What is street photography and how did you get involved?

Photographers define street photography in many different ways. Some are very prescriptive saying you must do one thing, while others are more inclusive, saying it’s more about the feeling of the street and what you find interesting that is most important.

I live on the inclusive side of the street and am happy to photograph people, architecture, tiny details and abstract shadows, whatever takes my interest and has a feeling of the street.

I would recommend you just give it a go, look out for other street photographers on-line and in person. View their images, talk to them, read what they write to get a feel for what you like about street photography. Try and find your own way into street photography and create your own style of street photographs.

You may enjoy finding other photographers to ‘work’ with and that can help speed up both technical understanding and creative approaches on the street. I would recommend sharing you images with other supportive photographers. You should get some helpful feedback and they will also appreciate your (constructive) thoughts about their photography.
I have been taking street photographs for a long time, but got more involved at the time of the London Olympics (2012). I was a volunteer driver and enjoyed being on the streets and photographing some of what I saw. Prior to this I was doing a lot of event and wedding photography and found street photography a more relaxing experience.
Since getting more involved I have not looked back and find it both interesting and creative. I take both colour and black & white images, enjoying how monochrome can simplify things and allow you to concentrate on the main subject.

Do you need any special kit or settings for street photography?

You don’t need any special kit for street photography, although I would recommend something light as you don’t want to hurt your back carrying around a lot of equipment. I don’t generally take my big Canon camera out on the street and often find my iPhone can do the job well. However, usually you will find me with a micro four thirds camera (I use both Panasonic and Olympus) and medium to wide prime lenses. Having said that I also love the little Olympus pancake zoom (14-42mm), which is surprisingly good for street work.
Whatever you use, make sure it is always ready to shoot so that when you lift your camera to your eye you are only concerned with composition and exposure compensation.

What are your favourite subjects and how do you approach street photography?

My own images are rarely of the ‘in your face’ type. I love images that capture a moment, often posing a question. I rarely tell the whole story, leaving space for the viewer to create their own story for the image. So, my favourite subject are things that are a little out of the ordinary. This often comes from something unexpected within a scene; a window propped open by a bottle of wine, a waiter having a quiet moment away from the kitchen, even an army tank on a strip of land in South London (really!). If it makes me stop and take a look then I hope I can make it into good photo which will be interesting to others.

Is good street photography a case of luck, or planning?

I think it’s a bit of both. My best photography is usually planned around a location, a theme or an event. I rarely go out and just see what happens. But within the planned photography I give myself time to walk around see what’s going on. I may spend an hour or more having a look around before turning the camera on. I’ll try and get a feel for the location and to look at the people who are there, making mental notes about what I might shoot. I find this time relaxing it usually puts me in a good mood for photography. At some point I’ll know it’s time to get started, so I’ll turn the camera on and get going. By the time I finish I can have walked around an area many times and photographed the same scene on a number of occasions. I make time to stop and take photographs of things that take my interest and I will also make time for anyone who shows an interest in my photography (I’m happy to talk photography with almost anyone).

Are there any particular legal considerations when photographing on the street?

From a legal point of view, we are very lucky in the UK as there are almost no restrictions about what you can photography from a public space. You only need model release for commercial use images, but not to put the image on your web site, sell it as an artistic print or include it in an article or a photobook.

If you’re not in the UK then the law may be very different, so check your local laws on-line or contact local photo groups as they will usually know is acceptable in your area.

Is there an ethics dimension to your street photography?

I like to think that my photography stays in-line with my ethics and I would encourage you to do the same. Although legally I may be fine to take and use pictures of people taken in public, I do consider their privacy. I don’t like to upset people on the street and don’t consider everything that happens on the street to be fair game.

My starting point is, would I mind if someone took my picture in a similar situation? That rules out pictures of homeless people or anyone in difficult or embarrassing situation. I could be happy to make an image of a homeless person’s sleeping bag and their belongings within a busy street to show the contrast between the situation of the homeless and those passing by, but I would not include the homeless person in the image, it would feel too exploitative.

Note: If you would like to explore ethical photography in more detail then please get in touch with me, or visit [www.photoethics.org](http://www.photoethics.org), which is run by Savanna Dodd [www.savannahdodd.com](http://www.savannahdodd.com). She offers a variety of resources including a very good introductory to course ‘The photographers ethical toolkit’.

How do you feel about people’s privacy in general when photographing on the street?

I do consider how people in my images feel about having their photo taken, especially if they are a central part of the composition. If I am going to publish the image then (e.g. on my website or in an article) then I will always talk to the person.

The discussion may happen before or after making the image but I always start with a smile and explain who I am. I offer a card with my contact details and explain why I took (or why I want to take) the photo. I will also show them the image and offer to send them a copy. I find that if I smile and am polite most people are happy to be involved, and if not then I am happy not to take the photo, or to delete it from my camera.

How do I get over feeling self conscious?

If you feel self conscious when shooting on the street, I think it’s worth considering why.

If it’s just that street photography is new to you then take a deep breath, dive in and give it a go. I would recommend somewhere busy, preferably with lots of tourists where you can fit right in while taking your pictures. In London, Trafalgar Square is a great place to start.

If however your self conscious feelings are not just beginners nerves, but are more to do with invading people’s privacy, then it may be a more ethical issue. Remember you don’t have to photograph people. You won’t be the first street photographer who leaves them out! But being ethical doesn’t mean you can’t photograph people, it just means you have to find your ethical way to do it. Communication is the key, so again…. take that big step and talk to them. You might find that by talking to the people you want to photograph, that they are very happy to be photographed (especially if you offer them a copy), and if not then nothing is lost.

If you are unsure where to start then try to get comfortable taking pictures of things other than people. Start with buildings, street art, light and shadows and then when you feel more confident you can give people a try. You may also wish to hide their identity using techniques such as a slow shutter speed to blur their identity, or a window reflections to make people less identifiable.

So, practice your street photography, respect your own and others boundaries and keep a smile on your face and an open mind about what others might think. Above all enjoy being on the street and take great images.

Getting comfortable taking street photographs can take time and practice but thankfully it doesn’t cost very much except time, good humour and a little effort.

Why are there so many men involved in street photography and who are your favourite street photographers?

Historically, there have been very many more men than women involved in street photography. These days, I think that the split is far more equal. However, the exposure of their work is not so equal, with men generally gaining more exposure. My best suggestion to remedying the imbalance is to get involved, share your photography, promote your own photography and support others who’s work you love.

Take street photographs because you love them and hopefully others will love them too.

How can I get involved in street photography?

Just step outside, hit the streets and start taking photographs. You could look for a local photography group that does street photography or talk to other photographers you meet on the street. Either way you will learn more about local street photography and you may make some new photography friends.

You should find local photowalks via [meetup.com](http://meetup.com), and workshops (such as my own [www.LondonStreet.photography](http://www.LondonStreet.photography) by searching on the web. Take care to find others who are supportive rather than judgemental.

Who would you recommend checking out for street photography inspiration?

If you would like to look at some street photographers work with a variety of styles and approaches, then have a look at some of the following:

Becky Frances <https://www.instagram.com/becky_frances/>
 <http://www.womeninphotography.info/blog/2018/1/30/becky-frances-london>

David Cantor [www.davidcantor.weebly.com](http://www.davidcantor.weebly.com)

Nick Turpin [www.nickturpin.com](http://www.nickturpin.com) and [www.in-public.com](http://www.in-public.com)

Joel Meyorwitz <https://www.joelmeyerowitz.com/street-photography>

Julie Hrudova <https://juliehrudova.com> and <https://streetrepeat.org>

Linda Wisdom <https://www.lindawisdomphotography.co.uk>

Peter Merry (my own sites) at [www.petermerry.co.uk](http://petermerry.co.uk) and [www.LondonStreet.photography](http://www.londonStreet.photography)

Vivian Maier [www.vivianmaier.com](http://www.vivianmaier.com)

[www.womenstreetphotographers.com](http://www.womenstreetphotographers.com)

And finally how can we get in touch with you if we have more questions or would like to come on a photowalk in London?

Feel free to send me an email using info@petermerry.co.uk or via the contact pages on my web sites. Join me at the [www.LondonStreet.photography](http://www.LondonStreet.photography) web site. The site is launching in early October, but AYWMC members can sign up early. The site offers monthly updates including photography guides and details of free London photowalks (for Covid reasons, currently self guided) and details of paid workshops, one-to-one training and other events. Don’t worry if you are not in London as much of what we do is on-line.

I look forward to meeting you soon.

Peter Merry

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