

Looking Good in Print

Dr Doug Spowart turns the pages on what photographers can easily achieve with photobooks and print-on-demand.



"The wall is for paintings; photographs belong in books." Henri Cartier-Bresson.

By now almost everyone has made a photobook because current technology makes it so easy, but a photobook can be so much more than the print-on-demand book or the usual bookstore publication we associate with the photobook. Now, in the digital age, the evolution of the book presents new possibilities.

While many commentators on the book may predict that the on-screen eBook will replace the familiar form of the physical object that we know so well, the current trend in self-publishing photobooks emphatically states that books will be around for some time yet.

The range of options available for photobooks includes handmade bespoke works of art to super-slick prestige, trade-styled publications. So, for the 21st century book creator, between these two 'bookends' there is a myriad of options of book styles and forms that can be considered. The standard codex – two hardboard covers and pages fixed along one edge – is the most commonly known and experienced form of the book and as such most options for everything 'bookish' are streamlined towards this end product. Although this is an efficient way of reading, there is so much more available now for the creative thinker/maker.

The greatest hurdle that photographers have to overcome when they make their own books is accepting that book design requires a whole new world of knowledge and skill sets. For years this expertise has resided in the world of the publisher, designer and the printer, and not with the photographer. To grasp and acquire these specialist skills requires a steep learning curve and this is why most online photobook printers provide templates with pre-designed options. The downside is that while templates make things easy, they restrict personal creativity and experimentation.

Another aspect of photobook design is that photographers often consider their photobooks as being a book of photographs, a kind of album, a catalogue or perhaps even an exhibition of work in a book. So, when they come to make books they are firstly photographs, placed in an order that 'feels' okay, a few words for a title and perhaps an opening remark and some captions and then ... place the order.

For the contemporary design-it-yourself photobook maker, to create a photobook as an expressive, personally styled visual communication, they will need to consider learning

and applying a variety of new skills and considerations about book design. This article will outline principles and ideas that can transform your bookmaking and lead you to making and appreciating a higher order of the craft, and the art, that is achievable in the construction of do-it-yourself contemporary photobooks.

STEP 1

Finding Inspiration

The best place to start thinking about your own photobook is to develop a 'knowledge base' of features you like, appreciate and enjoy in the photobooks made by others. Visit libraries, bookshops (both new and second-hand), checkout your friends' libraries and even magazine racks in newsagents. Make notes, take photos, gather tear sheets and purchase the stuff that inspires you.

These references will provide valuable insights for you about book/page size, image size, image groups, colour and/or black and white images, borders and spacing, texts and typographic elements, the 'feel' and weight of the paper – the list could go on and on. Importantly the knowledge base that you've collected will represent what you like and this will inform your decision making. It can be equally important to also prepare a knowledge base of things that you don't like as well.

As you draw upon your knowledge base, your decisions and directions culminate from a mix of these referenced ideas that will aid the development of a unique style for your book. Be careful not to directly and exactly copy a book design as that may infringe copyright.

STEP 2

Asking Questions

To get an understanding of the way ahead, you need to ask some probing questions: What is your book about? What do you want to say? Who is the audience for the book? What can I do myself – computer skills, image enhancement skills, design capabilities, printing and craft-based skills – should I decide to make my own. Your answers will enable you to embark



upon your book project with identified capabilities and perhaps a list of things that you will need to learn. Workshops, online tutorials and working with a mentor may need to be considered as ways to resolve knowledge gaps. Sometimes just going ahead and doing it will enable a learn-as-you-go experience.

STEP 3

Which Supplier?

The current range of print-on-demand (POD) photobook service providers is exhaustive. Today, most photobook suppliers have production plants in Australia. Although many POD service providers are international organisations with highly specialised and dedicated POD printing houses overseas, their service times are competitive with the locals.

Once again, your knowledge base will inform your decision-making process. Those questions we asked earlier will be a determining factor, although you may encounter some new ones: Will your book be landscape or portrait format? What paper and surface do you want to use? How many pages? What binding style, stitched or 'lay-flat'? Does the POD supplier provide software that matches your operating system? What cover—linen/leather/flyleaf/embossed title? How much do you want to pay? The list could go on and on.

Apart from visiting websites, the best ways of finding out about good photobook service providers is to ask friends, fellow photographers, photo store people and even your online Facebook connections. Try to see, hold and handle a sample of the book. Ultimately you will need to refine all the options down to a supplier, a book format and a paper stock from their range, a number of pages, any special embellishing services and the price-point for the service. Then it's a matter of accessing the software/online upload, making, ordering, waiting for supply.

While it seems obvious to make books using providers who can produce books of the style and type we are familiar with, the DIY book can be an option allowing extended personalisation and creativity. To start with, all that's required is a computer, image enhancement software and an inkjet printer. Additional equipment from the bookmaking side of things could include cutting, sewing and gluing materials and tools. While it may be simple to say that this is all you need, there is one other factor:

time. Hand-making books is very time-consuming, but the satisfaction from DIY can be a significant reward.

STEP 4

Designing your book

A book in its basic form is a codex that consists of a double page 'spread' which is printed on both sides, then folded in half to produce four pages. A book then should be designed as a double page view – just as the reader of your book will see the work. Most books, including photobooks, are broken down into a sequence consisting of cover, endleaf, title page, colophon, introductory comment, images in groups or sections, sometimes separated by subtitle pages, texts or perhaps even blank pages, and so on until the end of the book.

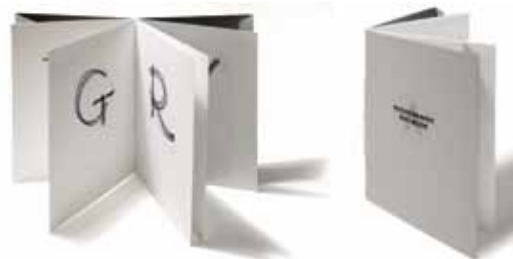
The design of your book will be defined by the questions that you made earlier and the decisions you made. You could consider that you are producing a book based on a predetermined plan.

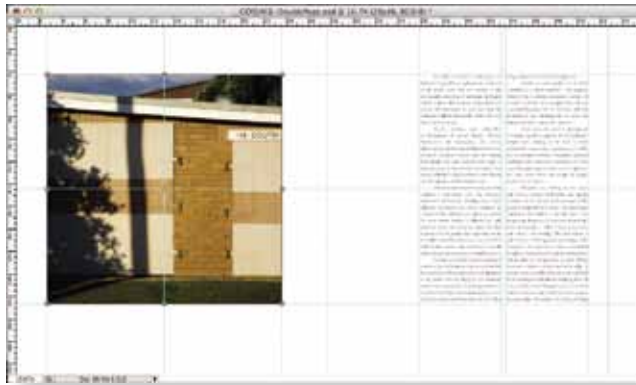
In some bookmaking disciplines like the artists book, the bookmakers feel that such a predetermined outcome limits the creativity and the possibilities for the book. Artists usually work in the handmade mode and through the handling of materials, discover things in the making that can direct the outcome. Some comment that the book 'tells' them how it wants to be created. This may sound a little strange, but this approach does allow for an organic process to emerge in which the content and the structure, form and narrative all merge to create an artwork as a book.

Artists book styles include the simple 'three hole pamphlet stitch', concertina book form that can be essentially a single strip of paper that can go on for metres and can be displayed as a strip (as shown) or be presented as a codex. A 'flip book' can be an interesting and challenging DIY format – it operates just like a movie showing a short sequence of images.

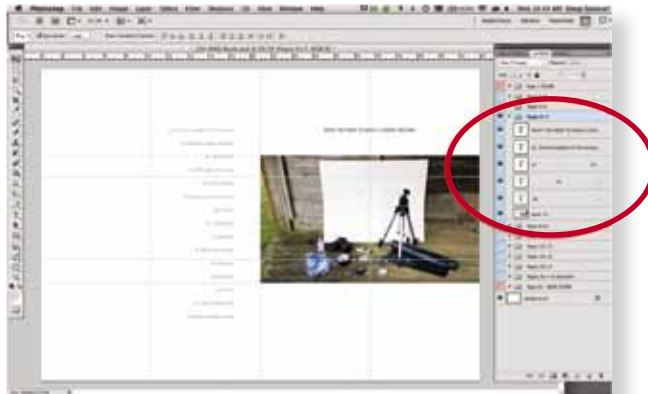


Bookmaking tools





Using a grid to help design.



A layer set in Photoshop

The computer design of the codex book is accomplished by setting up a document size that is double the selected page width. Guides can be set to enable a 'grid' to be developed so that successive pages can be treated similarly in terms of image placement, size, texts and other layout considerations. In programs like Adobe Photoshop, the components of each double page can be linked together in a 'layer set' that can enable every page of your book to be in the one document – to see each page pair, the layer set is highlighted.

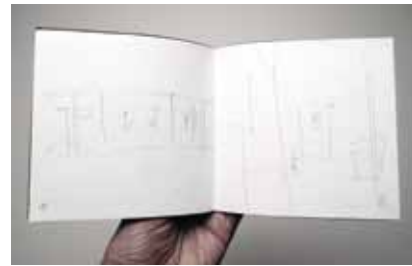
Printing is accomplished by switching on the appropriate layers, taking care to ensure that the right page content is printed in the right place. This is a process referred to in the printing industry as 'pagination' or 'interpolation'. It does take some figuring out, but there are simple procedures that can help as I discuss later in 'dummies and prototypes'.

STEP 5

'Dummies', Prototypes and Proofs

Designing a book usually starts with a mock-up into which images and texts are arranged and placed. This makes sense because in the world of publishing the design, production and the price-point for the book all depend on the physical outcome of a product that is made for sale to an audience. What this means is that the final outcome for the book is decided from the beginning and like building a house, an architect's plans and specifications are mandatory for success.

Whichever mode you select, it is important to make a mock-up of your book. Usually referred to as a 'dummy', it is made of plain papers (cartridge paper from an art shop is fine), it is cut to size and the estimated number of pages are loosely



Two stages of a dummy – hand drawn and images on pages to scale.

stapled or held together with bulldog clips. Images and text elements can be lightly glued in place and ideas drawn in using pencil. The dummy can enable you to get a 'feel' for the book and the way the story is revealed through turning the pages.

You can juggle elements around, work out sequences and groupings, texts and their positions and show it to others for their opinions and ideas. You may go through many stages of prototyping your book, making subtle refinements and enhancements along the way.



STEP 6

Telling your story

A picture can tell a story, but in a photobook we organise individual pictures into sequences to tell the story through the 'reading' or 'viewing' of the book. What implications are there for this in how we design our books?



Showing a dummy to a friend – Dr Michael Coyne offering comments on a book. (Another doctor! Ed.)

Your knowledge base and familiarity with the idea of the photobook as visual communication will inform your direction here. Being thoughtful about the story flow is important. The start point for most story designers is to print out each individual image and lay them out on the floor or any extended surface where you can stand back and look for sequences, pairings, synergies and narrative.

Working with others for feedback to see if they can 'get the story' is important. Preparing a dummy and reviewing the narrative flow helps, and it may take many dummy stages to refine the idea.

STEP 7a

Finishing – DIY

Printing your own book will require a printer that can be set for custom page sizes. For example, an A4 vertical format book will require a printer that can handle A3 paper and a page width of 29.7 cm. An A4 horizontal book will only require a 21 cm page

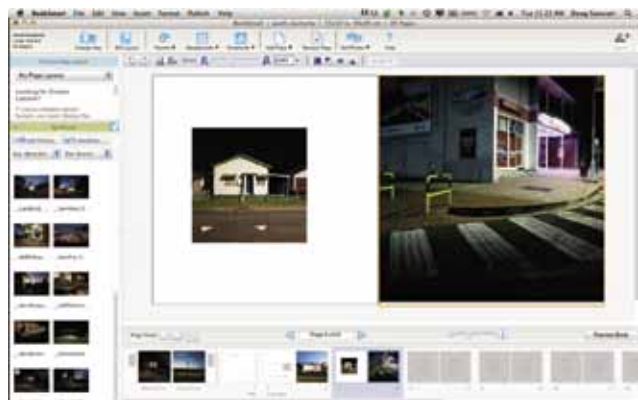
width, however, the custom page size will be just under 60 cm.

Associated with this is sourcing inkjet paper that is coated on both sides. These papers are available from suppliers like Awagami, Canson, Hahnemühle, Innova, and Tetenal. These papers may not match the POD book's lustre and glossy surfaces and are usually a matte finish. However, most are made of archival materials like 100% cotton rag and are more associated with the fine art book industry. Well, that is exactly what you are doing – making an artwork as a book!

STEP 7b

Finishing – POD

If you have chosen the 'design it yourself' option as discussed earlier rather than using the POD templates, the workflow required to complete the book is a little different. Essentially the layer groups you have prepared are simply flattened as each individual page and saved as a JPEG. Note: Do not save your flattened book file as you may not be able to recover the individual layers.



Next, it is a simple matter to use the 'full page' template supplied by the POD provider and populate each page in the appropriate order. Be careful if you are working with what are called 'full bleed' images where the picture covers the whole page – you must ensure that sufficient image exists outside of the print area to allow trimming in production.

STEP 8

Reviewing your book

The euphoria of receiving your book is a reward for your hard work and all the micro decisions that you have made along the bookmaking journey. However, in a way, the book is never finished, always there are things that could be done better, so spend time critically reviewing the result against your expectations. Your knowledge base will be expanded by this process and in doing so, your experience in photobook making will be enhanced.

Photographers make photographs to pass on and share the things in their lives that matter. Whether it's images of the natural world, a holiday to an exotic location, portraits of family and friends, things that excite or issues that anger and concern them, photographers want to communicate that story.

Once photographers made prints that were shared for framing or for 'magnetting' to the fridge door. The world of the photobook was something that, while it inspired and excited



PHOTOBOOK REFERENCES

Indie Photobook Library

<http://www.indiephotobooklibrary.org>

The Indie Photobook Library promotes and showcases the books in the collection through international pop-up and feature-length exhibitions, articles, conferences, guest lectures, and also preserves them as a non-circulating public library.

A Blog about Photobooks

<http://thephotobook.wordpress.com>

Douglas Stockdale writes reviews and commentaries about photobooks.

Darius Himes

<http://dariushimes.com>

Darius Himes is Assistant Director of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. He is a co-founder of Radius Books, a non-profit publisher of books on photography and the visual arts, where he serves on the board and consults on project acquisitions.

Martin Parr's website

<http://www.martinparr.com/books/>

Perhaps the world's most prolific photobook maker – a great site with books available as page views.

TIME's Best of 2012: The Photobooks We Loved

<http://lightbox.time.com/2012/12/24/times-best-of-2012-the-photobooks-we-loved/#1>

A selection of the best books for 2012.

Self Publish Be Happy

<http://www.selfpublishbehappy.com>

Celebrating, studying and promoting self-published photobooks through events (such as exhibitions, displays and talks), publications and online exposure.

Photoeye

<http://www.photoeye.com/magazine>

Reviews and commentaries of contemporary photobooks – also bookstore and auction house.

Keith Smith Artists Books

<http://www.keithsmithbooks.com>

Best selection of 'How to' books on designing, making and thinking about the artists' book.

photographers, was beyond their technical and financial reach. Today with computers and digital technology, the photobook has been democratised and is now firmly in the photographers' domain. All that remains is to embrace the technology, build a knowledge base and begin making books.

Most importantly, ideas and images need to be extended beyond just a collection of photos. They can be resolved into a photobook of high technical and aesthetic values, as well as into a profound and distinct personal narrative.



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