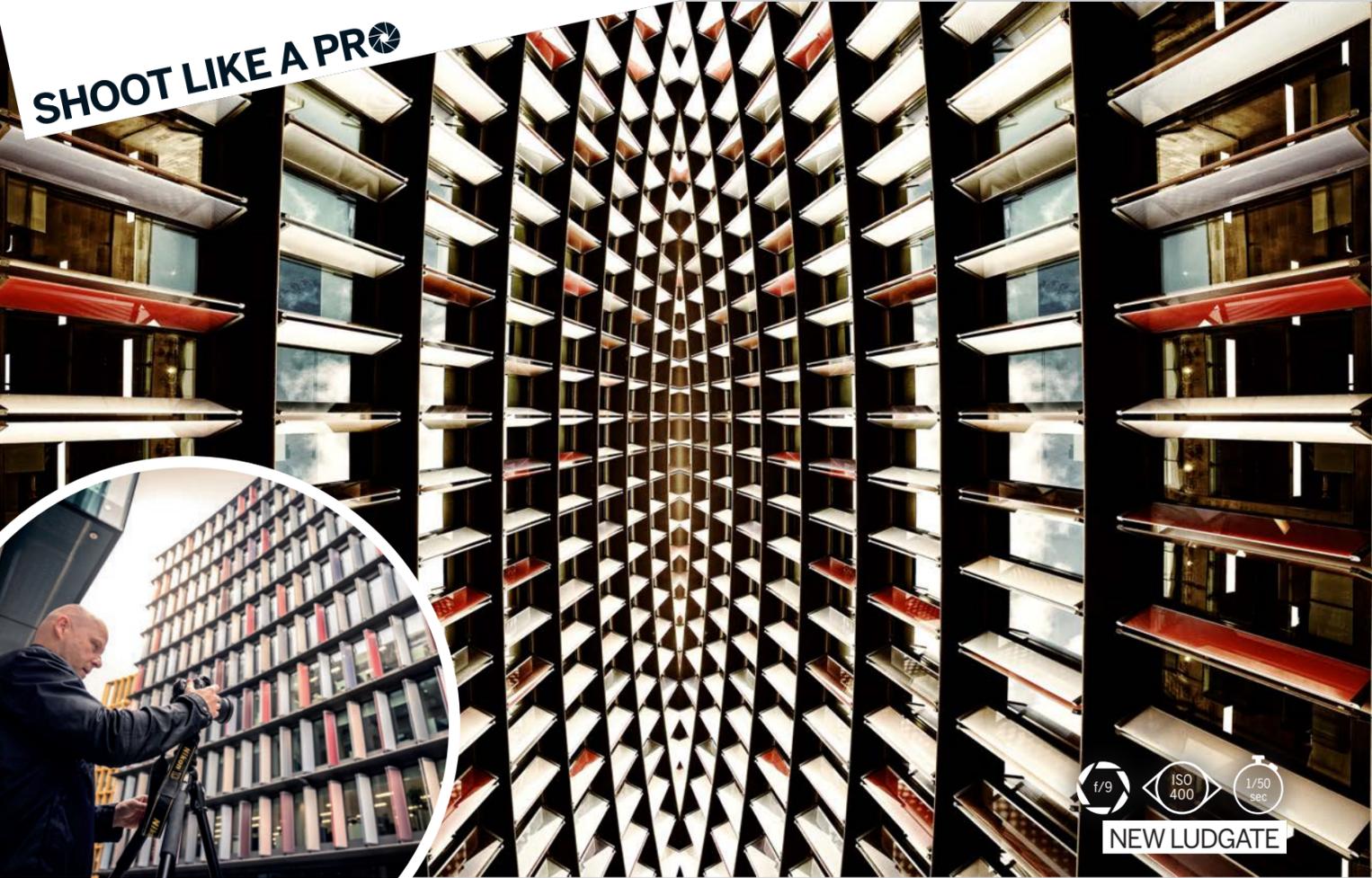
We are shooting on an overcast day, so Marek uses a heavy-duty tripod to keep his camera perfectly still. He shoots the building from across the street at a perpendicular angle, to get all of it in the frame. To minimise converging verticals, Marek uses his 19mm Nikkor tilt/shift lens.

“The lenses I use depend on the type of photograph I want to take. Most of the time, I use wide-angle lenses, such as my 17-35mm, 14-24mm or 19mm tilt/shift, for exteriors capturing a whole or bigger part of a building. This also applies to interiors. Meanwhile, a standard 50mm lens would be used for a close-up or detail shot.”

To avoid getting stuck in a regimented or formulaic approach to lens choice, Marek will occasionally mix things up. “I try to experiment with lenses and sometimes use one I would not normally use for a specific photograph. A telephoto lens is useful when shooting a structure from a long distance,” he adds.

Marek gets to work photographing the colourful facade of our first subject and asks me what I think of the design. It so happens that I am rather fond of it, at least from a photographic perspective. I ask Marek if he feels the increasingly homogeneous modern building design is an asset or a challenge when seeking a unique angle.

“It’s mostly a good thing,” he says. “Modern buildings, with their unique design, curved lines and



## Shoot for the client

Make sure you know what your client wants

Architectural photography is interpretive, and the creative shapes of buildings encourage stylised images. However, when taking on commercial work, Marek highlights the importance of shooting with the client's needs in mind. "When working for a client, I try to keep them satisfied and not impose my own style. A challenge is to properly interpret the client's requirements, however, I am not afraid to offer suggestions," he explains. Professional architectural imagery often needs to be functional and, as Marek's work shows, it requires a delicate balance of creativity and practicality.



Marek shoots images both commercially and for personal projects and so must decide how much of his artistic preferences he introduces to his work for commercial customers. Marek is represented by Gabriel Fine Arts gallery: <https://gabriefinearts.com>

sophisticated, lighter construction, give you more opportunities for exploration, different angles and extreme perspectives. You can expose a building in an exceptional or abstract form that might not be possible when photographing old monuments. Having said that, I am inspired by Antoni Gaudi and Zaha Hadid – architects with different styles."

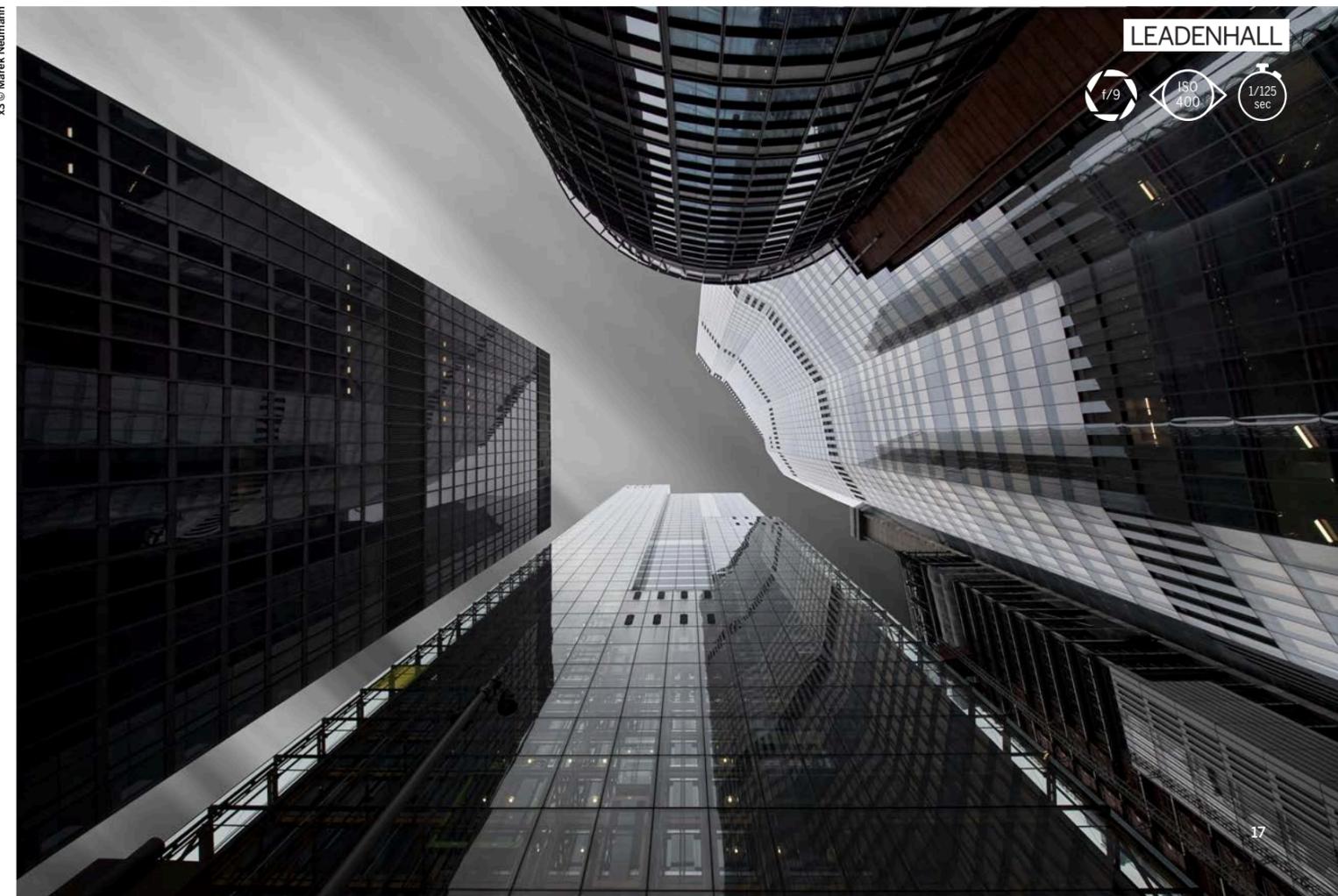
It is true that as architects push design boundaries, we can find new ways to use these buildings for original compositions, but how does this influence the photography process?

"The main differences between old and new buildings are walls and windows. Most new buildings use steel and glass, so I might not need any additional lighting, especially when photographing interiors. However, it might get tricky on a sunny day. Old buildings have thick walls and small windows, so the problem could be insufficient light. Often, I need to use additional lighting to avoid shadows and light the space evenly. Of course, the same would apply to a modern, large open space, even when shooting on the brightest of days."

With shot number one in the bag, it's time to move to our next location. Thanks to the parade, this proves more difficult than it may otherwise have been. We wind our way through the crowds, taking a shortcut through Bank station, to skip under the throngs of people lining the pavements outside Mansion House. While Marek points out that avoiding the attention of security is going to be a challenge today, the large cameras we are both carrying have an unexpected perk. Police assume we are press covering the event and wave us through the barriers. A stroke of good fortune. Marek says, noting that building security firms seem preoccupied with photographers carrying pro equipment and should focus on those attempting to go unnoticed, with smartphones. Nevertheless, while you might have the right to take images somewhere, avoiding confrontation is always best.

At Outwich Street, Marek switches to his 14-24mm lens to capture some extreme perspectives. Shooting straight up removes some of the context of a location and can allow a building room to breathe. Having

© Marek Neumann





SHOOT LIKE A PRO

## I am fascinated by the geometry of design, so the natural path was architectural photography

fought our way through the latest crowds. I ask Marek how he feels about including people in his architectural studies.

"Buildings are made for people and adding them can make photographs more alive and more accessible" he explains. "I try to include them, especially when shooting for my clients. At the same time, when working on my own projects, I prefer photographs without people, as I like my images to be cold and even a little apocalyptic. Having said that, I have recently noticed that I allow more people when shooting – people can bring a new perspective and dimension."

Next up is a visit to the famous 'Cheesegrater', also known as 122 Leadenhall Street. Once again Marek is shooting handheld to avoid blocking the pavement. He advises using a wireless shutter release when tripod-mounted, and highlights the advantages of exposure bracketing, to capture a wider dynamic range.

"In architectural photography, lighting helps to emphasise a space, a specific structure or atmosphere, reveal texture and perspective and all that plays an important role in shaping the viewer's perception," Marek says.

"The time of day and sun position make a big difference in how the photo is lit, so understanding and using the movement and angle of the sun can help with your choice of light for a shot. In architectural

photography, directional light isn't desirable and often leads to deep shadows and over-exposure, so a cloudy day is always preferable to a sunny one. An overcast sky can help diffuse the sun, softening both the highs and lows."

Marek believes this element can make or break an architectural image. "If you shoot with the right light, you can get magnificent effects, even when shooting an ordinary structure," he notes.

Watching him work, it's clear Marek is methodical in his approach, ensuring all lines are straight and the exposure is perfect. I'm curious how much post-processing plays a role in the work of a commercial architectural photographer.

"It's an extremely important part of my photography. I shoot RAW files, so I need to post-process my pictures, but I try not to over-edit them. I keep perspective and converging lines straight and avoid distortion while shooting, mostly by using appropriate lenses and angles, but some small corrections may still be necessary. The same applies to white balance. I always set it prior to taking a picture, but it might need to be adjusted in software during the retouching process."

Our final stop of the day is the Barbican Centre. This time we are shooting a building under construction – a subject many photographers would pass by. Marek composes the shot to make a feature out of the layers



f/8 ISO 250 1/13 sec  
BARBICAN CENTRE

© Marek Neumann

### The shooting gear Marek uses

**1 Nikon D5**  
As well as a tough build quality and sensible resolution, the D5 has a wide dynamic range, making it perfect for his outdoor architecture work. Marek also shoots in fashion, so the speed and ISO performance are ideal.

**2 Nikon D3s**  
Marek recommends having a backup camera available on paid assignments, in case of failures. Having a similar body makes moving between them easier and helps keep the shoot flowing.

**3 AF-S Zoom-Nikkor 17-35mm f/2.8D IF-ED**  
Marek's favourite lens, due to the flexibility offered by the useful focal length range. It enables both wide and standard fields of view.

**4 Nikon 14-24mm f2.8 G AF-S ED**  
An ultra-wide-angle lens that Marek uses when he wants to capture an expansive view of both exteriors and interior shots. The constant f/2.8 aperture makes it a good low-light performer.

**5 PC NIKKOR 19mm f/4E ED**  
Marek's standard architectural photography optic. Tilt and shift functions allow control of converging verticals and keep lines straight – essential for commercial images.

**6 Multiple lights**  
For interior photography, Marek uses Studio Lights and speedlights to control brightness and lift shadows. While bracketing helps, flash adds a natural look to images.

### Marek's architecture tips

- **Prepare** List the photos you want to take and the gear you'll need to use. If possible, visit the location in advance to plan angles and lighting.
- **Lighting** Adjust the light to emphasise a specific structure or atmosphere. Check your histogram after every shot.
- **Explore** Don't take every picture from eye level. Keep an eye out for curves or other dynamic shapes that can add a sense of movement. Explore all sides of the building for different angles.
- **Avoid distortion and reflections** Ensure all verticals are parallel to the left and right edges of your viewfinder. Remove unwanted reflections by adjusting the lens angle.
- **Post-processing** Always shoot RAW. Explore plug-ins to get specific effects that perfectly match the intended atmosphere of your shots.





f/8 ISO 640 1/40 sec

LEADENHALL INTERIOR



**Reliable stability**  
Marek recommends using a remote shutter release to trigger your camera and ensure blur-free images. A wired remote works well, although Marek prefer wireless models

of the floors. I ask how he would describe his style of photography. "I would say old-fashioned with a modern twist. I treat photography seriously, especially emphasising the quality of my work, paying attention to details. Creating an individual style is a never-ending process, as there is always something new to discover that can influence or amend your style." Before we wrap up, I ask Marek what he thinks is the biggest challenge in architectural imaging. "The main challenge is to properly interpret the client's requirements to keep them happy. In more abstract architectural photography, the difficulty is finding that unique angle or perspective that makes the specific picture stand out. Experience can definitely help, but sometimes you just need lots of patience, as it can take plenty of attempts to get there." With restrictions easing, Marek is back travelling internationally for work, shooting a range of subjects. From my time with him, it's clear that adaptability is an essential quality in professional architectural photographers. You have to match not only the style of the building but also align your own artistic preferences with the requirements of your client. "I constantly review and improve my technique and keep up to date with the latest technologies and styles," says Marek, as we head for a well-earned drink.

### Marek's pro steps to striking architectural shots



**1 Support the camera** Put your camera on a tripod to get your photograph sharp and to support your equipment, especially when shooting under low-light conditions. A ball head offers the greatest flexibility and freedom of composition.



**2 Control White Balance** Set white balance manually by using Kelvin temperature values and doing test shoots with a grey card. Colour can be adjusted in post, but in-camera is more accurate, especially when shooting commercially.



**3 Set the exposure** A grey card can be useful here too. Manually calculate and set the correct exposure and shutter speed. Meter from the highlights to avoid clipping and use additional lighting, such as flash, if you need to lift the shadows.



**4 Control perspective** Use an appropriate lens and keep your camera level. Marek uses a tilt/shift lens to ensure lines are kept straight. He advises using your camera's virtual horizon as a reference to ensure the setup is correctly positioned.



**5 Take a test shot** Shoot with your preferred composition. Check the shot and correct the distance, camera position and orientation to adjust for any distortion. If you need to recompose, adjust the shift, rather than pitching the lens up or down.



**6 Explore different angles** Even if you are satisfied with the initial image, explore more angles, extreme perspectives, interesting geometric shapes and textures. Look for lines of symmetry or anything unusual that will make your shot unique.