

# SurveyLA

Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey



## PHOTO TUTORIAL

Developed by:

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This self-paced tutorial was developed by architectural photographer Stephen Schafer to illustrate the basics of capturing historic resource survey photos for SurveyLA.





Each resource surveyed will be digitally photographed, and those photographs will become an integral part of the SurveyLA database. Survey photos may serve as the only documentation of a resource lost to fire, alteration, or demolition.

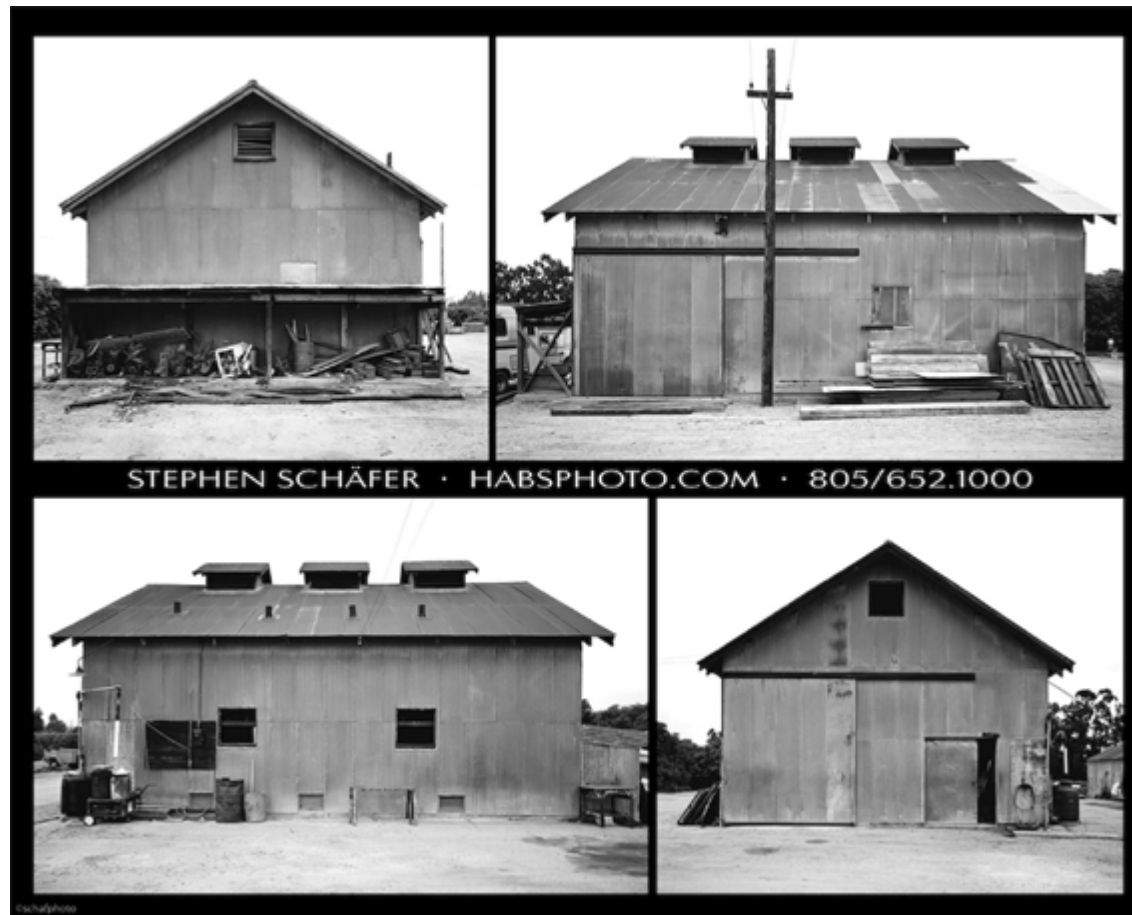




In addition to buildings, SurveyLA will include structures, landscapes, objects, trees, and districts.







Let's begin with the basics of documentary photography. Formal photo surveys – like HABS/HAER surveys of sites – require special camera equipment. They are recorded on large format black & white film, and include multiple views of the resource.



Photo Information:

*Demolition mitigation photographs of Vanoni Ranch, Saticoy, Ventura County, California. This is a typical example of structure documentation using the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) format. All facades are recorded with large-format cameras. HABS photos include every facade and context photographs as well.*



SurveyLA photos need not be as formal, but their basic documentary DNA is similar. The most important function of a documentary photo is to convey data about the resource.



Architectural photographers use many techniques to take beautiful photographs.

However, while the photographs in magazines tell a story, they do not always contain great documentary data.



A survey photograph of this resource maybe called “boring” by a magazine editor, but to a photo-historian, this photograph is loaded with data about the building.







Sometimes, everything will go your way and your survey photos will look great, have great details, and be easy to capture in just one shot. SurveyLA photographers should always try to document the resource in as few shots as possible (generally one).







Survey photos should be as easy to take as a snapshot.  
Follow some basic guidelines and you'll automatically  
capture the maximum documentary data.





Sometimes, good documentary photos may not be beautiful, but that's okay. This is a good example of an ugly photo that includes loads of great data about the resource.





Now that you know you aren't making art, you need to focus on the most important element in any photo: the light!  
Step one: Keep the sun out of the shot.





Having all parts of the resource front-lit is the best policy. This might not always be possible, but a bit of pre-planning can go a long way. The sun predictably rises in the east and sets in the west.



Photo Information: *Warehouse, Los Angeles Railway Company South Park Shops*





Noon *is not* the ideal time to shoot buildings.  
Occasionally, you can get a good photograph at noon,  
but if any of the resources you are surveying have eaves,  
data will be lost in shadows.



Photo Information: *Eichler Tract, Thousand Oaks, California*

When planning a survey outing, remember that structures on the west side of the street are usually lit in the morning and structures on the east side in the afternoon. If you don't have time to pre-plan, then assess the situation at the site. If the building in front of you is backlit...



...then the building right behind you might be in the sun. Start on that side of the street.



Keep the sunlight behind you if you can,  
preferably over your shoulder.



Ironically, the worst light for beauty shots is the best light for survey photos. Light fog or overcast skies create a shadowless light that can reveal more detail (look at the shadow area under the tree in the last image).







Remember, you are creating a document that photo-researchers will be scrutinizing in 100 years. The lesson we've learned from photographers at the turn of the century is that they liked shadowless light too. Look at all the information in this postcard photo, shot on an overcast day. (The clouds were painted in later.)



Photo Information: *Los Angeles resource aficionados may find this lighthouse familiar because its twin still survives as LAHCM #2385, Point Fermin Lighthouse in San Pedro, California.*





Now that you know what light to be aware of, you can focus on getting the maximum amount of data in your photos. Most of the time, a 3/4 view or corner that shows the two most important facades is best.



Be sure to make the resource as big as possible in the frame.  
Avoid too much sky or street (or car mirrors). Bigger photos hold more data.



This photo was taken from the same spot in the car with a zoom lens. Here, the resource fills the frame. However, you will usually get a better angle from outside the car.





And NO DWPs! (Driving While Photographing)



Photo Information: *Oldest operating McDonald's, Downey, California*



Obviously, you need to be aware of the edges of the resource and the edges of the frame. This photo is an extreme example, but you should try to include even small features at the edge of the resource.







*Camera Tilted Up*

*Perspective corrected HABS type photo*

Formal HABS photographs need to be straight, so they are taken with special perspective control lenses. SurveyLA photos can recede in perspective in order to get a tall resource in the frame. It is okay to tilt the camera up in order to capture the entire resource.





Tilting the camera up may be especially helpful when photographing historic trees. Here, the addition of the mission next to the trees provides needed scale and context.





Like trees, unusual buildings with unusual scale need context included.

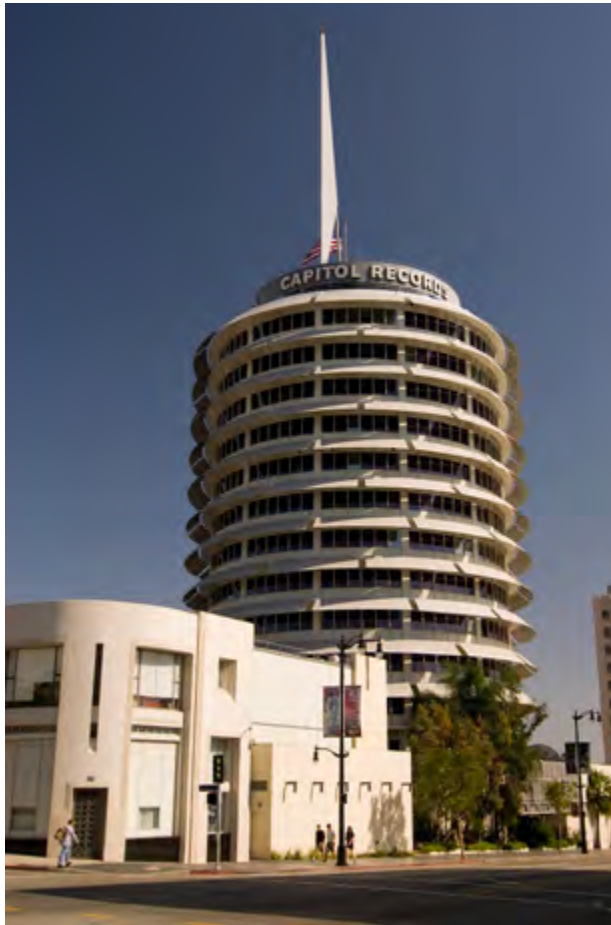




This image better describes the scale of the structure and the streetscape, while the cars offer a benchmark for size comparison.







When a resource is taller than it is wide, it's time to turn the camera 90 degrees and capture a vertical frame. Verticals (a.k.a. portrait perspective) are acceptable for SurveyLA.





Vertical perspectives are also useful when recording resources such as landscapes and horizontal features like these railroad tracks. The data in the left photo can be improved by adding some context and perspective. The right image better illustrates the resource because of the inclusion of the buildings at the top of the frame.





You'll have to use your judgment and decide which perspective – vertical or horizontal – will allow the resource to fill the frame. Sometimes, a horizontal space like a park or memorial will be best recorded from a higher vantage point, if available.



Photo Information: *Grant Park Cross, above downtown Ventura, California.*  
*City of Ventura Landmark #5*



The SurveyLA Field Interface will link a photograph with survey data being gathered in the field. This data will be recorded electronically in the SurveyLA database and documented on the State Historic Resources Inventory forms. Ideally, *ONE REPRESENTATIVE PHOTO* is all that needs to be captured for most of the resources you will be surveying.







Let's walk up to a resource and find the best view.  
Here is view #1. The 3/4 perspective is good,  
but the edges are obscured. Since SurveyLA photos will be  
taken from the public right-of-way, this view won't work.





In view #2, the full front is well-lit and shows a lot of data.  
However this view does not capture the depth of  
the building by showing a second side.





View #3 shows the front and driveway,  
but still lacks side/depth data.





View #4 is well-lit, shows the primary and a secondary elevation, which reveals data about the depth and size of the resource, and is also able to capture side penetrations. The car does not obscure critical character defining features, and the wall to the right does not obscure the rear corner of the structure.







View #5 is also a good mix of front and side elevations, and very similar to view #4. However, the wall at the right obscures the rear of the building slightly, so the previous view (#4) contains the most data.





Sometimes the resource can fill the frame from across the street,  
or across a parking lot with the lens zoomed in.





Sometimes it makes more sense to get up close –  
like in this public parking lot – and use a wide angle lens  
to keep obstructions like cars and street trees to a minimum.





In residential neighborhoods, you must always stay on the sidewalk or street. In this case, this was the best photo angle available from the right-of-way and, although it only shows the front of the house, it still shows plenty of data about the resource.





When framing the photo, be careful to place obstructions like trees and telephone poles where they will not obscure important data about the resource.



If a lamp post or flagpole is in the frame, try to place it away from the edges of the resource, or out of the way of important details. Did you notice the window covered up in the previous photo?



Finding the best angle on a resource should become second-nature.

Distilling the choices down to one view will inevitably leave out some information, but under most conditions, one photo is sufficient.



Because it includes two sides, this is a better documentary photo of this building. With only one shot, the depth is communicated, and as a bonus, the character defining north-light skylights are shown as well.



Photo Information: *Warehouse, Main Street, Santa Paula, California.*



Typical problems on noisy streets are high walls and hedges.  
Digital cameras with (live-view) monitors on the back  
have solved that problem. Just hold the camera over head,  
and point it over the wall.





You'll see an image of the view over the wall in the monitor on the back of the camera. When the resource is in the frame, take the shot. Even if it's a little crooked, it still shows more data than a fence or wall-obscured photo.







Some resources will be behind gates and fences. You can sometimes use the small lenses on digital cameras to shoot right through a fence, or use the gap in the gate.





This was shot through the space where the chain-link gates come together right at the sidewalk.





Sometimes, it's better to ignore chain-link fences completely.  
They are often transparent and allow the details of the  
resource to show through.





Fences can obscure the best view of buildings as in this photo. In this instance, take the best image you can with the most data about the resource and ignore the fence.



Photo Information: *Old Monterey County Jail, 142 West Alisal Street, Salinas, California.*  
*National Register #03000337*





Some obstructions, like traffic, can take time or a few tries to avoid. You should always delete the images that are ruined by passing cars and other obstructions so the camera is recording only the best images.





Let's look at improving the individual resource photographs. Here is an excellent survey photo. Well-lit, + 3/4 perspective, + all edges in the frame + no obstructions + not too close and not too far... and it has **FRowSE**.



Photo Information: *Built 1905 as the Bank of Arroyo Grande, 100 E. Branch St., Downtown Arroyo Grande, California.*

## F.Ro.W.S.E.



**FRowSE** stands for Foundation + Roof + Windows + Siding + Entry – all of the elements that should be included in a good documentary photograph. The “**F**” stands for Foundation. This photo shows how the building meets the earth.



Photo Information: *Open Door Church, Ocean Street, Oceano, California.*

## F.Ro.W.S.E.



The “**Ro**” stands for Roof. Your photos should show the roof edge and, if possible, the roofing material.





## F.Ro.W.S.E.



The "**W**" stands for Windows. Your photos should show the types of windows, as well as their styles, sizes, and frames.



## F.Ro.W.S.E.



The “**S**” stands for Siding. Your photos should show the building material and siding patterns, and try to communicate the surfaces and vertical architectural features.



Photo Information: *Vogue Theater, Oxnard, California by architect S. Charles Lee.*

## F.Ro.W.S.E.



The “**E**” stands for Entry. Your first survey image should show the primary façade (which usually includes the entry) and, if possible, entry details, size, and porches.



Photo Information: *Taylor's Steakhouse, 3361 West 8th St., Mid-Wilshire District, Los Angeles, California.*

## F.Ro.W.S.E.



This photo features even light, a 3/4 view, unobstructed edges, and is taken at the perfect distance. The **FRowSE** features are captured too. A solid survey shot!



Photo Information: *Residence, Henry T. Oxnard Historic District, Oxnard, California.*



## F.Ro.W.S.E.



All the **FRowSE** features are here as well.





Now that you understand the important features to include in your photos, you'll sometimes need to compromise to get them all in one frame. Here, in order to show the gable end, the entry was half obscured. This is a good compromise that allows the resource to be documented with only one photo instead of two.





Sometimes you may find yourself in small alleys and tight spaces. If you find yourself unable to back up and allow for space around the resource. Capture the most you can. Sometimes shooting at an angle from up the street can help.



Here's a challenge:  
This building will require two  
photos to effectively show  
its features. This front façade  
(showing the entry/primary façade)  
should be combined with the opposite  
view to convey the most data.



This second view from the rear parking  
lot shows the A-frame and the distinctive  
character defining features. Together  
with the primary façade view, these two  
images convey the most data.







Another example of a structure that is difficult to document with only one view.



Photo Information: *Primary Facade, modern residence, Lompoc, California.*



This second view shows critical character defining features that were missing in the front view.





When surveying a large resource or historic district, more than one photo will be necessary. The most representative photo of the series should be tagged as the primary photo. Here is an example of the most photographed feature of the Olivas Adobe, a picturesque arch. This 20th century feature, however, is not as significant as the 19th century adobe.



Photo Information: *Bell and Arch, Olivas Adobe, Ventura, California. Built circa 1930.*





Here is a photo of the Olivas Adobe that would be a more appropriate primary image for the district. Other photos of the building and context would go after this one to show additional details and context views.



Photo Information: *City of Ventura Landmark #1, Rancho Olivas Adobe, Ventura, CA.  
Built circa 1849, this building is also listed on the National Register.*





Remember to show the non-architectural features of a district too. Sidewalks, streetlights, street trees, and setbacks are important to document on at least one image. Try to combine them if you can.



Photo Information: *Santa Paula Street, Santa Paula, California.*



District surveys will require overview photos as well as individual photos of significant resources. Be concise with your photo selections

- most resources in a district can be captured with only one view.

Choose a representative photo to serve as the primary photo.





Well troops, I salute you for getting this far. Now you know the basics for capturing solid documentary photographs for SurveyLA. Charge your batteries (and take a spare), put on your neon safety vests, and go get 'em. Good luck, and may the light be with you!





**SurveyLA**  
Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey

Created for the  
Office of Historic Resources  
City of Los Angeles  
Department of City Planning  
<http://www.preservation.lacity.org/>

For more information about SurveyLA  
visit the SurveyLA website  
<http://www.surveyla.org>



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