

Top Ten 2: Design Elements to Experiment With

Photography is entirely a visual, spatial medium. Your attention to controlling design elements will separate your work of art from a simple snapshot and will dictate how your theme is interpreted by your audience.

Don't be afraid to experiment with design elements, take risks, and fully develop a design style of your own. Great art almost always requires an investment of effort and a leap of faith from its audience. Sometimes, an artist's most difficult and visually challenging photographs are among their very best work.

Here's a list of important design elements to begin experimenting with. Keep your mind open to many others - the possibilities for visual design in photography are truly infinite!

10. Infinite Lines

Lines that don't end or begin within the photograph seem to carry on forever. They hint that the world outside the photograph is much bigger and more complex than the world within it, and they cue the viewer's imagination to begin to explore.

Try it for yourself - photograph a small geometric scene, enclosing it completely within the frame and completing every line within the photo. Now move closer, photographing the same scene with its limits beginning to breach the frame of the photograph. The first photo will seem enclosed and complete and will tell the whole story. The second will stimulate the viewer to imagine where the lines from the edge of your composition lead. The photo will become merely a starting point on a longer journey.

Infinite lines don't have to end at the frame. They can fade into fog or smoke, they can dissolve into patterns, or they can pass behind another element. If you can imagine a line continuing, the line must be infinite.

Infinite lines don't suit some compositions, especially those whose goal is to keep the viewer in the present moment. Because infinite lines place demands on a viewer's imagination, they can lead to more difficult works that speak to a more experienced viewer. However, explore them occasionally - infinite lines can add a dimension of fantasy and exploration to your art, attracting and holding a viewer's attention.

9. The Frame

The frame is one of the most important design elements to become familiar with, simply because it is the only design element that will appear in every photograph you'll ever make. The edge of your photograph forms a bridge between fantasy and reality, a meeting place for your art and your viewer's imagination. Inside the frame is the message as you composed it. Outside, the message is interpreted, and your viewer's own thoughts begin to take precedence.

The structure in your composition will largely dictate the balance between the two. Long, leading lines or repeated shapes will tend to remove your viewer from the work and create a frame that seems like a window. A photograph with truncated lines and stagnant shapes will act more like a table or a canvas, keeping the viewer's attention on site and in the present moment.

How other design elements interact with the frame will change the photograph too. Elements in the corners will seem more energetic and less settled. The frame can be another repeated shape, echoing vertical or horizontal lines from elsewhere in your composition. More importantly, the frame can form relief, shapes formed of blank space left between it and your composition.

Whatever your style of photography, always try to use the frame as an important aspect of your composition. This simple, humble, invisible design element can change a snapshot into a work of art!

8. Blends of Similar Colours

Blending similar colours in a photograph can unify the composition, creating an attraction and a similarity between unlike elements. Colour can make a slightly awkward composition easier to accept, giving you the freedom to experiment with unusual geometry while still communicating with your viewer.

Similar colours can be different shades of the same colour, or just colours of a similar "temperature", like mixes of blue and green, or yellow and red. Light that has a colour cast, as daylight does in the shade or at sunset, will create blends of similar colours. Don't always correct for coloured light! Similar colours can be found in white light too - look for patterns in coloured rocks, earthy blends on a forest floor, or chipped paint on an aging wall.

Because similar colours will unify a composition, the composition will usually seem more passive and timeless. This can suit many photographs. If it doesn't, you may have to make your composition more dynamic, challenging the viewer with unusual geometry and difficult patterns. Colour has weight too, allowing you to balance heavy elements with open space.

Don't reach for a coloured filter or adjust your white balance every time you're shooting in off-white light. Embracing the native colour of a scene can give you new freedom to experiment with compositions or a new way to tie eclectic elements together. » Top

7. Motion

Photography is unique in its ability to capture and display motion. Photographers can choose to freeze a moving subject, blur it, or even show the subject clearly while blurring the background. If used effectively, motion can add an extra dimension to your photography, communicating a sense of time and space to your viewer.

Freezing motion with a fast shutter speed will show a detailed subject, and will reinforce the idea that your photograph is truly capturing a thin sliver of time. This will suit full and dynamic photographs, especially when the motion bleeds out of the image frame.

Blurring motion with a slow shutter speed will erase texture and show your subject as a simple wash of colour and tone. This effect is more like an impressionist painting, where the artist creates a timeless "glance" of a scene, omitting details and inviting the audience to fill in blanks with their imagination. A constantly moving subject will create new shapes as it "streaks" through your frame - make sure your composition takes advantage of this. A randomly moving subject will create a simple wash of smooth pattern - most interesting when combined with static elements.

Take advantage of movement, and try to see it as a creative tool instead of a hurdle. With practice, you'll use motion to create photos with entirely new depth, bringing a dimension of life and luster to the once flat medium of photography!

6. Shadow and Highlight Detail

For a photograph to truly engage its viewer, it must have enough complexity and detail to effectively dialog beyond a simple first impression. As your viewer continues to look at a piece, they should continue to find new elements that support the overall visual design and repeated patterns of the whole.

However, richness and complexity can easily become overwhelming clutter. Too dense a design can turn a photograph into a shapeless mass that intimidates a potential viewer, losing the initial impact that should win your work an audience in the first place.

So how can you possibly balance complexity with simplicity?

Try including a lot of detail in the highlights and shadows of your image. The patterns and shapes there can repeat and expand on the details in the rest of the image, but will tend to remove themselves from the initial impression of the photograph. The work will

look full and real, and will relay its message without unnecessary clutter. Up close, the work will continue to engage, allowing the viewer to appreciate its many subtle textures.

In your efforts to create an image with rich highlight and shadow detail, don't go overboard. Making too much of an effort to hold details (especially by using photography software) can leave you with a low contrast image. The idea is to maintain the photo's impact while hanging on to as many of those details as you can. Shadow and highlight details should be just that - details - and should stay hidden until someone goes looking for them.

5. Repeated Shapes

Reiterating a shape through the frame creates a feeling of continuity and expands the "scope" of a photograph. The shape in question doesn't have to be created using the same object - arranging dissimilar objects to form the same shapes can be a fascinating way of tying an eclectic scene together.

When first trying this type of composition, keep the repeated shape fairly simple. A complex shape will get lost as it changes subtly between contexts. Try repeating shapes with the same object at first, then move on to creating the same shape from many bases.

Very skilled artists (especially painters) can repeat shapes in ways you might not expect, echoing the outlines of animals in landscapes, or forming relief that compliments the body of the image. Photography can be more restrictive, but still approach it in the same way. Use the repeated shape as a kind of visual metaphor, showing your theme out of context and in a fresh, interesting way.

Repeating shapes is not a technique to use in every photograph. Photographs that need to portray a silent, present-moment feeling should avoid the complexity that repeating shapes inevitably creates. Asian inspired photographs that use empty space to balance objects might steer clear of clutter or a geometric theme at all. Keep the technique in the back of your mind, and use it whenever you think it might add to a photograph.

4. Relief

The empty space between design elements, or between a design element and the frame, is called "relief". Relief can take on as many shapes as the design elements themselves. Relief shapes are often recognized unconsciously, reinforcing your theme on a new level or adding an entirely new idea to your work.

Most photographs include relief shapes, usually by accident. Simply controlling these shapes will win you extra power with your design. Shift the camera, and watch the interaction of your elements and your frame. Try to mimic the shapes in the elements

themselves, or try to add a shape that expands or compliments your theme. Sometimes a photograph can get by on relief alone - jumbled, confusing objects can come together to form a clean, harmonious image.

The most common place to form relief is in the corners of your photograph. Cutting off a corner with a simple, unrepeatd straight line is a classic example of relief gone wrong. If possible, try to arrange a scene so that the corner forms a more complex shape. Failing that, try to repeat the line forming the triangle - this creates a series of polygons instead of a single cut off triangle.

Control over relief is finicky and doesn't come easy. Try working with close up objects when practicing relief for the first time - this will let you exercise full control over your position and the shapes between the objects in your frame.

3. Lines Between Design Elements

If your composition uses design elements that stand out, the viewer's attention will tend to gravitate to them first. If there's only one, the viewer's eye may start there, moving on to another part of the photo later. If there are more than one, the viewer's attention will drift between them, effectively creating lines between them.

These connecting lines work together to form shapes. Two heavy design elements will almost always form a straight line. Three will usually form a triangle - though three elements (or four, or more) nearly in a line can be interpreted as points on a curve.

Be careful with the shapes you choose to form, and where you choose to form them. Straight lines and triangles are very direct and strong, and make a solid, unbending impression. Curves can be leading and pleasing. More complex shapes, like rectangles or pentagons, tend to seem weaker and imply movement. Shapes in the corners will have more energy than ones in the rest of the photo.

The degree to which the shapes contribute to your theme will depend on how much they contrast with the rest of your composition. Work with similar objects that stand out to varying degrees, and try to work the produced shape into your surrounding ideas. Shapes between objects are a highly personal design element, so don't be surprised if people interpret these shapes differently than yourself!

2. Decaying Patterns

Patterns that change and decay can add immense interest to a photograph, graduating the frame and adding a symbolic sense of time lapsed. The effect is almost the opposite of a fixed pattern that applies a sense of rigidity and formality to a photo.

A pattern that changes and evolves within the frame can tell a metaphorical story, infusing the work with a feeling of age and mortality. Visually, a decaying pattern can slowly guide the eye through the frame like a series of curves, allowing the viewer to see the whole photograph without getting "stuck" on any single design element. Changing shapes can be interpreted as a symbol of age and wisdom.

Natural aging creates a wealth of decaying patterns for the photographer's viewing delight. Look for patterns in natural or urban areas that have changed with age. I have used thinning carpets of fallen leaves, progressively eroded sandstone blocks, or flaked layers of paint to create changing patterns in my photographs. The patterns can be massive or tiny, so keep your eyes open at every scale. Decaying patterns sometimes work best when all size cues are removed from the photograph.

By showing the progression of a pattern in a scene, you can add a strong sense of time, continuity, and evolution to your work. Look for patterns all around you and try it for yourself - with practice, you'll acquire a new way of guiding your viewer's eyes and imaginations.

1. Empty Space

One of the most ignored design elements in Western culture is the design element that isn't - empty space. Leaving a large portion of your frame vacant can speak volumes more than filling it up. There is no true substitute for the impeccable silence of a simply balanced open canvas.

Of course, you'd be challenging even the most forward-thinking art critic if you presented a series of totally blank photographs. The idea is to balance objects with space instead of other objects - to use space as a metaphorical and contextual object in its own right. The composition may look contrived and unbalanced at first glance, but the challenge of the work can actually help attract viewers.

Study traditional Eastern Asian art for ideas on how to present empty space in your photos. Blankness and solid colour predominate in much Asian work, often creating a flair of calm, concentration, and tempered imagination. The empty space often diffuses and mirrors the rest of the composition, and by its nature bleeds the photograph from the page into the real world.

Once your viewer gets comfortable with the idea of emptiness being something, they can begin to enjoy the simplicity of the approach amongst other, louder artwork. Instead of using bright, contrasty images with manic complexity to find a viewer's attention, try offering a place of quiet, a moment of harmony, and a starting point for thought.

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