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Photographing the State Capitols: A Sample Book Review

There are many factors to consider when photographing state capitols, or any other monumental structure, for that matter, according to Jim Stembridge. In early 2010, Stembridge had just completed photographs of the Hawaii capitol building in Honolulu, his 50th state capitol.

“Most of the capitols are covered with marble or sandstone rock, with lots of architectural detail,” Stembridge says, “so the best photographs are going to be early-morning or late-afternoon low-angle soft lighting.”

One of the basic concerns, Stembridge says, is the direction the building faces. If the capitol faces west, like Vermont’s or California’s, afternoons are best in any season of the year. For east-facing structures, like Illinois, Arkansas, and New York, mornings are better in any season.

South-facing and north-facing buildings, however, present difficulties. To get low-angle soft lighting on buildings that face south, like Utah, Massachusetts, and Texas, winter mornings and afternoons are best. “When you arrive on a bright and early summer morning, you will have the sun rising to the side and slightly behind the building,” Stembridge points out. “By the time sun reaches the face, it is at a high angle, casting big, deep shadows.”

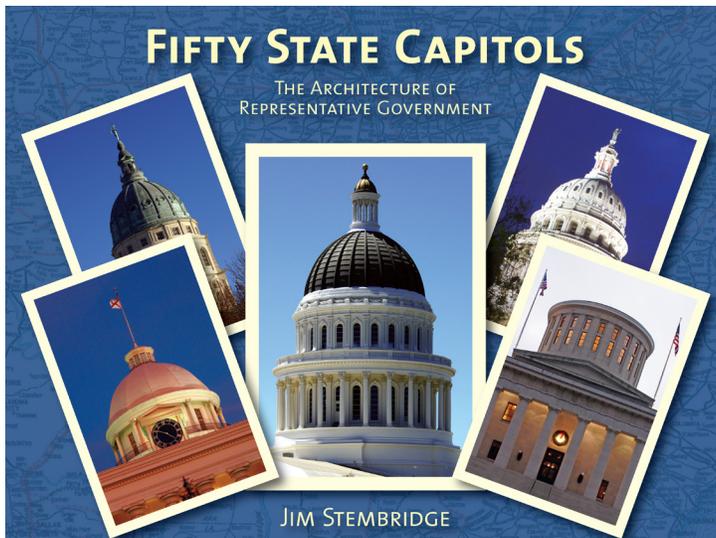
North-facing buildings, on the other hand, are best in late spring or early summer, morning or evening, when the sun rises to the side at an exquisite angle for illuminating the front façade. The fronts of these buildings, including Oregon, Montana, Nebraska, Kentucky, and South Carolina, are in shadow all winter.

Of course, today’s digital images can be easily altered, so lighting need not be the over-riding concern. Many a beautiful picture can be had on cloudy days or as the building’s external lights emerge, when the photographer’s main obstacle—heavy dark shadow—can be avoided.

Other difficulties for photographers can be large trees that block views, as in Nevada and Michigan; tight urban settings, as in Ohio, Indiana, and New Jersey; and repair work. In the cases of Idaho and Utah, which were closed for renovations in 2007 on his first visits, Stembridge had to return in 2010. For Michigan, Stembridge arrived in winter, and took advantage of a nearby parking structure to get above the vegetation. (Parking structures are also convenient to the capitols in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and California.) “Delivery vans that pull up right in front can also spoil the view,” Stembridge says. “All you can do is wait.”

Stembridge’s best efforts are on display in his new book, **Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government** (Coho Publishing, ISBN 978-0-9830292-0-5, 128 pages trade paperback, \$27.95 list price).

“I developed a preference for early mornings in the late fall,” Stembridge says, “with low sun illumination, fall colors as the backdrop, few cars in the parking strips, and no delivery vans!”



Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government

by Jim Stembridge

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276 color photographs by the author

Glossary, index, and references

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