



Light in the Dark

Uwe & Bettina Steinmueller

The above photo was one of the first pictures we took at Fort Point in 2004. The interesting part is that we did not get any usable version until about two years later.

While the image looks like it was made in a reasonably lit space, it is not. Why did it take two years to get this version? If you take just a single image, it is quite challenging (at least in 2004 and even today) to master the dynamic range from the bright windows to the darker shadows. This is why we took three exposures then, hoping to use some HDR software to create a better result. Neither the HDR software available in 2004, nor our skills at that time, allowed us to get an image that pleased our eyes. The important part was that



we had multiple exposures, and two years later when both the HDR software and we were ready for prime time, we got an image we liked.

It is not easy to describe what we find so fascinating about places like Fort Point. It is all about the mood and the textures created by the decay of the fort. In some way nature is taking back possession of a man-made structure. All the patina creates urban organic colors that we like. The play of light from the outside adds an extra dimension to the mood. From an aesthetic point of view, it is always a balance of how dark we want the final print to be. If the viewer looks at the image in a good gallery light, the print can be pretty dark with still enough details in the shadows; a dark version of the photo best portrays the mood. However, the photo is not often viewed in ideal light. This is why we produce slightly lighter versions. We know this is a compromise, but it helps to make the photos more accessible for the viewer.

Some people find HDR photographs “unnatural” looking. Adversely, they often find “normal” photos natural. Normal pictures only seem “natural” to us because we know the world more from photographs than from our own experience. Even our own experience fools us if we remember the scene in our memories. It is also clear that our eyes can deal much better with a higher dynamic range setting than what is presented in most photographs. This is because our eyes are able to adapt to the lighting in a setting in reality. For example, when you first enter Fort Point all is dark, and then after a short period of time it appears to get brighter because of our visual adaptation.

We don’t want people who view our images to be overly concerned with the question, “Is this HDR?” Our goal is to share the fascination we have photographing these places. On the other hand, we are firm believers that we need HDR to present places like Fort Point in the manner that shows what we

Left

Fort Point is an old fort directly under the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, which was built to protect the SF Bay but never used in any military operation.

Top

Alcatraz Modern Industries

PORTFOLIO:



Top
Alcatraz

feel about them. In general we believe that our *Light in the Dark* images manage quite well to avoid the “HDR look.” We have other photographs that do have the “HDR look,” and we like them, too, because these images are meant to have a particular artistic expression, and even over the top HDR can help at times. In our *Light in the Dark* series, the textures, colors and light of the original places are so strong that a so-called “natural” look is just fine.

Once we managed to get pleasing results from our Fort Point HDR photos, we started to really like the HDR process. Nearly all the photographs in this portfolio were created using HDR merging and tone mapping software. It turned out to be excellent timing, because shortly after this initial success, we had a unique opportunity to photograph at Alcatraz (as part of a special workshop). At Alcatraz

we had the same situation (dark rooms that were only lit from the slightly opaque windows). Again the textures, unique setting and the light were fascinating to us. These images have become some of our best-known work.

There was one final shot, the “Golden Gate Sunset in Alcatraz,” that was more of interest to us because of its inherent irony. This requires some explanation. What you actually see through the window is the sunset directly under the Golden Gate Bridge (the room inside was very dark so that we needed flashlights). The prisoners may have viewed the sunset this way.

While we cannot easily repeat the photo session at Alcatraz, we have come back to Fort Point quite a few times. We now know Fort Point pretty well, but



Top
Golden Gate Sunset
in Alcatraz

Bottom
Ft. Point

PORTFOLIO:



Left
Doorways at
Fort Point

Right
Officer's bed
Fort Point

always discover new scenes, lighting, textures and angles. This is one of the more challenging shots. Keeping the detail in the light shafts, having no artifacts where the light meets the shadows, and still some detail in the dark shadows is a challenge for nearly all tone-mapping software.

Also the choice of lenses makes a big difference. Our favorite lens right now is the Zeiss 21mm f2.8 ZF Distagon on a full frame camera. We find a top fixed focal lens at about 21mm to be close to ideal for Fort Point. Actually, we most often shot at hyper-focal distance settings. Today we take at least 5 to 7 shots to cover an even wider dynamic range at 1EV apart.

There are likely many other buildings that can be explored in this way, and we would love to photograph them all. Finding such places is not easy. It's even harder to get legal access to photograph.

Methodology:

- Frame the scene on a very sturdy tripod
- Use cable release and mirror lockup
- Take 3 to 7 exposures at 1EV apart to cover the full dynamic range
- Create a HDR file with Photomatix (proved to be the most reliable tool for us because other HDR tools sometimes introduce nasty artifacts)
- Tone-Mapping in Photomatix Detail Enhancer (we recently also tried some alternative tools which may show up in our future workflow)
- Add some global contrast (using our own commercial Photoshop scripts)
- Detail extraction and sharpening (again using our own commercial scripts)
- Sometimes distortion and perspective corrections in Photoshop
- Some selective color tuning if needed



Over the last few years, HDR has been a proven technique to capture some of our work. We nearly always create bracketed shots. This is a blend of classic bracketing, so that we can pick the best exposure. It also enables us to use HDR as we feel it is appropriate. In places like Fort Point or Alcatraz, we know that we will use HDR and hardly ever shoot only a single frame.

All images are copyright Uwe & Bettina Steinmueller.

German photographer Uwe Steinmueller and his wife and partner Bettina came to live and work in the United States over a decade ago. They concentrate on taking photos for fine art prints, mainly nature and urban landscapes. Uwe has authored numerous books and articles about digital workflow. He is also the owner and editor of *Digital Outback Photo* www.outbackphoto.com.

To ask a question or comment on this article, visit our online Forum: www.phototechforum.com

Product Resources

Cameras: Canon 1Ds Mark II, Nikon D700, Zeiss 21mm f/2.8, Canon 24-70mm f/2.8; Software: Photomatix, Photoshop CS4, DOP Scripts; Gitzo Tripod.

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