

# Controlling the Cost of a Photography Assignment

Contributed by the Architectural Photography Specialty Group of the American Society of Media Photographers

Revised May 2008

*The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.*

## SUMMARY

Architectural photography is a high-dollar investment that makes sense. Finding a way to incorporate photography assignments into a firm's budget is not as hard as one may think. Cost-sharing, advanced site planning and preparation, commissioning a local photographer, limiting an assignment's views, and communicating with the photographer can help architects control the costs of a photography assignment.

## PHOTOGRAPHY TO FIT YOUR BUDGET

Professional photography is of great value in advertising, marketing, magazine articles, competition submissions and office décor. Good imagery is a powerful tool for conveying the quality of your work.

Like architectural design and development, professional photography is a custom service that can be molded to meet your business goals and stay within your financial constraints. If your needs seem to outweigh your means, don't be discouraged. Following are a few ideas to relieve the pressure on your budget.

## SHARE THE COST WITH OTHERS

You aren't the only one who might benefit from photographs of a project. The owner, interior designers, landscape architects, contractors, consultants, product manufacturers, tenants and others probably have similar pride in the building and a similar need to market themselves. With some forethought, all may be served by a single photography assignment where the costs can be distributed equitably, to everyone's advantage. Photographers who specialize in architectural work are quite familiar with such arrangements.

If this is your plan, it is essential to let the photographer know about it before the initial estimate is prepared. As detailed in Best Practice



Boston Convention Center, Boston Mass. Design by Rafael Vinoly Architects. Photography by Brad Feinknopf, [www.feinknopf.com](http://www.feinknopf.com).

06.03.06, "Understanding the Estimate for a Photographic Assignment," the estimate typically will have separate cost components for production fees, licenses and expenses.

The production fees (the photographer's professional time) and expenses (e.g., travel, consumables, props, rental equipment, assistants, models and stylists) are generally not affected by the number of parties unless their separate interests require different views or special setups. A sharing arrangement means these cost elements may be lower for each participant.

Each party will be charged a separate rights-license fee, which is based on the use he or she will make of the images. In addition, each participant will pay separately for any special deliverables, such as large-format prints, Web galleries, or image files formatted and sized in different ways.

## CONTRACTUAL FORMALITIES

After reviewing the assignment parameters, the photographer will provide a written estimate that

states the terms of the cost-sharing agreement and names the primary commissioning client and other participating parties.

Alternatively, the photographer may draw up separate estimates for each of the parties. This relieves the commissioning client of any responsibility for collecting payment from the other participants. It also clarifies the cost-sharing details when different parties need different views. For instance, it's unlikely that the interior designer will make much use of the exterior photography, while the architect probably has limited use for photos of the furniture in the lobby. Nevertheless, each of the parties will get the benefit of dividing the costs that are incurred in common.

### LICENSING AND RIGHTS GRANTED

While all the participating parties will be sharing the expenses and the production fee, each party will pay separately for the uses that he or she will make of the images. The building owner may need only brochures for prospective tenants, for which an advertising brochure license would be needed. The designer might require Web-site use and glossy prints for a portfolio. The architect might be interested in Web rights, large prints for the office lobby and permission to submit images for competitions. Whether the assignment paperwork is framed in terms of separate estimates or a single estimate with primary and additional clients, each party is asked to sign a license agreement.

A vast array of uses and rights can come into play for any particular situation. Some common standards exist. PLUS (Picture Licensing Universal System) has compiled a glossary of licensing terms used in the photography and publishing industries. Visit [www.useplus.com](http://www.useplus.com) to browse the definitions.

### A REAL-WORLD SCENARIO

Suppose that an owner, a contractor and an architect discuss a cost-sharing proposal for photography. Two of them agree, but the contractor decides not to participate. A few weeks later, however, the contractor needs to print capability brochures and asks to use images from the shared photography session. Because the contractor forfeited the option to license the images at the pre-negotiated license fee and terms, the contractor is now in the same position as any outside party requesting use.

Photographers are usually willing to license images to third parties but typically charge these parties at least as much as the original group for several reasons, including different delivery requirements,

deadlines and license terms. The photographer and the latecomer will have to negotiate new agreements from the ground up. From the photographer's point of view, this is an inefficient way to do business. Multiparty licensing is cost-effective because it allows streamlined planning and preparation for photography.

In addition, the latecomer can choose from existing images – while the original group could anticipate only the outcome of the assignment they had commissioned. There is also the factor of simple fairness: If non-participants could get photography at the same cost as participants, the benefit of cost-sharing arrangements would be negated.

### KEY POINTS TO MULTIPLE-PARTY LICENSING

- All participating parties must sign an agreement before photography begins.
- Each participant is charged a licensing fee commensurate with his or her specific usage needs.
- Each participant is responsible for ordering and paying for his or her individual deliverables.

Clear communication among all participants is of prime importance, whether the photographer contracts only with the commissioning party (acting as liaison and collecting the other parties' respective shares of the fees) or contracts with each party separately. The benefit can quickly be lost if the parties don't share an understanding about goals, timelines and use rights.

A practical wait-and-see approach has its place in obtaining photography, as in any business decision. Sometimes the wise course is to license after the fact; other times, it is best to commission a separate assignment. If your requirements are congruent with the other parties' needs, there is no benefit in standing aside from a multiparty agreement. Rather, there can be considerable advantage to joining with other parties, not only to minimize cost but also to participate in the job planning and thereby ensure that the resulting images are useful for your business purposes.

### PLAN AHEAD, ALLOW LEEWAY

Schedule photography well in advance and plan for some variability in the timing. Creating photography on a rush basis adds to the expense, while a relaxed schedule means that your photographer can work through any last-minute glitches without incurring extra expenses.

The weather, too, can be a factor. A tight schedule means that foul weather and other uncontrollable variables may become problems. In contrast, an extended schedule may provide the opportunity to highlight your design with dusk or night illumination, different people, moving vehicles and even a variety of changing seasonal elements.

Another aspect of planning for photography is ensuring the site is prepared before the shooting assignment begins. Are the windows clean? Is all the construction equipment out of sight? Is electric power on? In a pinch, problems can sometimes be retouched away, but this adds to the postproduction time and can mean compromises in image quality. It's usually easier and less expensive to prevent the problems while on site.

### SHOP LOCALLY

In addition to minimizing the travel expenses, engaging a local photographer will often allow the most flexibility in scheduling the work. It can also simplify getting back on schedule after a weather delay.

The American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) operates a free "Find a Photographer" service at [www.FindaPhotographer.org](http://www.FindaPhotographer.org) that lists several hundred specialists in architectural photography. Only qualified professionals are in this database, and you can search by geographic location and by specialty. The search results include full contact information, sample photographs and Web-site links.

### USE FEWER VIEWS

It goes without saying that the number of views is a major factor in the job's cost. Each view must be composed and lit; the location must be cleaned and the background cleared; all props and personnel must be in position. Each view takes time and costs money. Get the most value from a given budget by listing concepts you'd like to illustrate and assigning a priority to each. Your photographer can then make sure that you get the most important images while staying within your budget.

### WORK WITH YOUR PHOTOGRAPHER

A good photographer can bring to bear a wealth of experiences and skills to get you the images you need at the lowest feasible cost. Just as small changes to a building's specs can make a big difference to the cost of construction, so small adjustments to a photographic assignment can drastically alter the cost of images. Your photographer can advise you about the options and

trade-offs that are available, giving you the freedom to balance the costs and benefits to your advantage.

### CONCLUSION

The decisions you make during the process of planning for the photography will affect its cost far more than any later steps you might take. Here are a few options that will help minimize the outlays:

- Share the costs of the photography assignment among several stakeholders in the job.
- Prioritize the views you'd like and phase the work over a period of time to highlight your design with changing seasonal elements.
- Hire locally. Visit ASMP's free [www.FindaPhotographer.org](http://www.FindaPhotographer.org) to identify qualified photographers near the project location.
- Schedule flexibly to avoid rush work, overtime costs and to allow for weather delays.

The quality of the photography you use to represent your designs is a reflection of your firm's values and affects how the marketplace perceives your business. There will always be someone willing to photograph your project at a lower price. A "bargain" can easily turn into an expensive problem when the resulting images do not meet expectations and have to be re-photographed. Commissioning a professional architectural photographer is an investment that can prevent frustration while saving time and money. Most importantly, the photographs you receive will be a valuable resource for your marketing as well as a source of inspiration and legitimate pride.

### RESOURCES

#### More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- |          |                                                         |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 06.03.07 | Preparing for Professional Photography                  |
| 06.03.05 | Selecting a Professional Photographer                   |
| 06.03.06 | Understanding the Estimate of a Photographic Assignment |

#### Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact [bestpractices@aia.org](mailto:bestpractices@aia.org).

#### Keywords

- Leadership

- Disciplines
- Design disciplines
- Architectural photography