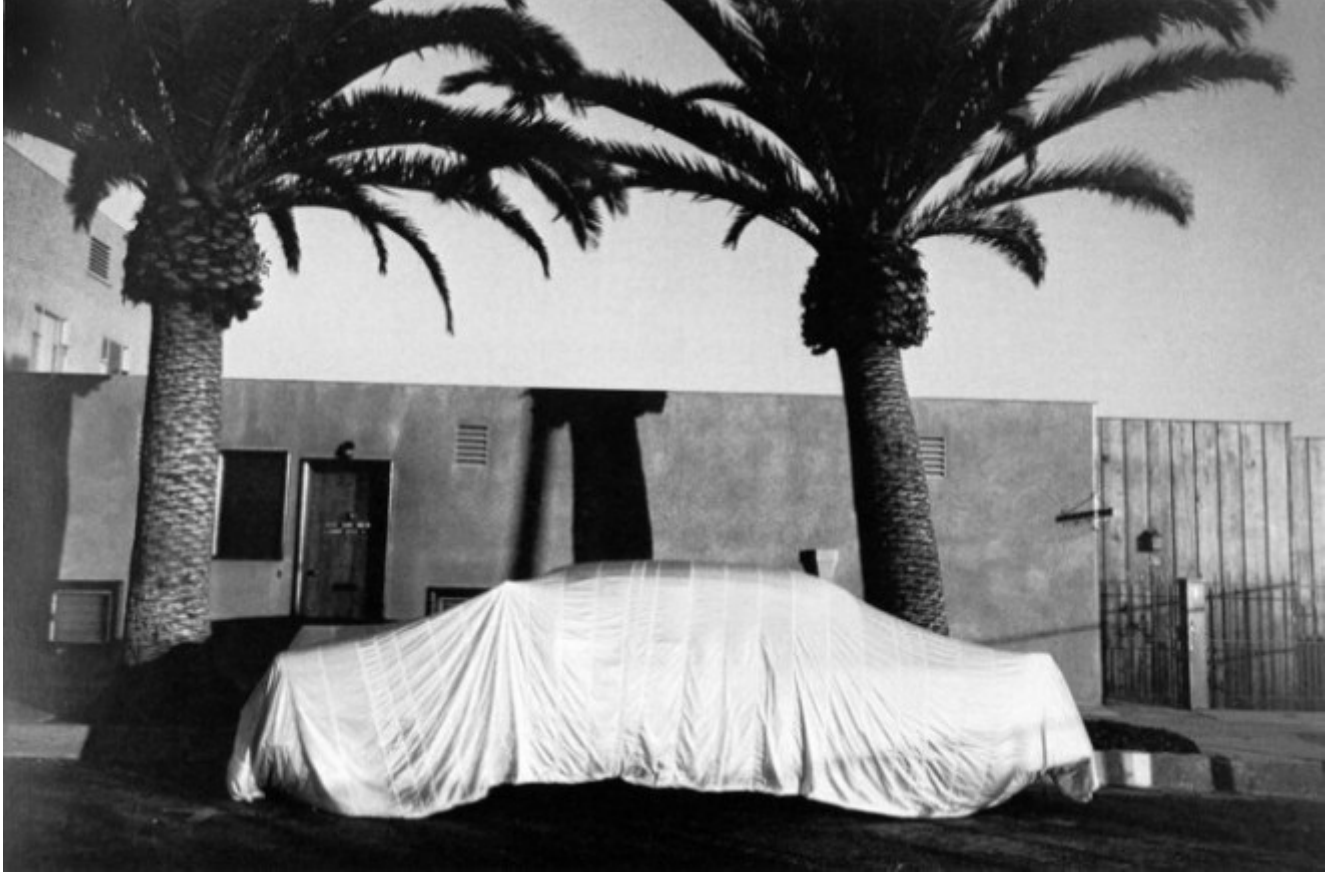


Street Photography Composition Lesson #10: Urban Landscapes

Eric Kim



© Robert Frank

For today's lesson I want to talk about "urban landscapes." Urban landscapes aren't really compositions in the specific sense (compared to lines, curves, etc)– but I still feel they are relevant when creating our street photographs.

If you guys have read my prior lessons on composition– I have thought a lot about what a "composition" really is. For me at the end of the day– a composition can really be anything. The dictionary's definition to composition is as follows:

Composition: The combining of distinct parts or elements to form a whole.

So when it comes to street photography, whatever elements we capture in the background make an image.

I am not exactly sure what direction these "composition lessons" are heading– but thank you for your support. Let us continue to ride the wave– and see where it follows:

Urban Landscapes

So to start off, let us first contemplate the question: What exactly is an “**urban landscape**?” There are no clear definitions online— and everyone interprets it a bit differently.

For me, an “urban landscape” is a photo primarily focusing on the urban environment (a man-made environment) which puts more emphasis on the background than the subject.

Of course, this is just my interpretation— but let us delve into some great examples of “urban landscapes” shot by some of the finest street photographers over the years:

Enter Robert Frank’s Urban Landscapes

If you haven’t heard of Robert Frank or his seminal book: “[The Americans](#)” — I highly recommend you to read the in-depth article I wrote. To sum up, “The Americans” is possibly the most important photography book for documentary and street photographers from the 20th century.

A swiss-born photographer named Robert Frank traveled across America, and took quite grim photos of America in the 1950’s into the early 1960’s. The photos are dark, grim, and a depressing view of America. But at the same time, the photos are elegant, sequenced beautifully, and create a great “sense of place” of America during the time he photographed.

Frank captured many photos of people during his journey— but also many photos simply focused on the man-made environment (mostly without people). Here are some great examples:

“Save Gas”



© Robert Frank

One of the photos that are embedded in my memory is this photograph by Robert Frank of an empty gas station, with lonely looking gas pumps in a barren-looking environment, with a sign in the top left that says “Save Gas” (embedded in-between each other).

The photo feels dreary and gloomy, and there is a funny juxtaposition between the darker mood of the image and the 3-leaf clovers on top of the gas pumps. The 3-leaf clovers are pretty similar looking to a 4-leaf clover, which is generally a symbol of good luck. For those of you who picked 3-leaf clovers as kids (thinking they were good-luck 4-leaf clovers)– you know the frustration. We were so close in being lucky– but not close enough.

Overall the photo has a mood of desperation– yet hope. Also the “Save Gas” is a sign of the times of Americans wanting to be frugal with gas at the time (this was only photographed around a decade after the [Great Depression](#)).

St. Francis Statue



© Robert Frank. St Francis, gas station and City Hall, LA 1955

This is another memorable image from Robert Frank’s [“The Americans.”](#) You see a statue of St. Francis holding a cross– facing the rest of the world. I am not sure whether the sun is rising or setting– but the mood of the photo can be interpreted I feel in two ways:

First, you can interpret the photo as St. Francis being an omen of doom– bad things to come. He holds a cross in opposition to all the darkness and difficulties the American people will face.

Secondly, you can interpret the photo as St. Francis being a beacon of hope– good things to come.

Covered Car, Long Beach, California, 1956



© Robert Frank. Covered Car, Long Beach, California, 1956

One of my favorite “urban landscape” photos in Robert Frank’s “The Americans.” You have truly brilliant light shining down on this covered car, with palm trees in the background— which make this photo feel very “Sunny southern California.” At first glance it seems like a very fun and upbeat image.

Yet at the same time, when I look at the shot and think about it more— it feels like death. When I see the white cloth draped over the mysterious car underneath, it almost looks like a cloth you would cover a dead person after a homicide.

This is what I love about these images I have been showing of Frank— he simply captured what he saw, but the interpretation is always up to the viewer.

Road-side graveyard

© Robert Frank. Graveyard

In Frank’s “The Americans” — one re-occurring symbol you see in the book is that of Cemeteries and graveyards.

In this photograph, you see a roadside make-shift graveyard with three crosses sticking out of the shrubbery in-between the freeway. You have a brilliant ray of light shining upon the gravesite. It almost looks like the light of God?

Once again, it is a dark and gloomy photo (every grave-site generally is) — but the ray of light is that glimmer of

hope that makes the photo feel hopeful.

Drive-in movie, Detroit 1955

Drive-in movie, Detroit 1955 © Robert Frank

One thing I love about urban landscapes is that they can show and capture the spirit of a time— socially, economically, and politically.

In this image, we see a drive-in movie theater from Detroit. Of course during the 50's, there were tons of drive-in movie theaters— as most Americans became mobile and dependent on their cars. However this is certainly a nostalgic image— as there are hardly (if any) drive-in movie theaters at all anymore.

If you think about it, a drive-in movie theater is a strange cultural artifact. First of all generally when you go and see a movie— it is a collective event. You go into a theater, and sit next to total strangers and enjoy the movie in unison. However with a drive-in theater, you sit alone (or perhaps with your friends) in a car— isolated with everyone else.

Nowadays we are becoming even more isolated in the developed world— watching all of our movies ourselves on Netflix on our computers. Oh how times have changed.

I think we can see from all these examples of Frank— even though most of these photos don't have people in them— they still evoke a strong **emotional** response from the viewer. I don't think street photography always have to have people in it— and these urban landscapes from Frank make a strong case that you can tell a lot about society with the man-made environments we create.

Enter Walker Evans

One photographer that Robert Frank had strong influence from was [Walker Evans](#), an American photographer. Evans was famous for taking large-format 8x10 photographs of the American urban landscape as well— and inspired many pivotal photographers to come such as [Lee Friedlander](#) and [Diane Arbus](#).

One fascinating thing about shooting with a large-format 8x10 view camera is that you see the world upside down. Not only that, but they are huge and cumbersome— you need to lug around it with a tripod attached on the bottom. And each shot counts.

Therefore when you are framing with a large-format camera, you need to be absolutely precise when it comes to photographing your environments. Most large-format photographers tend to photograph landscapes— as it is incredibly difficult to photograph anything moving. Even when you are taking a portrait with a large-format camera, you have to make sure your subject is absolutely still.

Walker Evans – Cemetery, Bethlehem PA, 1935

© Walker Evans – Cemetery, Bethlehem PA, 1935

In this great photograph by Walker Evans— you see a cemetery overlooking the urban landscape of Pennsylvania in the mid 1930's. The photograph is shot with a relatively long lens— as there is great compression in the background and the foreground. They look like they are all on the same plane.

In terms of interpreting the image– I feel there is this clash between religion, faith, and values (of the cross) — juxtaposed against the industrial landscape of America which promotes industry, efficiency, and production.

America was founded on very strong religious terms– and is still a very strong Christian nation. But at the same time, us Americans pride ourselves in production, business, and industry. But I think at the end of the day, money and business come up on top.

Barber Shop. Atlanta, Georgia. March 1936

© Walker Evans. Barber Shop. Atlanta, Georgia. March 1936

In this photograph, Evans ventured down to the South for his “[American Photographs](#)” book– and photographed this African-American run barber shop. The photograph is rich of details, and because it is shot on an 8x10 camera– if you see the real print you can make out even the text on the newspaper on the wall. The details are a visual feast for your eyes– and they keep looking around the frame finding points of interest.

During the time that Evans took the photograph, America was segregated between blacks and whites. Although the barbershop that Evans photographed is full of life and culture– it still feels run down and quite depressing. I see old historic photos of segregated water fountains, waiting rooms, and schools– and can’t help but think how poor in condition this barber shop is probably when compared to a white barber shop.

For me, the photograph also has a slightly sinister feel to it. The chairs don’t seem very inviting to me. In-fact, they almost look like execution chairs. The backs look rough with wear and tear from use, the the leather doesn’t seem smooth and buttery soft. It reminds me of those leather straps that are used to tie down prisoners.

I doubt that Evans had all of these racial and social intentions in mind when he took the photo. He probably just saw an interesting barber shop, set up his camera on a tripod, and took a photo. But once again, I think the more we think about when the photograph was taken and the social-historical context of the image– it has a much deeper and personal meaning.

Enter Lee Friedlander

[Lee Friedlander](#) is another photographer I absolutely admire and talk a lot about on the blog. He is a witty and humorous photographer with a strong eye for composition and framing. He is one of the finest American photographers who also shot much urban landscape– in the most boring and ordinary places– and made them extraordinary.

Knoxville, Tennessee. 1971

© Lee Friedlander. Knoxville, Tennessee 1971

One of the great things about Friedlander is that he was able to take great photographs in the least likely places.

I know a lot of us live out in the suburbs– where there aren’t many people walking around. Even though you might not have anybody walking around– you can still create great images without them.

This photograph is absolutely brilliant. It is extremely simple, and full of great geometric shapes. You see the triangle of the sign in the middle of the frame, of its shadow on the bottom of the frame, the triangle of the dark-tree

on the right side of the frame, of the tree on the left side of the frame, and the roof of the house in the middle-left of the frame:

Figure 1: Note all the triangles in the shot.

And of course what makes this photograph absolutely brilliant are the 3 little clouds in the top of the frame, which are framed perfectly above the triangular shaped sign. It makes it look like an ice cream cone:

Figure 2: The visual joke that Friedlander makes with the ice cream cone.

One lesson we can certainly learn from Friedlander is the importance of having a sharp eye— and trying to turn the camera onto small subtleties in our environment to create great and memorable images.

Kentucky, 1977

© Lee Friedlander. Kentucky, 1977

Another surreal and odd urban landscape is by Friedlander— this time in Kentucky which looks like the middle of nowhere. There is a sign that says: “ENTRANCE” proudly and boldly. It looks like there might be neon lights attached to it— so you can see it glowing at night.

But where does this entrance take you? As far as the eyes can see— there is nothing. Just barren wasteland, dry, hot, arid— and without life.

Enter Simon Kossoff

One contemporary street photographer whose work I absolutely admire is [Simon Kossoff](#) from [Burn My Eye](#). His photos are bright and colorful— yet full of satire and commentary.

Jesus is Watching You

© Simon Kossoff

To create an effective urban landscape you can also look for signage and interesting juxtapositions.

For example, this image by [Simon Kossoff](#) is brilliant in the way he saw and framed the image. The setting of the image looks like some pit stop in the middle of nowhere, and the sign that says: “Jesus is watching you.” And right behind him is an “ADULT VIDEO” sign/store. Is Jesus trying to stop you from going to the adult video store? Even if you end up going, you have the guilt of knowing that Jesus is watching you pick up those adult videos.

Car Frame

© Simon Kossoff

In one of Simon’s best known photographs, you see a guy lying on the green grass, relaxing and looking up at the nice and blue sky. But the surrealism of the photograph comes from the way that Simon shot this photo from inside his car. The window of his car frames this man perfectly in the frame.

It looks like Simon also shot this with a flash, which normalizes the exposure between the inside of the car and the

sunny landscape in the background. It reminds me a lot of Lee Friedlander's "[America by Car](#)" series in which Friedlander did something similar:

© Lee Friedlander. Nebraska, 1999

Enter Stephen Shore

[Stephen Shore](#) is one of the great contemporary American color photographers— and one of the early pioneers of color as well.

He did two seminal books on photography— the first titled: "[American Surfaces](#)" in which he took "snapshots" of his road trips across America. These were shot mostly with a 35mm camera.

His second book was "[Uncommon Places](#)" where he once again went on a series of road trips, this time taking an 8×10 view camera and photographing more urban landscapes.

Here are two photos I love by him:

Road stop

© Stephen Shore

The first photograph is a great image in which screams "[Americana](#)." You see what looks like a typical pit stop alongside a freeway in America. There are the typical stops where many Americans go to have a quick bite when on the road.

You see a variety of retro-looking cars, which come in all different shapes, colors— which lead you around the frame. Shore also captured this from a high angle, giving you a clear view of the foreground all the way into the background. I love the signage of the shops (Sambo's, TIRES) in the background— and how the frame is filled well.

Mountain sign

© Stephen Shore

This is a surreal shot by Stephen Shore in which we see a sign of a majestic snow-capped mountain and lake. The odd thing is that this billboard is in the middle of a place that looks quite dry and arid. Not only that, but the sign literally looks like it is part of the environment— like it was "photoshopped" or "copy and pasted" in.

Enter Joel Sternfeld

[Joel Sternfeld](#) was another great American photographer who took to road and photographed America with his 8×10 camera— capturing quizzical moments during his journey.

Pumpkins and fire

© Joel Sternfeld. 1978, McLean, Virginia

In this photo you see a series of orange pumpkins in the foreground, some of them intact and some of them cracked open. It gives the photo an ominous photo— of impending doom. Then in the background you see the odd

thing– the fire in the background (which also happens to be orange).

What is the real story behind the shot? As a viewer you don't quite know– and it all seems so strange and out of place. According to what I heard, the real story is that the fire wasn't a real one– but a mock one for the firefighters to practice on. I'm not 100% sure of this story– but it still is a puzzling image.

Elephant in road

© Joel Sternfeld.

Another incredible image by Joel Sternfeld is this of a elephant collapsed in the middle of the road. You don't see this type of image very often– and Sternfeld captured it well. You see the interaction between the people, the cars, and this huge animal– trying to figure out what to do. It is a strange and unsettling image.

Some Urban Landscapes by Me

I have been quite fascinated with urban landscapes for a while– and here are some images that were taken during my road trip across America (from Michigan to California):

Pittsburgh, 2013

Ann Arbor, Michigan. 2013

Lansing, Michigan. 2013

Indianapolis, 2013

Some tips when photographing urban landscapes:

1. Focus on composition

© Walker Evans – Cemetery, Bethlehem PA, 1935

This sounds obvious, but if you are to shoot an urban landscape and you don't have to worry about capturing people– take your time. Take your shots from multiple angles and perspectives. Try to get the composition as perfect as you can in-camera. Try to fill the frame with all points of interest.

2. Look for interesting juxtapositions

© Simon Kossoff

It isn't enough to simply take photos of urban landscapes with interesting signs. To make a photograph even more compelling– try to capture certain elements in the background which directly contradict one another.

3. Look for the light



© Robert Frank

Having great light can either make or break an urban landscape. Try to photograph when the light is good (either sunrise or sunset during golden hour). It will make all the difference in the world— and make your images feel much more intimate and pop out more.

4. Find a frame

© Simon Kossoff

One interesting way we can photograph an urban landscape is look for an interesting frame. So we can create a “frame in a frame”— to bring in focus to our environment at hand.

5. Look for things out-of-place

Pittsburgh, 2013

In this photograph I took in Pittsburgh, I saw a bunch of soda/coffee machines abandoned in a parking lot— across from an urban neighborhood. The machines looked like they were full of personality— but they were quite sad out there in the open. I liked the juxtaposition between the machines against the residential neighborhood— which feels quite out of place.

Conclusion

I don't think that as street photographers we should limit ourselves to simply taking photos of people. We should also put emphasis on capturing the urban environment around us.