Interview

DAN ALKA NOT ONLY ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

This time I bring you an interview with a photographer whose precise and consistent approach to working with images has impressed me a lot. His perfectionism manifests itself not only in his architectural and portrait work but also in the INSTATRIO.com project, of which he is the creator.

RUDOLF STAHLICH Editor-in-chief | All photos by DAN ALKA
DANALKA.com, INSTATRIO.com, instagram.com/danalka_com

↑Frank Gehry: Dancing House. Prague, Czechia. Self-portrait. I am wearing special off-road skates that have three huge 15-cm inflatable wheels. I take them everywhere with me. I use them to scout locations. It's a very efficient and fast mode of transport. I can get practically everywhere with them, even in the woods and on rough terrain.

Dan, it's nice to meet you. I'll start our conversation rather untypically: How is it possible that you have so many beautiful portraits of people that I admire in your portfolio? Oliviero Toscani, Frank Gehry and others... I was under the impression that architecture was your domain.
Meeting architects and artists and taking their portraits, ideally in their studios or workshops, or together with any of their creations, is a big passion of mine, similar to taking photos of architecture.

I worked for **Oliviero Toscani**, the renowned Italian photographer and creator of ads for the world's most famous brands and magazines, who is world famous for his controversial ad campaigns for the Italian company **Benetton**, for over two years and learned a great deal from him. We often shot at Superstudio 13, a legendary complex of thirteen high-end photo studios in Milan, using tons of artificial lighting with a team of several people photographing top models and celebrities. On the other hand, for Oliviero's personal project **Razza Umana***, we have photographed "ordinary" passers-by in front of a white sheet of seamless paper on the streets all over Europe. It was very minimalistic, fast photography with natural lighting.

← **I photographed Frank Gehry's portrait in his extensive studio** (the former BMW operations center) **in Los Angeles, in front of a model of his already completed** (June 2021) **project Luma Arles (**an arts center in Arles, France**). At 93, he is astonishingly active and incredibly hard-working: his colleagues told me that he is the first to arrive at the studio and the last to leave. In parallel, he is working on about thirty buildings/projects around the world in various stages of development.**

***Razza Umana** - The Human Race*

This is a socio-political, cultural and anthropological study. We photograph the morphologies of human beings, we want to show what we are like, what our faces are like, and what the differences between us are. We take somatic imprints and capture the faces of humanity." Oliviero Toscani

Frank Gehry is one of my many favourite architects. I have been photographing his buildings all over the world and I have photographed all his buildings in Europe, a total of 25. This mammoth photo project is just a small part of my main, much larger online multimedia web project that presents **carefully selected "MUST-SEE" places around** the world through the most beautiful photographs. The beta/test version of this project is already available at **INSTATRIO.com**

*Frank Gehry is the recipient of the prestigious **Pritzker Architecture Prize** and is widely recognized as one of the world's finest architects. A number of projects have turned the world's perception of architecture on its head. His creations are listed among the most important buildings of our time. Some of his most famous works include the **Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao**, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris, and the Dancing House in Prague.*

***Guggenheim Museum** opened to the public in 1997, the building was immediately hailed as one of the world's most spectacular buildings and a 20th-century masterpiece. Architect Philip Johnson described it as "the greatest building of our time." The museum attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists every year and boosts the city's economy to such an extent that so-called "**Bilbao effect**" is now essentially*
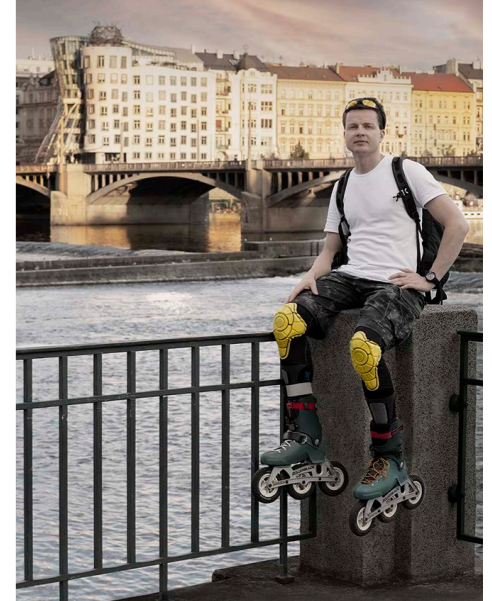
a terminus technicus. It refers to the positive social and economic effects of cultural investment.
*One of the Guggenheim's most striking features is its outer fabric and design, made of **30,000 titanium plates**. This material was carefully and intentionally selected, especially for its behaviour under changes in weather and light conditions, such as the change in color and shade and its overall effect of plasticity. I have actually printed some of my photos from the Guggenheim series on brushed aluminium and was thus able to emphasize the behaviour of the titanium, getting effective photographs that are very close to the actual visual reality of the building.*

What did you learn from Oliviero Toscani?
truly a great deal! There hasn't been a day when I didn't learn something. He is a vast mine of knowledge and experience. He has been surrounded by photography every day since he was born, being the son of prominent photojournalist Fedele Toscani. His sister Marirosa is also a prominent design and product photographer.
Oliviero has friends among artists and photographers from all over the world and it was also very enriching meeting them.

↓ I took this portrait of Oliviero Toscani in the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. The two-meter print hangs in his studio in Tuscany and is his wife's favourite portrait.

→ Dolní Vítkovice in Ostrava (Czechia), which I documented before it was radically altered in the name of safe mass tourism.

I've attended countless meetings and brainstorming sessions with Oliviero and his clients. Interestingly, Oliviero never works with middlemen or marketing agencies. He thinks up and discusses the whole concept of campaigns directly with business owners or magazine editors. I also had access to his huge photo and video archive, which I helped sort, digitize, archive, and edit, while also assisting him with shooting and post-production work.

Oliviero Toscani is a perfectionist. His recurrent motto is **"No detail is too small."** I fully identify with the premise, as I believe that perfectionism is etched in my DNA.

But let's go back a little further, to your photographic beginnings. How did you start with photography, and when and why did the genres you shoot crystallise in you?
I don't believe there is a single tipping point. My beginnings and eventual development are due to a combination of several factors and events, of which I will mention three:

1. I spent my childhood in Ostrava, an industrial city in Czechia, where my favourite "playgrounds" were the cities' abandoned, darkened and falling-apart factories, where I roamed and explored. It was necessary to constantly monitor the space and concentrate on the slightest details of the dangerous area: rusty stairs, collapsed floors, asbestos, wires hanging from the ceilings, loose bricks. I also had to observe the little activity that went on, such as a watchman letting his dog loose.

2. When I lived in Germany, my greatest friend was an avid collector of luxury watches: Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet, Vacheron Constantin, Blancpain, Jaeger-LeCoultre, etc. He was obsessed with them. Being a leading IT consultant, he could afford to own a lot of them. He always bought them new, wore them for a few weeks, scratched them, and in the meantime looked around for a new model to buy. Even on his highly above-average salary, this couldn't go on indefinitely. After a while, he started selling some models on eBay. He mentioned to me that he was selling them at a big loss. Even though I had no experience with photography at the time, I was convinced that I could shoot them much better than he could. And I did; they started to sell faster and at a much better price. Gradually, I refined my lighting and composition

techniques to best manage the delicate balance between showing the watch in the most attractive way possible while not hiding the fact that it was used or scratched. My friend was very happy with the results and soon gave me a new Leica with several lenses. My first camera...

3. Thirdly, the fact that my mother is an enthusiastic photographer herself contributed to my growth as a photographer.

You willingly pass on your art and experience in architectural photography to workshop students. What are the main skills that novice architectural photographers lack?

John Baldessari, the American conceptual artist, said that a true artist should know three things:
1. Being in the right place at the right time
2. Talent is cheap.
3. You have to be possessed or obsessed. You really have to feel like you cannot not do art, and that is something you can't will.

When someone wants to be obsessed but is not naturally obsessed, the result is kitsch. Then obviously, in technical terms, one must understand the four balanced elements that comprise a good photograph:
subject, **light**, **composition** and **timing**.

Not only preparation — scouting the location, waiting for the right light — but also technique is extremely important for your work. How do you prepare for shooting a particular subject, and what technique and equipment do you use?

It depends on the specific location and the type of image I plan to take. I like to go out skating (location scouting) lightly with one camera and one tilt-shift lens. When I travel "heavy" (with over 120 kg of photo gear) I carry up to ten different lenses, a very stable and massive tripod, panoramic heads, a telescopic column that can extend up to 21 metres with a remote-controlled gimbal and many other items that I would need during my work.

↑Ólafur Elíasson: Umschreibung, KPMG building. Munich, Germany. Especially for this HDR & ultra-high resolution image, I ordered a special tilt-shift lens mount from the USA and modified my wi-fi router to remotely control the camera with a live view via a tablet. The camera had to lie completely on the ground, and it was impossible to adjust the composition via the viewfinder or LCD screen.

→ Frank Gehry: Luma Arles. Arles, France. Once I find a place with potential for an interesting photo, I try to make the most of it. Here, for six days, I waited from morning to night for the right train to pass by, with a distinctive colour and no printed advertisements on it, passing at the optimal speed and on the right track *(I didn't want it to be on the other track for this composition).*

Our readers are interested in new techniques; they like to learn, for example, how you edit your images and how long it takes you to post-produce...

I use a free online graphic editor **PHOTOPEA.com** created by the genial developer **Ivan Kuckir.** This web-based tool can handle even very complicated editing. The post-production time depends on the specific images. For the simpler ones, it takes me 5-30 minutes to edit. But if I use **HDR*** technique, when I shoot in challenging lighting conditions with

multiple exposures that are then stacked into one final image, or/and if I use **focus bracketing****, editing a single photo can stretch out over several days. In some cases, I compose the final image from several hundreds of sub-shots that, in addition to having different exposure and focus, were shot from various angles and positions and with various lenses.
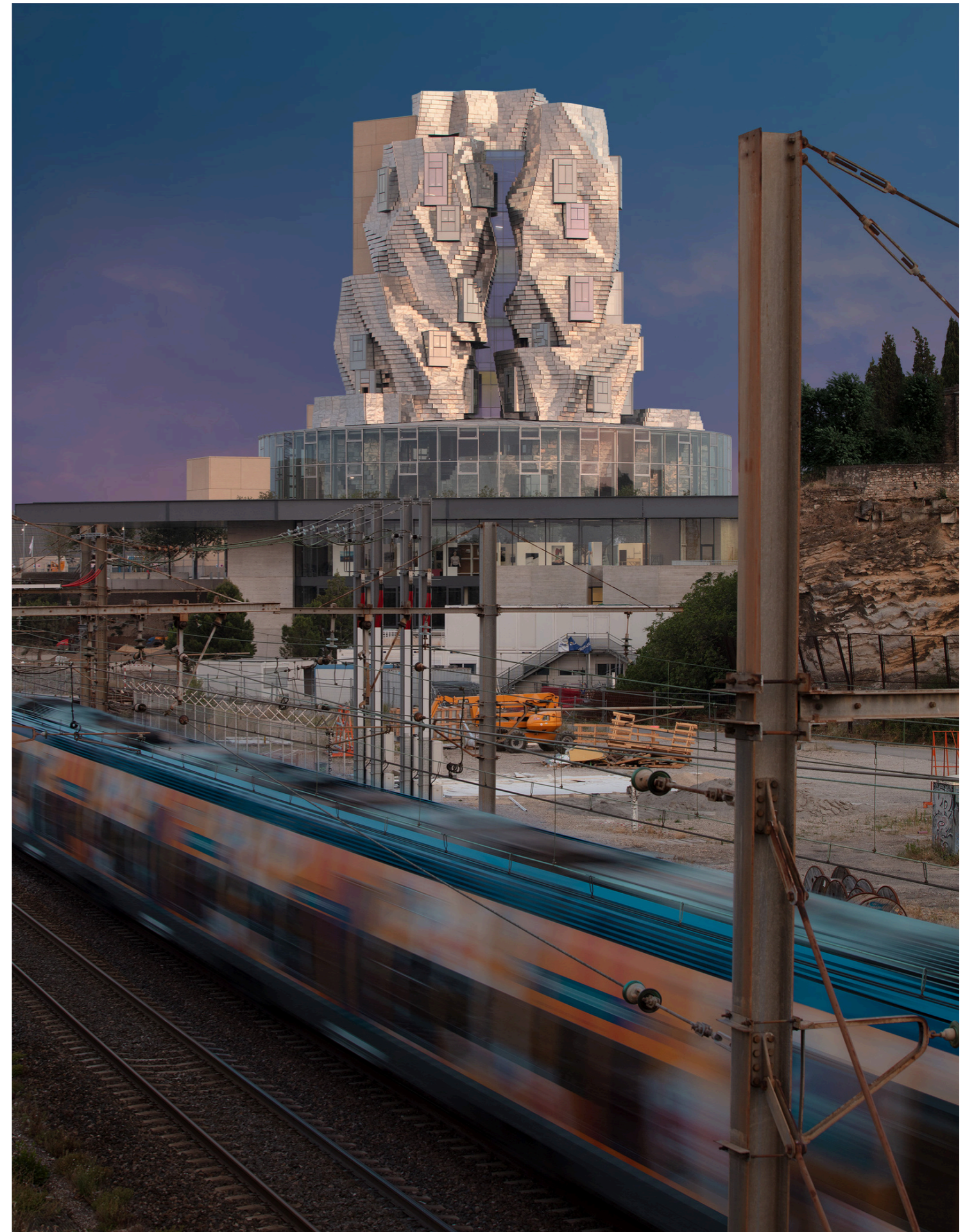
*HDR stands for high dynamic range. Dynamic range is simply the range of the lightest tones to the darkest tones within a photo. Put another way — it's a measure of the light intensities from the highlights to the shadows.

**Focus stacking is a digital image processing technique which combines multiple images taken at different focus distances to give a resulting image with a greater depth of field than any of the individual source images.

Finally, what immediate plans do you have for new locations?

I work daily on the aforementioned web and multimedia project, **INSTATRIO.com,** which incorporates photographs, videos, audio, audio,

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still is, but not with the same, oh-so-impressive design) @
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               (he only jumped to the basket a few times
early in the morning)
               (he didn't come to play until the afternoon)
               (notice that her socks match the design of the court in
the name of "no detail is too small")
               (she came to the court to take pictures of someone else in
the evening, when these players weren't there)

texts, an interactive map, and so forth. This project is and will remain **my main priority**. It currently features 250 **MUST SEE** and it's already a very handy and quick tool for planning and finding interesting places that one should definitely not miss. The motto for this project is: "**SEARCH LESS DISCOVER MORE**" This project is by its nature an ongoing one, and I am continuously adding new places of interest. On my **Instagram** profile (**@danalka_com**) I constantly announce news and give information about developments in this project.
I hope to CU there! •

→ I have a lot of photos that have details that you only discover when you zoom in or print them out in large format. An example would be a shot of the London Eye from the days of COVID. All of the capsules at that attraction appear to be empty (they are otherwise always sold out and crowded, with a maximum capacity of 25 passengers). **It is only on closer inspection that you realise that there is a gentleman in one of them, presumably a member of the staff, looking out over the empty streets of London with a face mask. I love this sort of thing when it goes well. If I don't like a detail in a shot, I can wait weeks for the right moment.**

I'm more or less an impatient person. But luckily, I'm also an audiobook and podcast enthusiast. Otherwise, I wouldn't have the patience. But by listening and educating myself, it's not wasted or unused time. The key is that most photos with "The Decisive Moment" really need time. Everything can be photographed right the first time and gone, or you can keep returning and looking for other opportunities.

INSTATRIO.com

Homepage

1 **Search window**. If you enter for example "Gehry Germany" you will see all of Frank Gehry's buildings in Germany.

2 **Interactive map**. It provides a quick overview of all places and allows you to easily plan your visit.

3 **Nearby**. It will only show you places within your 300-kilometer circle.

4 **One place** on the homepage is always represented by three photos. Clicking with the mouse or using the cursor takes you to the so-called InfoPage. The InfoPage shows you detailed information about the place and more photos.

InfoSite

1 **Audio description** of the place.

2 **Wikipedia link** of the place.

3 **Navigation** to the place from your current location.

4 **Official website** of the place.

5 **Tags**. For example, clicking on the "Frank Gehry tag" will show you all his buildings, biography & objects he designed.

6 **Photo gallery**. The homepage always has three square images, but each location on the InfoPage can have an unlimited number of photos *(videos, texts, etc.)* in any format.

7 **Navigation** to the place from where the photo was taken.