



*How to photograph*  
**HOUSES**

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*by stan barron*  
*stan barron properties austin, texas*



This booklet was written for members of  
The Institute For Luxury Home Marketing,  
founded by Laurie Moore-Moore

# Preface

**T**his small booklet is intended to be viewed on-line. This means all of the photographs seen here are at 72-dpi...resolution that is acceptable for a computer screen, but not suitable for printing. The low-dpi makes for faster downloads.

What credentials do I have for giving advice about photographs? None whatsoever even though I took every photo used in this report. I know nothing about photographing weddings, pets or babies. Photographing houses is easier—they do not move.

I used to hire a professional photographer, and I have to say I have never met a photographer I did not like. My only frustration was waiting sometimes weeks before they could get to my listing. So, I began to go on each photo shoot with my favorite photographer with the intent that she would teach me how to properly photograph a house. One of the things I learned very quickly was the huge difference having the right camera makes. As agents, we own the wrong kinds of cameras. The right gear—more specifically the right lens—to use is a wide-angle. Da! When she showed me a photo of a living room taken with a regular lens vs. a wide-angle, the difference was startling. In one visual gulp, you can capture an entire room with a wide-angle lens—something that is impossible to do with the kind of camera you own now. Recently, there has been a breakthrough in digital cameras—you can now get a camera (see p. 11) that takes photos like the kind we used to see only in magazines such as *Architectural Digest*. There is no shortage of books about photographs, Photoshop, and cameras—what I could never find was information that boiled all of this down for us—agents who simply need practical advice for getting better photographs for our listings. I hope the information on the following pages helps you.

*-Stan Barron, Austin, Texas  
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# Why good photographs are sooo important

**I**t is impossible for a seller to be objective about his own home. The main drawback is that he knows every inch of that home and all of the aspects that make it fun or special. Listing agents often get drawn into this, too. Why? Because when we go on the listing appointment, we physically walk through and literally “see” the house. But buyers have never seen the seller’s house, nor the countless others that are simultaneously on the market. Buyers formulate opinions about which ones to go see based on the photographs you use in your marketing—newspaper ads, flyers, website, etc. If those photos are just average, the consumer will likely never come see your listing. Moral: Your seller may have the nicest house in town, but if the right buyer never comes to see it no sale will take place.

The sole reason you do any marketing is to make one home stand out from others, and photographs that accurately demonstrate the home increase the chances of attracting the right buyer.

Selling a house is not a real estate function...it is a marketing function, and *pretty photographs sell more houses*. Think about the marketing used for professional products you are exposed to. Have you ever seen a bad photograph (taken with a point-and-shoot-camera) in an ad for a BMW? Of course not. Ever seen a badly composed shot in a cosmetics ad? Never. Good photographs are worth the effort.



**Before**



**After.** This expensive home went from unsold to “sold” as soon as I changed the marketing—primarily the photos.

# The Basics Of Good Photography

*Use a tripod. Keep the camera level. Do not use a flash. Invest in a camera with manual controls*

**A** tripod eliminates camera movement which, in turn, results in sharper photographs. If possible, do not use the shutter button—try a cable release or use the countdown timer.

Using a tripod also helps keep the camera on a level plane. If you have seen, or taken, a photo and noticed that some of the architectural elements seem to be tilting or leaning (see example top of p. 14), it is likely due to the camera not being level. So common is this, there is a name for it—keystoning.

Never use a flash. A flash emits a narrow beam of white-hot light that has a range of about 7-10 feet. Everything in that shallow range is typically overexposed...everything beyond that ten-foot range is usually underexposed (too dark). Flashes are good for taking photos at a birthday party, but not much else. Well-intentioned camera-store salespeople love to sell those bigger flashes that fit on top of your camera (called shoe-mount flashes). The idea is that you can tilt the flash up so it bounces off the ceiling. The trouble is, most expensive houses do not have flat ceilings. Besides, those flashes are not capable of evenly spreading enough light over a room as large as a kitchen or living room. Flashes can also create harsh shadows. It is best to simply use the available natural lighting—very easy, by the way, when you put your camera on a tripod and use a long exposure (see next paragraph).

It is impossible to get usable photographs of a house with a point-and-shoot camera—the kind where everything is automatic (including the flash going off). At a minimum, you must invest in a camera with manual controls—the kind that allows you to control just two factors—how long the shutter stays open and the size of the aperture (the f-stop thing). As a matter of fact, you need only to contend with one of those factors—how long the shutter stays

[cont. on p.8]



Using just the available light in the room, this kitchen photo was taken with the camera on a tripod, and a 4-second exposure at an f-22 setting...everything is nicely in focus. It often helps to shoot diagonally across a room which adds depth and dimension.

open. Every photograph in this report was taken by setting the aperture (the size of the hole that light comes through) at f-22. This setting has a huge benefit for agents: it keeps everything in the shot nicely in focus.

With the aperture set at f-22, all you have to do is figure out how long to leave the shutter open. Many interior shots work well with a three or four-second exposure. That's the great thing about digital—you can take the shot and instantly see it in your viewfinder. If the photo is still too dark, just re-take it leaving the shutter open for five or six seconds...keep changing the time of exposure until it looks right.

### ***Ways to eliminate “yellowish” tints, grainy texture and unwanted blurring***

Before you take an INTERIOR photo, remember to re-set your camera's White Balance. It will likely default to auto-White Balance. Never use this setting for interior photographs (it causes most photos to have a yellow color cast). For all interior shots set the white balance to either Incandescent (what it is called on most Nikon cameras) or Florescent (on Canon cameras). Changing to one of these settings creates a more natural-looking color palette. When you forget to do this (and you will), photos with a yellowish color cast can be quickly corrected in Photoshop (see p. 15).

Here is a final tip for interior photographs of a house: turn on every single light in the house (don't forget to flip on the vent hood light over the kitchen stove and task lighting under kitchen cabinets).

There is no reason you cannot shoot all photos at a 100 ISO. A 100 ISO is likely the default setting anyway, but higher ISO speeds typically create “noise” or grainy-looking photos. If the room doesn't have much available light, just use a tripod, and keep the shutter open longer—15 or 20 seconds is not unusual.

Manual cameras have the option of manual or auto-focusing. Take advantage of the technology—use the auto-focus, and you should not notice any blurring. If you have one of the newer cameras that have Image Stabilization, *turn it off* when using a tripod.



When taking a photo of a home's exterior, keep the sun at your back. You can seldom get a good front elevation photo once the sun is directly above or behind the house. When you go on the listing appointment, make a mental note of which direction the house faces. If, for example, the house faces east, start taking photographs at about 11 am. You can do the facade first, while it catches the morning light. Take interior photographs next while the sun is overhead—advantageous because you get no harsh light coming in through the windows. By the time you are ready to get backyard shots, the sunlight should be just right to brightly illuminate the terrace, pool, etc.



**Before.** Photo taken in the horizontal mode



**After.** This is a much more compelling angle—taken in the vertical mode by simply turning the camera 90-degrees counterclockwise.

# A breakthrough in camera technology

**I**t cannot be said frequently enough: in order to take excellent photographs of houses you must use a camera with a wide-angle lens. Keep in mind that for agents, the smaller the number on the lens...the better for us. For example, a 20mm lens is far superior to a camera with a 35mm lens. The lower the number the bigger the field of view.

As wonderful as digital cameras are, they are first-generation technology, and they all have a built-in drawback. No use going into a lot of boring detail on this, but here is a quick summary. Present-day digital cameras *magnify* the lens, and there is nothing you can do about it. Magnifying a lens creates a zooming-in effect—the opposite of what we need as agents. It has to do with the kind of sensor in the current day digital cameras.

Recently, there has been a huge breakthrough in digital camera technology. There is an entirely new category of digital cameras called “full sensor” SLRs. For the first time ever, a camera can now include a “full sensor”. If you want the maximum potential of a wide-angle lens, it must be used on one of these new “full sensor” cameras.

Canon and Nikon make a “full sensor” camera. These cameras are not cheap, but all you have to do is make one extra sale, and your investment has paid off. These cameras are sold as the body only—you must buy the lens separately.

**Note:** Every photo in this report was taken with Canon’s “full sensor” camera, the Canon 5D. The lens is an ultra wide-angle Canon EF 16-36 mm f/2.8L USM. The main “number” to note on that lens is the “16”, a very wide-angle lens that is perfect for taking interior photographs. This lens also has built-in technology that automatically corrects distortion so you don’t get “fish-eye” or bending-at-the-corners effects. Nikon’s “full sensor” camera is called the D3 (it is about twice the price of the Canon model).

**Before.** Taken with a 35mm lens



**After.** Taken from the exact same spot in the room...with one of the new "full sensor" cameras and a 16mm lens. Wow!, what a difference. Upscale homes have bigger rooms and interesting architecture, and this new kind of camera technology beautifully captures the drama. Compare the before and after shots—which one do you think results in more showings?

# Attention Women: Here is why you should never compare yourself to Victoria's Secret models

**T**hink about this for a moment. Have you ever seen—in person—a woman who looks as good as the models featured on magazine covers or in lingerie catalogs? Never, right? You know why? Because *these women exist only in Photoshop*.

Trust me, if you were on an elevator and a Victoria's Secret model walked on, you would not give her a second look. The transformation of these women is the handiwork of Photoshop. Cleavage is added. Fake abs are airbrushed in. Legs are lengthened. Skin blemishes are removed. Waistlines are trimmed. Lips are plumped up. Eyes and teeth are whitened. And did I mention that lots of cleavage is added?

Even if you get nothing useful from this booklet on the topic of photographs, you can walk away with the confidence that you should never again let a magazine cover make you feel inadequate. (I am a card-carrying promoter of the life philosophy of “acceptance”.)

Okay, now that I have that out of my system, let me serve up some of the miraculous things Photoshop can do for real estate agents. I am writing this section under the theory that you do not presently own Photoshop. Even if you do, you may find some of the “quick fixes” discussed here very useful.

Make no mistake, Photoshop (made by Adobe, the latest version is CS3) has a steep learning curve. Here is how I got comfortable using the software. I hired someone to come to my office to teach me the basics.

Consider finding an expert in your area. You might try your local Craigslist. Don't be alarmed by the person who shows up at your office. Likely, you will be a bit surprised at how young this person is...you will probably have someone who walks in your office listening to an iPod, sporting tattoos, a nose ring and a pierced tongue...and I am just talking about the women!

[cont. on p.15]



**Before.** Appears to be tilting, called keystoneing



**After.** In the "Before" shot above notice how the architectural elements (especially the bookshelves) appear to pinch inward. This occurs when you inadvertently tilt the camera down...something that tall people do all the time (not exactly my problem if you have seen me in person). In any event, the "After" shot shows no such tilting because the camera was level. So common is this problem, Photoshop has a filter to fix it (found by going to Filter+Distort+Lens Correction).

Photoshop used to require lots of manual tweaking, but the last two versions include some new auto-correction features, and these new updates alone make Photoshop worth the price. Below, is a quick summary...

**Auto Color:** Interior photos (especially kitchen shots) have a tendency to be yellowish. Once you have opened the photo in Photoshop you can find this auto correction step by looking across Photoshop's menu bar and going to *Image+Adjustments+Auto Color*. You will instantly see the effect on your photo. It often works miracles.

If you want to try a method that gives you more control, go to *Image+Adjustments+Hue/Saturation*. This brings up a box with a couple of slider controls. Use the slider that says "*Saturation*", and move it to the left. As you do, you will see the changes instantly. Keep moving the slider back and forth until you like how the photo looks.

**Shadow/Highlight:** This feature has been in the last two versions of Photoshop, and it may be the single most helpful adjustment for an agent. Real estate photographs can be difficult because of multiple lighting issues—you may take a photo of a home's exterior, but because the trees and landscaping are in the shade, these dark areas lose all detail. The same can happen with an interior shot—one area is well-exposed but other areas are too dark. Pull up one of these exposure-challenged photos in Photoshop. To find this auto-correction miracle, go to *Image+Adjustment+Shadow/Highlight*. This does two things: 1) It automatically corrects the photo. This remarkable little feature leaves the correctly exposed areas alone, and lightens (or darkens) the areas that need adjustment. The result is normally a much brighter photograph with even lighting. 2) It simultaneously brings up the *Shadow/Highlight* box. This box has a number of slider controls that you can manually adjust if you like.

**How to sharpen photographs:** Make all adjustments to your photo first (such as those mentioned above). Do the sharpening as the last step. In Photoshop go across the menu bar to *Filter+Sharpen*. This gives you a set of choices, (*Sharpen, Sharpen Edges, Sharpen More, Smart Sharpen and Unsharp Mask*). Believe it or not, the

choice you want is the one that says “*Unsharp Mask*” (Oh, I know what you are thinking, ‘Unsharp Mask’ can’t possibly be right, but it is).

When you go to *Unsharp Mask*, it brings up a box with three choices. Try these settings, *Amount: 80, Radius: 1, Threshold: 4*. You can also move these sliders around for greater or lesser amounts of sharpening. (Note: in the latest version of Photoshop, the new setting, *Smart Sharpen* can be very helpful for photos that need a lot of sharpening).

Some final thoughts about Photoshop. There are some really quick fixes for all kinds of things that are beneficial for real estate photographs. This is why it is so helpful to find a local person who can sit down with you at the computer to demonstrate how to correct certain kinds of photos. For example, you can add clouds to a cloudless sky. If you take on a listing in the off-season, the yard will likely be brown—in about ten seconds in Photoshop, you can make the grass “turn” green. Photos that have a flat tone to them can be brightened instantly. You can put a feathered edge around photos, etc, etc.

If you want to get the most helpful and detailed books on the subject of Photoshop, the best are written by **Scott Kelby**. His books are *well illustrated with clearly written steps you can follow*. His latest is called The Adobe Photoshop CS3 Book for Digital Photographers. His previous book, The Adobe Photoshop CS2 Book for Digital Photographers, may be the best book ever written for Photoshop users—it was packed with useful and practical tips. For about \$100 a year, you can join the National Association of Photoshop Professionals (Kelby is the founder). Not only does this get you a regular magazine subscription to Photoshop Magazine, but you can email questions to the staff, and they *actually* respond. For example, you can send them a question such as, “How do I remove an overcast sky and replace it with one that is bright blue?” Every time I have sent a question like this, they send back a series of steps I can follow to pull off the effect. Their website is [www.photoshopper.com](http://www.photoshopper.com)





**Before.** Using a tripod, take two identical photos, with different exposures and combine them into one shot.



**After.** This is one of Photoshop's most powerful uses—to combine two photos into one. This is especially important when you need to show any kind of interesting view through a window, be it the ocean or a garden. No camera can capture extreme light and dark areas in one shot. In the top left photo, the exposure is good for showing the ocean view, but the room is too dark. The top right photo is correctly exposed for the interior, but the incredible ocean view is "blown out". The solution is to combine the best of both shots. Wow oh wow!



**Before.** Most photos are helped dramatically by simply cropping them properly



**After.** In the photo top left, the house seems to be "lost". It is emphasized correctly here by cropping out the excess sky, and the other house. Add a soft border for the final effect, and you end up with a usable exterior photograph

# A New Way To Get Inexpensive Aerial Photos

## *(Rent a boom truck)*

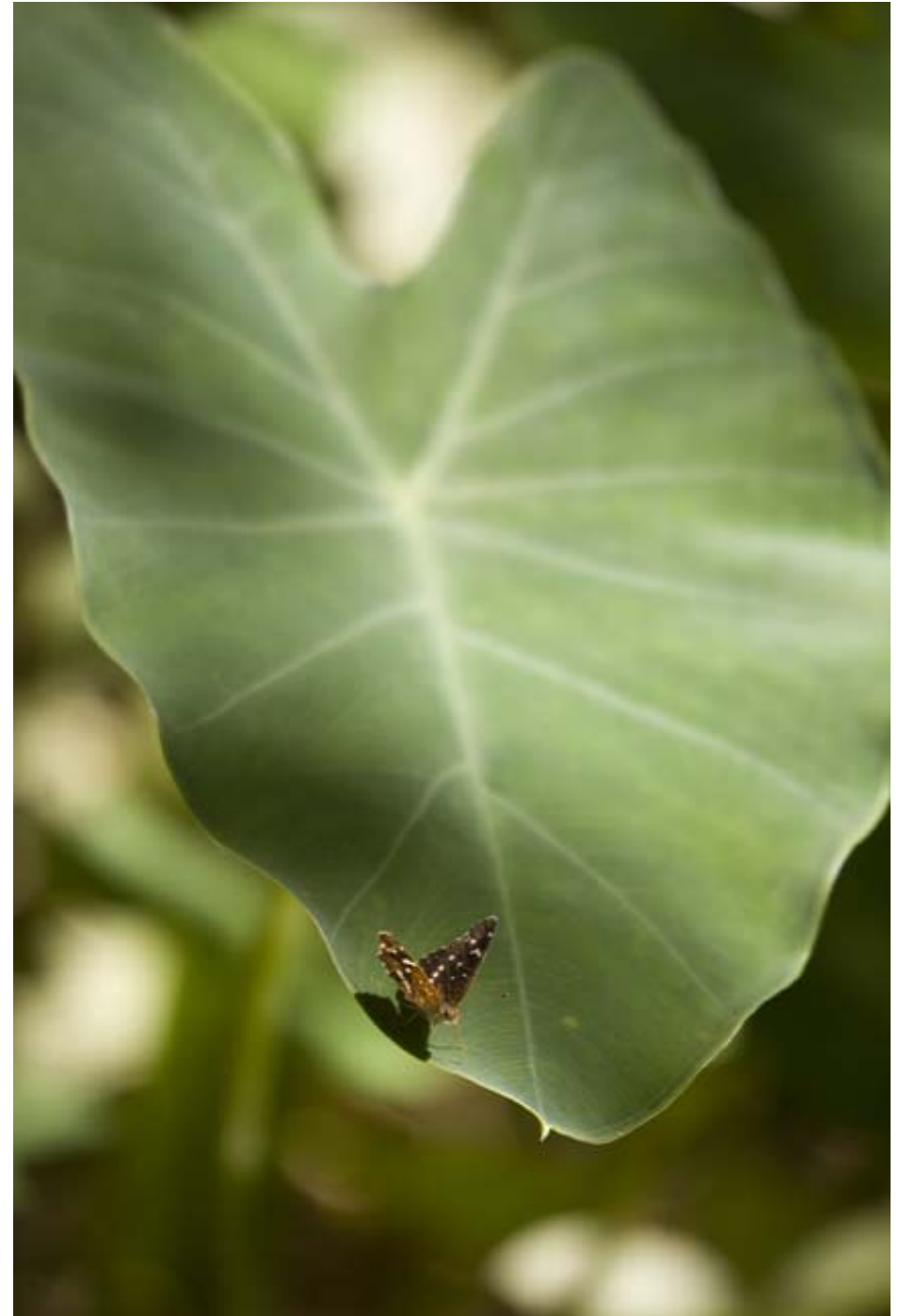
**A**erial photos are expensive (about \$1,500-\$2000), and you often have to wait weeks to get on the pilot's schedule. These photos are often kind of "fuzzy" due to the vibration of the plane or helicopter. Here is a fast way to get inexpensive, hi-resolution low-level photographs. Look in the yellow pages or search on-line for a company in your area where you can rent—by the hour—a truck called a cherry picker or boom truck. The driver wheels up in front of your listing. You, or your photographer hop in that little box and up you go. You can get up to the level of a five or six-story building. If you are afraid of heights...send your assistant. The cost is about \$150 to \$200.



They are called boom trucks or cherry pickers—a great platform for a photo



With a boom truck, you can get up to the level of a five or six-story building.



Don't forget to use photos to "sell" amenities in the immediate area. Incoming buyers seldom know about these benefits. These shots are from a Zen-like hike-and-bike trail that was walking distance from the seller's house.

## Some closing thoughts...

**H**opefully, this information will help you produce professional-caliber photographs worthy of a luxury residence. Getting excellent photos is a little more time-consuming, but it is definitely worth the effort. You will sell more properties, and you can use this skill to get more listings.

Remember the basics. Invest in the right camera and lens. Pay attention to factors such as lighting conditions and camera angle. Use photo-imaging software for the finishing details. Don't be afraid to get some hands-on guidance from an expert such as a photographer or Photoshop guru. Be creative and have some fun.

*Good luck*



## Stan Barron's bio...

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**P**rior to starting his real estate company, Stan received some very fortunate training from the advertising industry. His primary mentor was the legendary David Ogilvy, the founder of the Madison Avenue ad agency Ogilvy and Mather. Ogilvy handled accounts for corporations such as Mercedes-Benz, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Sears and Ford.

When Barron started his real estate company, he was the first agent to apply proven advertising concepts to the sale of a house. He does not use “flyers”. Instead, he uses story ads—ads that sell by telling an interesting story about a home.

Barron has written articles for the National Association of Homebuilders, Design-Build Magazine, and he has been a keynote speaker for Laurie Moore-Moore's company, the Institute for Luxury Home Marketing. In 2007, he was also invited to be a panel speaker at the annual meeting of the National Association of Realtors® in Las Vegas.

He wrote this booklet on photography for the members of the Institute for Luxury Home Marketing—an organization that trains, and certifies, real estate agents in how to sell luxury homes. Real estate agents who have this certification are few and far between—it is the rarest of all real estate designations—held by fewer than one-third of one percent of agents in North America.

*Stan Barron works in Austin, Texas. His office address is 8500 Mopac, 808 Austin, TX 78759. If you would like to have Barron do a workshop or speak to your group, please contact Laurie Moore-Moore at the Institute For Luxury Home Marketing at 214.485-3000.*