



Learning from the experts:

Chris shooting the Exbury Egg for *Amazing Spaces*

How to shoot architecture and property shows

In the latest in our series 'Learning from the experts', **Laura Jeacocke** has been talking to two DoPs who specialise in shooting architecture and property shows, **Chris Smith** and **Tony Etwell**. Both Chris and Tony have a wide variety of interesting tips and advice to give on how best to reveal both the buildings and the stories behind them.

Career foundations

Architectural shooting is such a niche specialism that it is interesting to hear how people achieved the goal of working in this field. Neither Chris nor Tony's original ambition was to film buildings (although Tony wanted to design them) – instead, Chris studied for a Drama and Arts degree, soon finding himself sailing up and down the Caribbean shooting promotional videos for Carnival Cruise Lines. He then wound up at Rapture TV for a couple of years filming clubbing hotspots ("Filming in a dark, cramped and noisy nightclub, where communication is impossible, is pretty good training!"), before going freelance and landing a job on *George Clarke's Amazing Spaces*.

Tony, on the other hand, joined the Ogilvy and Mather advertising agency, learning the art of photography and subsequently heading up their studio/video department after just 2 years. Soon after that, he joined Thames TV as a Technical Trainee, "learning not only sound, lighting, editing etc., but also how to paint, rewire and plumb – in fact, all the essentials for moving up the property ladder!" At Thames he shot *The Bill*, both as staff and freelance, before deciding to switch over to children's documentary/reality shows (e.g. *Wise Up*) and finally focusing solely on architecture through shows like *Grand Designs*.

Digging your way in

When I asked the two of them about ways into the industry nowadays, Tony sighed. "There's next to no training and if we don't find a way of helping talented young camera ops we could end up losing them – the only way to keep the consistency of quality is to pass down what we know." Chris also comments on a "worrying trend where directors/producers are also cameramen" and how "they're focused on the story not the pictures like us. They're given a camera but many of them aren't technical and don't know what they're doing with it." He explains: "There's a false economy on half of productions to substitute experienced camera ops with directors/producers and it needs to stop."

They did have some valuable advice for new entrants though. Chris recommends shooting stills as a great entry point as it gives you "a sensibility for how to capture and sell the story of the building". He tells me how "learning to shoot is like being a musician; it takes years to develop your eye and there's no shortcut to experience". For architecture, they say, it is useful to learn a little about it – at least to "understand the difference between modernism, art deco and Arts & Crafts. If you understand how a building is constructed from groundworks to finishings, it will inevitably help you out."

More generally, Tony advises seeking out "shows you can have fun on and with variety". Also key is to "make sure you leave a good impression – and don't underestimate the importance of taking an interest in the people you're working with". They both recommend having "a diverse range of skills", so in the worst case you can still pay the bills. But, most importantly, they say "give yourself some credit for getting any opportunities" and "just be really positive". Tony comments: "Your success is guaranteed as long as you're determined enough... It will happen if you put the hard work in – call people, be proactive and, once the ball is rolling, work makes work, and contacts make contacts."

following "the dialogue rather than the content". Instead you should "try to read the emotion of the situation and use it to your advantage". He also mentions that you "shouldn't panic as an operator". If you miss something key, "make a log of it and get a cutaway later". Also, "an understanding of the edit is vital".

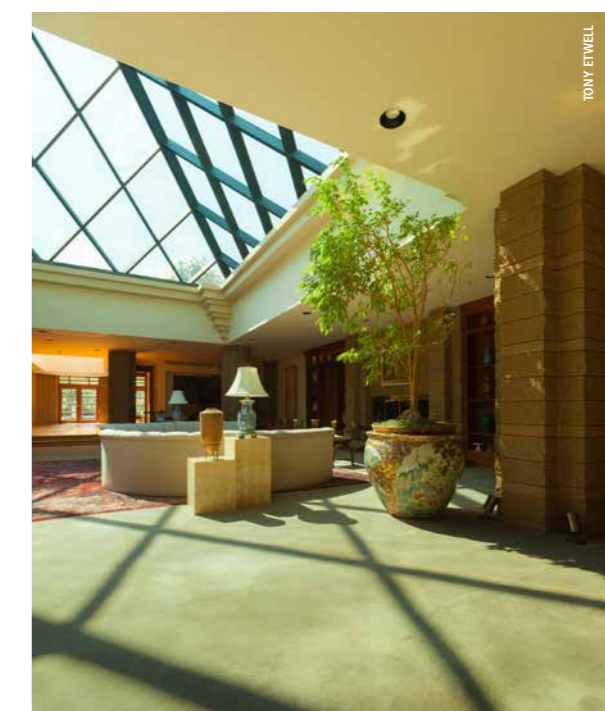
The quality of light is crucial too: "You want to show architecture off at its best and natural light is important for that... Find time to get those shots, even if it means staying longer for the golden hour." The *Grand Designs* finals are shot over two days, with the first taken up by interviews and the second for the beauty shots, but Tony explains how this can cause problems in terms of continuity. For instance, if it's cloudy on day one, he'll find an area that's slightly overexposed/where he can put a light in to shape the background, hinting that the sun's out, so if it's sunny on day two it will match. He also mentions that "lots of people wrongly use HMIs to lift the light levels but in a way that creates bright spots on



Shooting architecture

Shooting property programmes to reveal both the visuals of the building and the narrative of the show in the best way possible can seem daunting, so I asked the experts for any specific techniques when setting out to achieve this.

Tony says the most important thing when shooting actuality is simply to listen. This is "almost more important than the camerawork itself... It's not just about architecture but about the human story behind it" and content is key. "If you listen carefully you pan intelligently!" But he also cautions against



Top and left: Chris shooting Polecam shots of a futuristic house at Lake Lugano (top) and a tree house (left) for *George Clarke's Amazing Spaces*. Right: *Grand Designs* – making the most of the natural light for a dramatic effect

the ceiling”, whereas he “uses HMs as the sun, in order to create shape in the background and add drama to a scene... HMs should be used to create structural shape, almost like drama lighting, rather than just to lift the light levels which can be done with a soft... Try to use your lighting to create mood and emotion, and let the location be the inspiration for your shots and then paint them with light.” Chris also adds: “Never stand people in front of windows and never silhouette people with backlights.” Overall, his mantra is “the simpler the better”.

Tony shares a tip for shooting long handheld shots: “Make sure part of the body cuts through the frame and the actor can move freely; this means your frame will disguise any shakiness as it is constantly moving.” He also explains how he will misframe initially to make sure the verticals are straight and then crop in.

On capturing the essence of the building, Chris explains how “geometric lines naturally instigate a tilt up” and movement should be “inspired by the building”. Symmetry is also crucial to shooting architecture as it can reflect the power and stature of a building, so “find the optimum position and composition to capture that”.

They both mention the importance of foreground. “There are focal points in architecture that draw the eye in; work with the scenery to flaunt that.” It can also be used to show scale, primarily through pulling focus. For example: “To show off dropped ferns in concrete slabs, you might pull focus between the beautiful fern imprints and the house... In this way you’re adding beauty to the concrete and also showing scale, all in one shot.”

Chris says: “Every building has a story about how it functions – illustrate that and hone in on the details,” adding “The nature of architecture is static and immovable, so try to add movement and variety of shots, otherwise it can get very dry... if you give the camera a dynamic movement it creates dynamic visuals.” Tony agrees: “Look to be clever... force the edit by doing a slow pull focus so they can’t cut. This gives the viewer a chance to properly take in the building and that’s what the architect wants. TV tends to want fast cutting but architects just want to show off the building!” Also, try to “shoot it from an unusual angle, not just straight on. Study the form and structure of the architecture and show how it’s built with your shots. Fill in those editorial gaps.” Tony says that he is always looking to “explain the architect’s theory and technique, to tell their story”. He adds: “Lazy operators just put the camera at a convenient height, but you have to get your knees muddy – if a structural beam is low down, then your camera has to match that.” You should always “follow the rules... but then break them as quickly as you can” as this gives the audience “an individual interpretation”.

They both emphasise how all “cutaways should have a clear meaning”; for example, on a structural beam the bolt is the reason the building is in place, so “pull focus between that bolt and the construction to make it obvious”. Tony explains how he will look to establish this basic sequence: “a wide first, then a ‘bridging’ shot like a hammer coming into frame, followed by a progress wide, then a close-up, e.g. the nails entering a wall, and end on another wide to show the final result”. He adds: “Always observe the build – you want to give the editor something extra to tell that others haven’t noticed.”

He also recommends walking around the site first to build a strategy. “Where will the wide be and where will the presenter walk?” However, as much as possible, he likes to let the presenter lead and he will follow: “Don’t constrain them!” Chris then highlights the importance of “retreading all the presenter’s routes as POV shots” – but with a cautionary note to be aware of the direction of travel: “For the edit, make sure they’re walking the same way and always be aware of the line and direction of travel.”

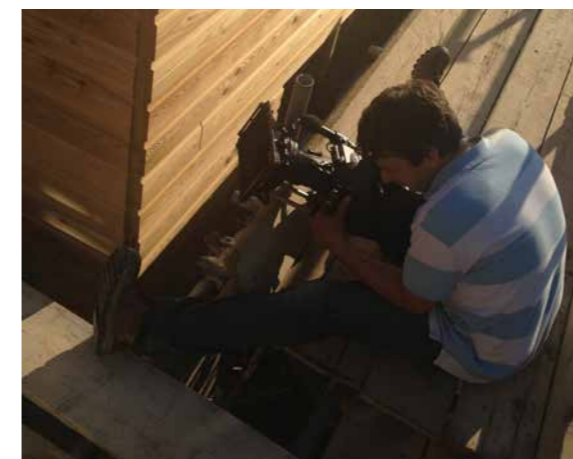
Tony concludes that: “A good lunch is really important for the inspiration too... oh, and a double espresso!”

Signature shots

Most shows/genres nowadays have a recognisable shooting style/familiar shots that audiences can associate with the show, so I asked the experts what this would be for architectural shows they have worked on. The first thing both Chris and Tony mentioned was the use of tracking shots, both “for beauty, or as an entrance into a space”.

Tony added that he frequently uses macro “to show texture and the finest detail of a building in order to give it an emotive”, for example, a close-up of brickwork where you can see the grain and grit. Chris said his favourite shot on the *Amazing Spaces* series is an end piece to camera (PTC) done on the main camera, but then, on a cut, the presenter turns and talks to a drone which then pulls out, revealing the build one last time.

“Don’t frame conventionally all the way through,” Tony contributes, as “it can get very boring”. Instead, he likes to “mix up the pace/shots; it’s all about the feel, and that feel comes back to listening”. He adds that he is probably better known for this on *Grand Designs* than for any particular shot.



Tony is always looking for the optimum, often unusual, viewpoint: “Lazy operators just put the camera at a convenient height, but you have to get your knees muddy”

From tripods to tracks and drones

Property shows have graced our TV screens for decades now, occupying both daytime and primetime slots, from *Homes Under the Hammer* to *Location, Location, Location*, *Grand Designs* and *George Clarke’s Amazing Spaces*... but has the filming of architecture evolved over time?

Chris feels that over the years productions have begun to put more “care and consideration into making the building look amazing at the reveal”. He mentions how they tend now to “work in natural light a lot more and, unlike the earlier years, often just with available light”. Also, the technology has advanced: “The availability of drones is much more common now and practically irreplaceable on sets.”

Tony mentions how *Grand Designs* has evolved over time. They now, for instance, cross-shoot chats to get full coverage and content (‘noddies’ being one of his pet hates!). Also, the show has “developed a superb pace and rhythm, giving meaning to tracks and shots... There have been several key people who have contributed to its ‘look’ and style over the years and it’s been great to be a part of forming that.”

Shooting without intruding

As you can imagine, building sites are dangerous places, with exposed nails, precarious scaffolding and loose planks providing potential hazards. They both explain how Health & Safety is a constant and essential consideration, with the indisputable need for “adequate safety gear, such as hard hats, high vis, steel-toe cap boots, etc.” Never underestimate

a building site they say: “Make sure you scout the location first, check the grounds and make sure the construction people are doing it the right way as well.” However, at the same time, “a minimal presence is crucial”. Chris explains that most of the shooting is “done on the shoulder, with only establishing shots and CUs on the tripod”. Tony agrees, mentioning the importance of “fast forward planning and trying to do it in one take. Not only does this give a morale boost, but also means you have a lower presence on the site.” It’s also best to light each shot individually – “make it lightweight and mobile, daisy-chain around the space, with minimum kit, minimum impact”.

Because these are actual building sites you’re working in, things can get very dirty, particularly kit, so Tony highly recommends protecting the camera. “Always use a polariser: not only does it provide a nice saturated picture and control reflections/contrast (namely the shine on the lovely presenter’s head!); most importantly, it also protects the lens.” He’s been through about eight polarisers so far – but remember “a lens is a lot more expensive than a filter!” As always when it comes to shooting TV, “There’s intense time pressure and you mustn’t let yourself be hurried into doing something that’s going to be dangerous.” They mention how “everybody looks out for each other on set” and nobody takes safety lightly.

Highs and lows

Every operator has key memories from their career, both good and bad – from travelling the globe to shooting off rickety scaffolding. I asked the experts what theirs were. Tony’s particular highlights include being the only person to record the shuttle launch handheld and having to whip pan during the countdown between a child presenter and the shuttle take-off, keeping in focus all the time. Also, while travelling for *Grand Designs* through North America, finding outrageous things like planes parked inside houses, plus seeing the original Lichtenstein painting of Marilyn Monroe are standouts. “Through architecture shows you get to see so much that others don’t; some of these people are so wealthy



Chris shooting Sky Sphere for *Amazing Spaces*



Chris sharing a joke on *George Clarke’s Amazing Spaces*



A career highlight for Chris: filming in Whistler Ice Cave – nature's architecture

you get to see the very best houses and hidden art collections. It's completely unique." Particularly bad experiences include "leaving a build when you've missed the light" and having a camera stolen on a shoot without loan insurance. But he says "When you get it right, being a part of someone's dream and living it with them is very inspirational." His main aim now is to design and build his own house ('BIY', as Kevin McCloud, the *Grand Designs* presenter, calls it).

Chris's highlight is shooting 250m under a glacier for a Christmas special in Canada, when the guide noticed that a particular chamber had opened up that no one had ever been into. Inside was "fantastic ambient lighting with blue streaming through – nature's architecture!" Also for *Amazing Spaces*, they shot a climber's refuge in Italy, 2500m up. They had three hours to shoot the whole thing and were "drinking beers in the sunshine by lunchtime". However, shooting in small spaces can present challenges; it "limits your creativity to a certain extent" and can sometimes create "horrible conditions", for example, shooting in a tiny bullet-like escape pod on the hottest day with no windows, like "a very cramped sauna". Chris is also, like many of us, "fed up with the M1"!

Kit wishlist

When it comes to kit, the never-ending question about whether to buy or rent still reigns supreme, and Tony and Chris have different takes on this. While Chris owns all his kit (primarily using a Sony F55), Tony owns ancillary equipment but always hires the main items like the camera, lens and lamps etc. His reasoning for this is that "every shoot is different and requires different things", so "owning and constantly buying lots of kit simply isn't economical", plus it allows diversity in which cameras he can use.

While baby legs are "vital for getting the right architectural angles" and "sticky tripod heads are your worst enemy", most operators will agree the weight of kit is still a predominant issue. "Holding a shot for a 40-minute chat can become unbearable – you end up concentrating on the pain instead of the shot." At the moment, neither Tony nor Chris use rigs due to time pressures; however, they're both seriously considering Ready Rigs as so many operators nowadays suffer from back problems. They can also make "travelling through

spaces visually stunning". Alongside this, Chris finds a lot of camera setups sit "very front-heavy" due to the size of the lenses (e.g. the Canon CN7, which weighs around 3kg), so a "lighter faster zoom" would be very welcome.

Tony also mentions that shooting in 4K, or even 6K, is particularly well-suited to property shows as it gives "the ability to crop shots, assisting in getting the right architectural framing".

Final tips

As every camera operator knows, it's a strenuous and tiring job, and one that requires large amounts of self-care. Chris says it's crucial to "keep a reasonable level of fitness – and your core is the most important as it supports your back... Listen to your body and don't push through pain." They tell me: "There's no point being a hero because at the end of day we'll all need to be working long into our retirement." Always be mindful of lifting techniques and remember to "use your knees, not your back". Chris tells me how he'll get massages on days off and that once every six months he'll see an osteopath: "Invest in yourself – your body is your tool."

When it comes to the ever-growing repertoires of camera ops, I asked if there are any particular tools or skills that would be particularly useful for property shooting. Chris says a drone licence is "a massive plus" as it can transform a sequence and up the production value. "You'll stand head and shoulders above the competition if you can do that." Tony adds that "having a familiarity with the subject is a better tool than any – know the subject and, more importantly, have a passionate interest in it".

Fact File

Chris Smith works regularly on architectural shows, including *George Clarke's Amazing Spaces* and *Ugly House to Lovely House* for Channel 4. A licensed drone pilot, he also operates a Polecam, and has been lucky enough to travel widely over the years. Chris is based in North London.

See more about Chris: www.chrissmithdop.tv
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GTC member **Tony Etwell** is best known for working with the *Grand Designs* team, and can normally be found kneeling in a muddy puddle, performing yoga or climbing a tree to find

an interesting angle to film from. If he hadn't been lured from photography into television, he would have become an architect, so in photographing architecture and design, he's got the perfect mix. Winning a GTC Award for Excellence for his work on *Grand Designs* was "extremely special" to him.

One day, he will update his website www.antonyetwell.com to properly showcase his work... oh, and write/photograph a book on the right way to build... once he's finished his chores at home!



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