

SPECIAL REPORT

Lou Brown's

Street Smart[®]

**Photographing
Your Houses for
the Best Results**[™]



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Introduction

What credentials do I have for giving advice about taking photographs? Absolutely none whatsoever... I know nothing about photographing weddings, pets or babies... photographing houses however is easier – they don't move.

If you hire a professional photographer, your frustration will be waiting sometimes weeks before they can get around to photographing your property. In the real estate investing business time is money... added marketing time costs you enormous amounts of money... lost rents, interest expenses, property taxes and insurance added to the expense of a professional photographer.

If you go on a photo shoot with a professional photographer with the intent of learning how to properly photograph a house one of the things you'll learn very quickly is the huge difference having the right camera makes. But timing, framing and composure can also make a huge difference in the quality of the photographs you take of your properties.

As real estate investors we generally own the wrong kind of camera. The right gear – more specifically the right lens – to use is a wide-angle lens. When you see a photo of a living room taken with a regular lens versus a wide-angle, the difference will be startling. In one visual gulp, you can capture an entire room with a wide-angle lens – something nearly impossible to do with the kind of camera you probably own now.

Having said that, there are post-photo "work arounds" to solve this dilemma... Adobe PhotoShop Elements has the capacity to "stitch" photos together into a single photo. Open all the photos you want to include then click on "File" then on "Create Photomerge..." and the program will do the job for you. After your photos are merged into a single photo crop it to the area you want to show.

There is no shortage of books about photography, Adobe PhotoShop and cameras – but you'll never find information boiling all of this down for us real estate investors. We simply need some practical advice for getting better photographs of our properties to help us get them rented, lease-optioned or sold as quickly as possible.

There are digital cameras that can take photos like the kind you only see in magazines such as Architectural Digest. Even though you probably won't run right out to buy the latest very expensive digital camera just to take better photos the following information will help you improve your photos even with your current camera.

For the purposes of producing the photographs for this Special Report I made a decision to only use a point and shoot camera. The camera used I purchased on sale for \$159. The technology has improved to the point where this camera is a 16 megapixel model that comes with software to perform many of the post photo session functions previously requiring an additional photo software program... it allows you to crop your photos, stitch photos together as described above using PhotoShop Elements and even extract still photos from video clips taken using the camera.

Why good photographs are so important

It is impossible for you to be objective about your own properties. The main drawback is that you know every inch of the home and all of the aspects that make it fun or special. We physically walk through a property and literally "see" the house. But your buyers have never seen your property or the countless others that are simultaneously on the market. Buyers formulate opinions about which houses to go see based on the photographs you use in your marketing — newspaper ads, flyers, website, etc. If those photos are just average, the consumer will likely never come see your property. You may have the nicest house in town, but if the right buyer never comes to see it no sale will occur.

The sole reason you do any marketing is to make your property stand out from others on the market, and photographs that accurately demonstrate the home increase the chances of attracting the right buyer.

Selling a house is not a real estate function... it is a marketing function, and pretty photographs sell more houses. Think about the marketing used for professional products you are exposed to. Have you ever seen a bad photograph (taken with a point-and-shoot-camera) in an ad for a BMW? Of course not... Ever seen a badly composed shot in a cosmetics ad? Never... Good photographs are worth the effort.

The Basics of Good Photography

The number one rule for taking photos is to use a tripod... it will help you keep the camera steady and level. A tripod eliminates camera movement which, in turn, results in sharper photographs. If possible, do not use the shutter button – try a cable release or use the countdown timer. Using a tripod also helps keep the camera on a level plane. If you have seen or taken a photo and noticed that some of the architectural elements seem to be tilting or leaning it is most likely due to the camera not being level. This is so common there is even a name for it – keystone.

Never use a flash. A flash emits a narrow beam of white-hot light with a range of about 7-10 feet. Everything in this shallow range is typically too light (overexposed)... everything beyond that ten-foot range is usually too dark (underexposed). Flashes are good for taking close-up photos of people at a party, but not much else. It is best to simply use the available natural light – this is very easy when you put your camera on a tripod and use a long exposure times. For interior photos it also helps to turn all the lights on in a room. Taking an exterior shot at dusk with all the lights on can also give you a dramatic photograph. But do not use a flash... if extra light is needed to achieve the desired effect use halogen work lights from the local hardware store... generally under \$10 each.

Many professional photographers feel that it is nearly impossible to get great photographs of a house with a point-and-shoot camera – the kind where everything is automatic (including the flash going off), but since I know this is precisely the type of camera you will probably be using it is the one we will focus on here. At a minimum, you should invest in a camera with manual controls – the kind that allows you to control just two factors – how long the shutter stays open and the size of the aperture (the f-stop thing). As a matter of fact, you need only to contend with one of those factors – how long the shutter stays open. Every photograph in this report was taken by setting the aperture (the size of the hole in the lens the light comes through) at f22. This setting has a huge benefit in photographing real estate... it keeps everything in the photo in focus.

With the aperture set at f22, all you have to do is figure out how long to leave the shutter open. Many interior shots work well with a three or four-second exposure. That's the great thing about digital – you can take the shot and instantly see it in your viewing screen. If the photo is still too dark, just re-

take it leaving the shutter open for five or six seconds... keep changing the time of exposure until it looks right.

Compose Your Photos

One of the most common problems I see in house photos is the angle used to take the photo from. The front of a property should be photographed in such a way as to show the front door and one side of the house, but if at all possible, not from the garage side of the house. This invites your buyer into the house while minimizing the size of the garage yet giving the depth perception necessary to gauge the size of the house. The photo to the right illustrates this, though it would be a better photo if the camera was elevated higher – more on this later.



Ways to eliminate “yellowish” tints, grainy texture and unwanted blurring

Before you take an INTERIOR photo, remember to re-set your camera’s White Balance. It will likely default to auto-White Balance. Never use this setting for interior photographs (it causes most photos to have a yellow color cast). For all interior shots set the white balance to either Incandescent (what it is called on most Nikon cameras) or Florescent (on Canon cameras). Changing to one of these settings creates a more natural-looking color balance. When you forget to do this (and you will), photos with a yellowish color cast can be quickly corrected in PhotoShop.

Here is a final tip for interior photographs of a house: turn every single light in the house ON (and don’t forget to turn on the vent hood light over the kitchen stove and task lighting under kitchen cabinets). If the room doesn’t have much available light, just use a tripod, and keep the shutter open longer – 15 or 20 seconds is not unusual.

Manual cameras have the option of manual or auto-focusing. Take advantage of the technology – use the auto-focus, and you should not notice any blurring. If you have one of the newer cameras that have Image Stabilization, if at all possible turn it off when using a tripod.

When taking a photo of a home’s exterior, keep the sun at your back. You can seldom get a good front elevation photo once the sun is directly above or

behind the house. Before you go to the property first look it up on Google Maps or bing.com so you can take note of which direction the house faces.

If, for example, the house faces east, start taking photographs before around 11 AM. You can do the front first, while it catches the morning light. Take interior photographs next while the sun is overhead – advantageous because you get no harsh light coming in through the windows. By the time you are ready to get backyard shots, the sunlight should be just right to brightly illuminate the terrace, pool, etc.

Front exterior photos for west facing properties should be taken after about 2 PM... south facing properties between 11 AM and 2 PM... north facing properties should be photographed on overcast days – this softens the lighting giving you a better result.

To get really good photographs of your houses you will need to photograph them every time you visit until you get acceptable images.

Camera Technology

It cannot be said frequently enough... in order to take excellent photographs of houses you must use a camera with a wide-angle lens. Keep in mind that the smaller the number on the lens... the better. For example, a 20mm lens is far superior to a camera with a 35mm lens... the lower the number the larger the field of view. But you do not want to use a super wide angle (fish-eye) lens.

As wonderful as digital cameras are, they have built-in drawbacks. No use going into a lot of boring detail here, but here is a quick summary. Present-day digital cameras magnify the lens, and there is nothing you can do about it. A magnifying lens creates a zooming-in effect – the opposite of what we want. It has to do with the kind of sensor digital cameras use.

There is a category of digital cameras called “full sensor” SLRs. Canon and Nikon both make a “full sensor” camera. These cameras are very expensive and take a lot of time to learn to use, but all you have to do is make one extra sale and your investment has paid for itself. These cameras are sold as the body only – you must buy the lens separately. If you want the maximum potential of a wide-angle lens, it must be used on one of these new “full sensor” cameras.

All of the house photographs in this special report were taken with this “point-and-shoot” camera, the 20MP resolution “Canon PowerShot ELPH 180 20 MP Digital Camera”. The lens is a wide-angle Canon 28mm-140mm 5x Optical Zoom Lens (equivalent on a 35mm film camera). The main “number” to note on the lens is the “28”, a wide enough lens to satisfactorily take most interior photographs... in some cases you will need to take multiple shots and Photomerge them together and the camera adjusts up to 6400 ISO for low light photos. This lens also has built-in photo stabilization technology that automatically minimizes camera shake and it corrects distortion so you don’t get “fish-eye” or bending-at-the-corners effects.



Almost everyone now days has a smart phone... either an iPhone or an Android phone... they take excellent photos. And many people also have an Apple iPad that also takes excellent photos. You can also use these to shot a virtual video tour of the house that you can include on your website, and Facebook Market Place listings of the property.

Here is why you should never compare yourself to a magazine model

Think about this for a moment. Have you ever seen – in person – a person who looks as good as the models featured on magazine covers or in catalogs? Never, right? Do you know why? Because these people only exist in Adobe PhotoShop... Trust me, if you were on an elevator and a famous model walked on, you would not give them a second look. The transformation of these people is the handiwork of PhotoShop. Cleavage added... legs lengthened... skin blemishes removed... waistlines trimmed... lips plumped up... eyes and teeth whitened... fake abs airbrushed in... and did I mention lots of cleavage is added?

Even if you get nothing else useful from this special report on the topic of photographs, you can walk away with the confidence that you should never again let a magazine cover make you feel inadequate. (I am a card-carrying promoter of the life philosophy of “acceptance”.)

Okay, now that I have that out of my system, let me serve up some of the miraculous things PhotoShop can do for real estate investors. I am writing this

section under the theory that you do not presently own PhotoShop... even if you do, you may find some of the "quick fixes" discussed here very useful.

Make no mistake... even Adobe PhotoShop Elements (available online for under \$80) still has a learning curve. Consider finding an expert in your area. You might try Craigslist. Don't be alarmed by the person who shows up. Likely, you will be a bit surprised at how young this person is... you will probably have someone who walks in your office listening to an iPod, sporting tattoos, a nose ring and a pierced tongue... and I am just talking about the women! Or you can go to a great tutorial website... PhotoShopElements.net or [Click Here](#).

PhotoShop used to require lots of manual tweaking, but the latest version includes some new auto-correction features, and these new updates alone make PhotoShop worth the price. Below, is a quick summary:

Auto Color: Interior photos (especially kitchen shots) have a tendency to be yellowish. Once you have opened the photo in PhotoShop you can find this auto correction step by looking across PhotoShop's menu bar and going to "Image" + "Adjustments" + "Auto Color". You will instantly see the effect on your photo. It often works miracles.

If you want to try a method that gives you more control, go to "Image" + "Adjustments" + "Hue/Saturation". This brings up a box with a couple of slider controls. Use the slider that says "Saturation", and move it to the left. As you do, you will see the changes instantly. Keep moving the slider back and forth until you like how the photo looks.

Shadow/Highlight: This feature has been in the last two versions of PhotoShop, and it may be the single most helpful adjustment for an agent. Real estate photographs can be difficult because of multiple lighting issues – you may take a photo of a home's exterior, but because the trees and landscaping are in the shade, these dark areas lose all detail. The same can happen with an interior shot – one area is well-exposed but other areas are too dark. Pull up one of these exposure-challenged photos in PhotoShop. To find this auto-correction miracle, go to "Image" + "Adjustment" + "Shadow/Highlight".

This does two things:

- 1) It automatically corrects the photo. This remarkable little feature leaves the correctly exposed areas alone, and lightens (or darkens) the areas that need adjustment. The result is normally a much brighter photograph with even lighting.

2) It simultaneously brings up the Shadow/Highlight box. This box has a number of slider controls that you can manually adjust if you like.

How to sharpen photographs: Make all adjustments to your photo first (such as those mentioned above). Do the sharpening as the last step. In PhotoShop go across the menu bar to "Filter" + "Sharpen". This gives you a set of choices, (Sharpen, Sharpen Edges, Sharpen More, Smart Sharpen and Unsharp Mask). Believe it or not, the choice you want is the one that says "Unsharp Mask" (Oh, I know what you are thinking, "Unsharp Mask" can't possibly be right, but it is).

When you go to Unsharp Mask, it brings up a box with three choices. Try these settings:

- Amount: 80
- Radius: 1
- Threshold: 4

You can also move these sliders around for greater or lesser amounts of sharpening. (Note: in the latest version of PhotoShop, the new setting, Smart Sharpen can be very helpful for photos that need a lot of sharpening).

Some final thoughts about PhotoShop. There are some really quick fixes for all kinds of things that are beneficial for real estate photographs. This is why it is so helpful to find a local person who can sit down with you at the computer to demonstrate how to correct certain kinds of photos. For example, you can add clouds to a cloudless sky. If you take on a property in the off-season, the yard will likely be brown – in about ten seconds in PhotoShop, you can make the grass "turn" green. Photos that have a flat tone to them can be brightened instantly. You can also put a feathered edge around photos, etc, etc.

Different Ways to Get Aerial Photographs

Aerial photos are expensive (about \$1,500 to \$2,000), and you often have to wait weeks to get onto the pilot's schedule. These photos are often kind of "fuzzy" due to the vibration of the plane or helicopter and the fact that they must be taken with a long telephoto lens.



One of the most exciting developments in photography in the last few years is the drone – high flying cameras that enable you to capture unique viewpoints of common subjects. Recently the cost of getting a camera into the air has dropped dramatically and if you decide to venture down this road I guarantee you won't be disappointed. Apart from the amazing images you can capture, they are also tremendous fun!



<https://digital-photography-school.com/how-to-use-drones-to-do-stunning-aerial-photography/>

As with most modern technology there is a vast range of drones, or UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), on the market. Similar to camera equipment in general, how much you're prepared to spend will determine the quality of camera on-board, and the flying characteristics of the drone itself. There are low-cost models that will take very basic images, up to the big boys toys that will happily lift your prized DSLR up into the heavens. You can even add your GoPro camera on to some units that will take advantage of camera gear you may already have. One company has a range of models that has a large percentage of the market – [DJI](#). Their Phantom range of drones are the first choice for many, and though they do make some high end-models, the [Phantom 3 Series](#) models are the most popular drone in the world, for good reason. The drone pictured above is currently \$490 from Amazon.com.

Here is a fast way to get less expensive, hi-resolution high-level close-up photographs. Look in the yellow pages or search online for a company in your area where you can rent – by the hour – a truck called a cherry picker or bucket truck – a great platform for a photo. The driver wheels up in front of your property. You or your photographer hop in that little box and up you go. You can get as high as a four or five story building. If you are afraid of heights... send an assistant. The cost... \$150 to \$200.



Another way to get a higher elevation photo is to stand on a ladder with your camera on the tripod with its legs extended but folded shut so you can hold all three of them in one hand... it can be rather tricky and frustrating to stand on a ladder holding on with one hand while you hold the tripod high up over your head with the other hand and the shutter timer set to automatically take a picture... you will need to take a lot of shots to get a single usable photograph. And if you fall off the ladder... well, on second thought maybe you should just go ahead and rent the bucket truck! The cost for the ladder... \$250 to \$350.

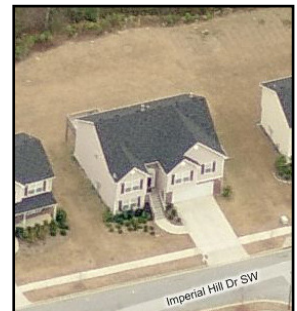


Another possibility is to use a painter's telescoping extension pole... another hardware store purchase... see the section to follow for instructions on how to assemble your own monopod "Pole-Cam" (my setup cost just \$32). Now you can remain standing safely on the ground, use your computer as the viewfinder and get an elevated photo of the house.

To watch a short 12:24 minute tutorial video on composing exterior house photographs... [Click Here](#) or go to:

<https://StreetSmartWiz.com/phototraining/>

Yet another method I've used on occasion is to go to www.bing.com/maps and if the property location is available chose the "Birds Eye" view option... you can enlarge the image and rotate the position (four available) for the best view. Use the "Print Screen" key on your computer (generally located to the right of the F12 key)... open Adobe PhotoShop Elements and select "File" + "New from Clipboard" then crop the image to best show your property. The resulting photo is NOT the best in the world... the image is usually grainy and generally a little out of focus but it is OK for the price (FREE) and is of sufficient quality to show on your website...



Painters Extension Pole Monopod "Pole-Cam"



What I like about this setup is you can take your photos by yourself, using one hand to hold the pole, keeping the camera in the air and use the other to push the "Print Screen" laptop key. I've found it's a pain to get someone else to help hold and move the pole when needing to take photos of a property and you'll find it easier to move the pole yourself so you can get the shot you want without trying to give directions to the other person.

Here's the materials you'll need to get for your "Pole-Cam" photographs:

1. A multiple section painters extension pole (get one that extends to 12-18 feet long... around \$36 – I got my 16' Unger pole at Home Depot for \$30 plus sales tax)
2. To mount your camera to the painter's pole you'll need an easily found hardware store part:

- A 5/16" anchor bolt (the above Unger pole comes with a pre-molded 1/4" hole in the top of it... drill this out to 5/16" to receive the anchor bolt... this allows you to mount your camera onto the threaded shaft at the top of the pole)
3. A camera that has a USB connection – I use a "Canon A3300 IS"
 4. The software included with your camera
 5. A 20 foot USB extension cable
 - The 5' cable that comes with your camera plus a 15' USB extension cable available from many computer stores
 6. A laptop computer (PC or MAC)

Using the software application that comes with the Canon PowerShot ELPH camera you can control it from a laptop computer, which gives you a high degree of control



over the camera and includes a live viewfinder display allowing the camera to be aimed



remotely from the computer using a standard USB cable connection. The USB cable plugs into the camera and into your laptop then turn on "live preview" from the Canon software to see what the camera is seeing (just like when you are looking through the camera's viewfinder). Move the "Pole-Cam" around to get the shot you want, and hit a

single function key ("prtsc" on my computer) located to the right of the f12 key to capture your photo, then paste it into your photo processing software and crop it as needed.

The Canon PowerShot ELPH 180 20 MP Digital Camera (\$149.99) and 15 Foot USB 2.0 Extension Cable (\$2.99) are both available from Amazon.com with FREE shipping (prices and availability at the time this is being written).

Some closing thoughts...

Hopefully, this information will help you produce professional-caliber photographs worthy of your properties.

Getting excellent photos is a little time-consuming, but it is definitely worth the effort. You will sell your properties much more quickly, make more money and use this skill to help you buy more properties.

- Remember the basics.
- Invest in the right camera and lens
- Pay attention to factors such as:
 - lighting conditions
 - composition, and
 - camera angle
- Use photo-imaging software for the finishing details
- Don't be afraid to get some hands-on guidance from an expert such as a photographer or PhotoShop guru
- Be creative
- Have some fun

Good Luck,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.