

10 Things Alex Webb Can Teach You About Street Photography

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One of the street photographers who have had a strong impact on my street photography is [Alex Webb](#). Webb is a Magnum photographer who uses strong colors, light, and emotion to capture beautifully complex images. After picking up a copy of Alex Webb's "[The Suffering of Light](#)" I fell in love with his work and his use of color- and started to also make the transition from black and white to color.

If you want to see some things you can learn from Alex Webb and his work, keep reading below!

1. Layer your photographs



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Depth is a strong element in the work of Alex Webb. In many of his photographs, they have a strong foreground, mid-ground, and background. The great thing about this is that it leads you (the viewer) to invite yourself into the frame. You see what he sees. You enter the frame by looking at the things closest to you, and then you slowly make your way into the mid-ground, and then slowly out into the background.

Suggestion: When you are out shooting on the streets, try to get subjects in your foreground, mid-ground, and background. Be patient and wait until all the elements come together, and think of how your photographs can lead viewers into your photograph, and then out of them.

2. Fill the frame



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"It's not just that that and that exists. It's that that, that, that, and that all exist in the same frame. I'm always looking for something more. You take in too much; perhaps it becomes total chaos. I'm always playing along that line: adding something more, yet keeping it sort of chaos." – Alex Webb

If I could categorize some of Alex Webb's work it would be "orderly chaos". He often fills the frame with so many subjects that it almost feels too busy. However many of the subjects in his photographs don't overlap and there are many "mini-interactions" in his photographs. This is what makes his images interesting- as I think his photographs tell lots of small stories inside the frame.

Suggestion: When shooting on the streets, try to constantly add things to your frame – yet know when "too much" is "too much". Try not to overlap the subjects in your frame, and try to have a nice balance between dark shadows and the light (shoot when the light is good- sunrise and sunset).

3. Walk... a lot



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"I only know how to approach a place by walking. For what does a street photographer do but walk and watch and wait and talk, and then watch and wait some more, trying to remain confident that the unexpected, the unknown, or the secret heart of the known awaits just around the corner." – Alex Webb

The only way you are going to capture great street photographs is to walk on the streets... a lot. When you are out walking on the streets, you will open yourself up to many more opportunities to shoot on the streets, and also experience the feel of a place.

Back home in Los Angeles, nobody walks. In-fact I am guilty of it myself. When I go to the supermarket (which is about a five minute walk) I like to drive my car (which only takes one minute). However on the way I am missing potentially great photo opportunities.

Suggestion: Try to walk as much as you can. Even if getting to a place (grocery store, bookstore, shopping center) will take 30 minutes (instead of five minutes) try to walk. Bring your camera along, and you will open yourself up to many more photo opportunities.

4. Look for the light



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“Colors are the deeds and suffering of light.” – Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

“[The Suffering of Light](#)” is the title of Webb’s most recent book- a phenomenally beautiful book with smooth and thick white paper, velvety pages, vividly brilliant colors, and a great selection of Webb’s best work from the last 30 years.

From a recent interview he talks about the quote:

“My understanding – of course, I’m not a philosopher or a scientist – of an aspect of Goethe’s theory of color is that he felt that color came out of tension between light and dark. I think that is very appropriate when you think about the kind of color that I shoot.” – Alex Webb

He often describes when he is shooting in places- he looks for the tension between borders. For example, he found Istanbul a fascinating place because geographically- it is located as a hub for many different cultures. It is a melting pot in terms of socio-economic, political, and ethnic terms. He says about Istanbul, *“I returned frequently between 2001 and 2005 to complete a book on this vibrant and melancholy city that sits between the divide between the East and west: Istanbul: City of a Hundred Names”*.

He also refers to shooting at the U.S.-Mexico border and says:

"...There is something about the transience, the impermanence of the border that has always fascinated me. It's a place where two cultures meet and intermingle and create almost a third country."

From another interview when asked about himself shooting:

"When I am working, then I really have to work. I really have to work. I really have to stay attuned. I have to get up early in the morning, get out and I wonder and maybe the light is getting less interesting, then I eat my breakfast... I work in color, where light is really important in a very special way, so I work certain hours much more than others. I am always out at the latter half of the afternoon and in the evening."

Suggestion: When shooting in color, don't shoot color for the sake of shooting color. Think about what sort of message or meaning that shooting in color has. Also make sure when shooting with color – shoot when the light is good (morning and late evening).

5. Realize 99.9% of street photography is failure



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"Luck – or perhaps serendipity – plays a big role... But you never know what is

going to happen. And what is most exciting is when the utterly unexpected happens, and you manage to be there at the right place at the right time – and push the shutter at the right moment. Most of the time it doesn't work out that way. This kind of photography is 99.9% about failure.” – Alex Webb

It is rare that you make a great photograph. There are some many things beyond your control. How your subject looks, the intensity of the light, the background, the moment, and so forth.

Therefore realize that when you are shooting street photography, 99.9% of your images are going to be bad photographs.

Suggestion: Go out and shoot as much as you can. Although 99.9% of street photography is about failure, the more you go out and shoot- the more chances you will have to take great images.

If you go out and shoot for an entire day and shoot 100 photographs, you might get 1 decent photograph. If you shoot 200 photographs, you might get 2 decent photographs. If you shoot 300 photographs, you might get 3 decent photographs.

Of course if you machine gun when you are out shooting- it won't make you a better street photographer. Shoot with intent, and after that – a lot of getting a great image is a numbers game. Remember you can make your own luck.

6. Work on projects



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"Most of my projects seem to start as exploratory journeys with no visible end in sight." – Alex Webb

As written previously, I believe that working on projects is a great way to approach street photography. The reason is that working on projects will give you direction, purpose, and will allow you to create a narrative or story.

However working on projects is often difficult. We don't know how long they will take, or what to shoot. When talking about his own projects, Webb states: "*Different projects seem to have different arcs of completion*".

Suggestion: Think about how you see the world, and how your photographs reflect that. First start off by shooting your own life. What makes your city unique from others? If you want to go travel, go to a place with an open-mind and see what themes emerge. Then start focusing on those themes- and narrowing down.

Also check out my past article on "[How to Start Your Own Street Photography Project](#)" for more ideas.

7. If you are stuck, try something new



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There are times we may hit brick walls with our street photography, and don't know what direction to head toward. Webb shares one of his experiences:

"In 1975, I reached a kind of dead end in my photography. I had been photographing in black and white, then my chosen medium, taking pictures of the American social landscape in New England and around New York – desolate parking lots inhabited by elusive human figures, lost-looking children strapped in car seats, ad dogs slouching by the street. The photographs were a little alienated, sometimes ironic, occasionally amusing, perhaps a bit surreal, and emotionally detached. Somehow I sensed that the work wasn't taking me anywhere new. I seemed to be exploring territory that other photographers- such as Lee Friedlander and Charles Harbutt – had already discovered." – Alex Webb

After this realization, Webb headed to Haiti, which transformed him- and also influenced him to change his work into color.

I experienced something similar myself. When I first started shooting street photography, I shot like Henri Cartier-Bresson – looking for the decisive moment, being patient, and juxtaposing interesting subjects and backgrounds. However after a while, I found myself hitting a dead wall- and being uninterested in that way of working.

I then found a video on YouTube about Gilden shooting street photography- and was

fascinated. I experimented shooting with a flash – and found that getting close was more interesting to me, and a better way of working for myself. After all, I find myself to be much more of an outgoing and up-front person, rather than someone who is a more passive and “invisible”.

Suggestion: Experiment if you feel frustrated with your own work. If the way you are shooting street photography isn’t making you happy- try something else. Always shoot in b/w? Try color. Shoot digital? Try film. Always upload your photographs everyday? Try once a month.

Experimentation is very important- but try not to experiment too much. Experiment enough until you find yourself reasonably content, and stick with it!

8. Follow your obsession



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“I mean its an obsession, you follow the obsession but at the same time you have so many doubts, you know. Why am I wasting so much money going back to this place, taking more pictures? What’s the point of it? No one cares about it. I think I care about it but maybe I am deceiving myself.” – Alex Webb

If you want to become a great street photographer, I think obsession is important. Not all of us want to become great street photographers (we may just do it for fun or as a

hobby) but if you take your street photography seriously – work hard and overcome your doubts.

There are times you might doubt yourself why you are out shooting. I experience it all the time myself. But working on projects can help you stay more focused with your photography, while also meeting other photographers, reading photo books, and constantly shooting.

Suggestion: To stay obsessive with street photography, constantly read books on street photography, meet other street photographers, and shoot. In sociology there is a saying that “you are the average of the five people closest to you”. Therefore if you hang around with a lot of passionate street photographers- by proxy- you will become a passionate and (healthily obsessive) street photographer yourself.

9. Capture the emotion of a place



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“Color is very much about atmosphere and emotion and the feel of a place.” – Alex Webb

Shooting in color is a great way to capture the mood and the atmosphere of a place. But once again mentioned before in this article- don’t shoot color simply for the sake of shooting color. Think about how shooting color can add context and meaning to

your photographs.

Alex Webb shares about the experience that transformed him to shooting color:

“Three years after my first trip to Haiti, I realized there was another emotional note that had to be reckoned with: the intense, vibrant color of these worlds. Searing light and intense color seemed somehow embedded in the cultures that I had begun working in, so utterly different from the gray-brown reticence of my New England background. Since then, I have worked predominantly in color.” – Alex Webb

Therefore you can see one of the main reasons he switched to color was to capture the mood and intensity of the locations he was visiting.

Suggestion: Think about what kind of mood or emotion your project/photos are trying to tell- and choose the right medium. If you are interested in capturing the darkness and gloom of a place- b/w will probably work better. If you want to capture the energy, light, and excitement of a place- color might work better. Remember the saying, “The medium is the message.”

10. Travel

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Before I started traveling and [teaching street photography workshops](#) full-time, I had never traveled much. The negative thing about not traveling is that you can become close-minded. You only think about the values of the society you live in- and you forget about the outside world.

Traveling has helped open up my eyes to the rest of the world- and has transformed me as a person as well. I see the world from a much more global perspective- and have relished meeting new people while experiencing new cultures.

Travel can also help you get out of a rut in your photography (although not necessary). Webb shares one of his experiences:

“I happened to pick up a Graham Greene’s novel, *The Comedians*, a work set in the turbulent world of Papa Doc’s Haiti, and read about a world that fascinated and scared me. Within Months I was on a plane to Port-au-Prince.

The first three-week trip to Haiti transformed me- both as a photographer and a human being. I photographed a kind of world I had never experienced before, a world of emotional vibrancy and intensity: raw, disjointed, and often tragic. I began

to explore to other places- in the Caribbean, along the U.S.-Mexico border- places like Haiti, where life seemed to be lived on the stoop and in the street.” – Alex Webb

Suggestion: Travel as much as you can. I know in the states, people don’t travel as much as they should. Part of it is the work-a-holic society we live in (and crappy 2-week breaks we get), but even a brief trip to another place in the world can be life changing. Traveling has taught me to be less materialistic, and also more appreciate of other cultures and ways of life- and thinking. It has also helped me explore new photo projects in different parts of the world (in Asia specifically with my “First World Asia” project which is currently underway).

Not everyone can travel- but if you can- travel and open your eyes to the rest of the world as much as you can.

Books by Alex Webb

Below are some incredible photo-books by Alex Webb. Make sure to order one and learn more of how you can paint with light in your street photography. Remember, [buy books not gear](#).

- [Alex Webb: The Suffering of Light](#)
- [Alex Webb: Istanbul](#)
- [Alex Webb & Rebecca Norris Webb: Violet Isle](#)
- [Crossings: Photographs from the U. S. Mexico Border](#)
- [Under a Grudging Sun: Photographs from Haiti Libere 1986-1988](#)

Links for Alex Webb

- [Website](#)
- [Magnum website](#)

Interviews with Alex Webb

- [IPA Interview with Alex Webb](#)
- [Alex Webb Features on IPA](#)
- [Interview with Alex Webb on MSNBC](#)
- [Alex Webb interviewed by Marek Grygiel and Adam Mazur](#)

What has Alex Webb taught you about street photography? Let us know what you think about his way of working, his color, and insight in the comments below!
Also continue the conversation on my [Facebook fan page](#).