

BLOG

Skyscrapers: Above and Beyond

April 4, 2016



Keystone Blue Cross, Philadelphia, PA

Photographing skyscrapers is a tall order in many ways. These giant feats of architecture, engineering and construction first get conceived, then designed, then built, often over the course of years and to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. I appreciate, and am humbled by, the immensity of the challenge to show these herculean structures to their best advantage.

For many of the skyscrapers I photograph, I am working for commercial realty companies that use my imagery to sell either a whole building or available space within a building. The goal is to obviously make the buildings look as formidable and desirable as possible: large, classy, sophisticated, modern, state of the art, and featuring the latest in contemporary amenities in an ideal location. Many businesses understand that having an office in a shiny, towering edifice will positively reflect the building's sophistication, stability and permanence onto their own company's brand of success.



When photographing skyscrapers, I try to “read,” and then tease out, the unique qualities and individual contexts of each structure, from the ground level to the very top. Skyscrapers “read” one way from a distance and another way from closer up, gazing up at them from the street.

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Comcast Tower, Philadelphia, PA

For many of these projects, I am challenged to show a building or buildings in the context of their urban environment to let a buyer or new tenant know what a great location they'd be buying (or leasing) into. Showing the building's surroundings, and even getting a view of the structure's middle and top, requires "getting some height" on the building. This becomes a matter of locating a neighboring building high enough to offer up a perfect view from the middle or near the top of the subject building. The next hoop to jump through is getting permission to photograph FROM these other buildings, which in my experience is an endeavor that's either really easy or nearly impossible.

Once I identify an ideal building to shoot from, I often show up and ask the security staff if I can go up in their building to photograph a neighboring building. Some people agree readily to my plan and accompany me on my travels through their building. Others say I'll need permission in writing from the building managers, which may take a month at which time I'm welcome to come back. So getting some height on these tall buildings requires a little ingenuity, persistence, people skills and luck, especially given today's concerns about security.

Since so many skyscrapers are faced with glass curtainwalls, "reading" each building becomes a study in what is reflecting in the building at the time. Once I'm up in an adjacent building, it's almost like a chemistry experiment: mixing just the right amount of height, light and shadows, with reflections of clouds and other buildings. For a different perspective, I also photograph skyscrapers from the ground to demonstrate the grandiosity of the entrance and present a more dramatic "towering" view as the top of the colossal structure fades into reflections of clouds and then meets up with the wild blue yonder.



Penn Mutual Building, Philadelphia, PA