

How to Get the Shot

Blog #102: Looking Up at the MCA

Revealing the secrets behind unforgettable photography

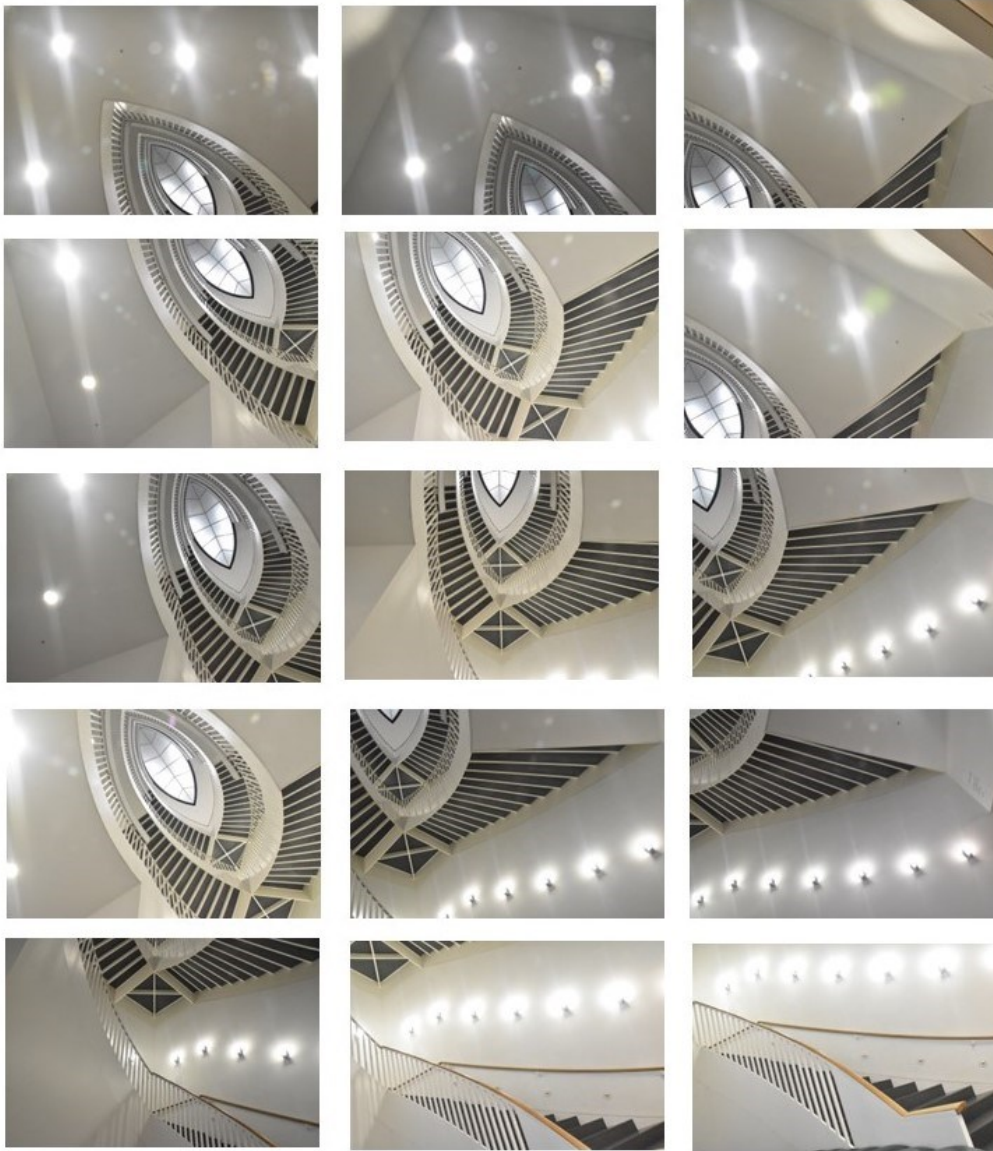


Looking Up at the MCA staircase from the bottom level.

When I worked at the Chicago Architecture Foundation, one of the best pieces of advice was to “Look Up!” Chicago has remarkable architectural treasures, many of which are at the top of buildings. That advice suited me as I stepped into the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The stairway was impressive with dramatic curves that traveled effortlessly from floor to floor. It wasn’t until I got to the bottom of the stairway that I looked up to my amazement and the simple beauty of the design. It was a perfect oval, each level enclosing the one above.

The bottoms of the ascending staircases, seen in the lower half of each level were black with white dividers between steps – a stunning contrast to the descending ceilings displayed in the upper portion of the stairwell. Your eye could not help but to follow the stairway from the bottom as it circled up, layer by layer, ascending four stories.

The building was designed by German architect Josef Paul Kleihues and was Kleihues' first commission in the United States. While the building’s art galleries are blank square boxes that don’t interfere with the art on exhibit, the staircases are dramatic, an ellipsoid shape constructed of Black Impala granite and lit by light fixtures the architect designed. This ellipsoid design feature is repeated elsewhere in the building.



Individual components of the panoramic Image

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The challenge for a photographer is to get the whole image in a photograph. Your proximity to the floor above makes it difficult to get far enough away to capture the full design. To solve this dilemma, I took advantage of the photo stitching design tool (available in many photography software programs, or available as a separate software purchase at any price levels) and began layering photos one



Rough Merged Image

on top of each other, eventually creating a grid of 15 individual photos, being careful to capture the shots at the same distance and at the same exposure. It took many sets of the grid to find a set that would merge to reveal the entire staircase, but when I found the right set, these fifteen individual photos merged together, revealing the full staircase emerged in all its beauty.

Looking Up at the MCA Photo Stats

Dimensions:

- Individual	4000 x 6000
- Merged	8534 x 11287
- Cropped:	589 x 640
Exposure:	1/30 sec at f/16
Focal Length:	18mm
ISO:	10000
Camera:	Nikon D3500
Lens:	18.0-300.0mm f 3.5



Another Angle: Looking Head On

TAKEAWAYS

1. Have your camera with you.
2. Look up. Look down. Take in the setting from different angles (including from upstairs and downstairs).
3. Don't rush. If you're on your own, give yourself the luxury of your own time to take all the alternative shots you want to consider for editing.
4. Take lots of shot with different angles and exposure, including with and without a polarizing filter.
5. If the shot can't be capture due to logistical limitations, experiment with photo stitching. Take multiple sets of photos so you have a back-up in case one set can't be merged.
6. Consider returning to a photo site. A second trip can provide great perspective and shots you missed.