

Horizontal vs. Vertical Composition in Street Photography

“Street photography isn’t about what you capture – it’s about how you frame it.”

The Emotional Choice of Orientation

What's poppin, people? It's Dante.

Today we’re talking about **horizontal versus vertical composition in street photography** – not from a technical standpoint, but an emotional and intuitive one.

The choice between orientations isn’t just a camera setting; it’s a reflection of how you *feel* in the moment. For nearly seven years out of my decade-long practice, I shot almost entirely horizontal. Recently, I’ve been experimenting more with vertical frames – and it’s changed how I see the world.

Every frame is a decision. Orientation affects the mood, rhythm, and narrative of a photograph. Whether horizontal or vertical, the goal is to express the relationship between subjects – to show how life connects.

The Importance of Orientation

When composing a photograph, I’m constantly reading relationships – the **foreground, background, and moments** unfolding in between.

Each orientation helps tell a different story.

Take this example:

On the beach, a young boy looks up into the sun while an older woman crawls out of the water. Their relationship – youth and age, vitality and fatigue – demanded a

vertical composition.

If I'd shot horizontally, one of them would've been cut off. The vertical frame allowed both to exist harmoniously in the same visual slice of life.

On the other hand, a **horizontal composition** shines when you're photographing broader interactions — like a parade, a group of people, or scenes layered across depth.

For instance, during *Shabbat* in the streets, I crouched low to capture silhouettes reflected in a puddle. Horizontal orientation allowed me to include multiple figures and layers — the reflection, the rhythm, the unity.

Fluidity with the Ricoh GR

The **Ricoh GR** is the ultimate tool for this kind of fluid shooting. It's compact, discreet, and an extension of the hand.

I hold mine loosely — **thumb underneath, middle or ring finger on the shutter, index finger resting on top.**

This lets me *flip orientation instantly*, almost like a sleight of hand.

That physical connection between body and camera matters. The Ricoh's design lets me respond to life fluidly — horizontal or vertical, depending on instinct, not overthinking.

“Street photography is a dance — you move with the scene.”

When to Go Vertical

Vertical compositions thrive when you want intimacy, height, or tight separation between subject and background.

- **Pairs and Relationships:** Two people framed in a doorway, a man under mounted taxidermy in a butcher shop, or a subject connected to a tall element in the scene.
- **Isolation:** Vertical framing narrows focus, inviting the viewer into a smaller, more personal slice of reality.

For example, in *Love Park, Philadelphia*, a man lifted a snake while people gathered to pet it. Dropping low and switching vertical let me connect the snake in the foreground to *City Hall* in the background — a perfect vertical relationship.

“Vertical frames feel intimate, pulling the viewer into a narrow slice of the scene.”

When to Go Horizontal

Horizontal compositions thrive when life expands — when multiple subjects, gestures, or layers interact at once.

Think of **Coney Island’s beach** — boys stretched across the rocks, layers of bodies, sea, and sky.

The horizontal format let me harmonize **foreground, midground, and background** into one cohesive rhythm.

Another example:

On the *Schuylkill River Trail*, a single runner passes along a snowy boardwalk with the entire Philadelphia skyline beyond.

The wide orientation communicates *space, mood, and context* — the smallness of man within the vastness of the city.

Horizontal frames let you play with dynamics. They’re the stage where you choreograph movement across the scene.

The Role of Intuition and Flow

Composition is not analytical — it's **felt**.

When I walk through the city, I'm not calculating thirds or counting leading lines.

I'm *responding*.

If I see three subjects, my body naturally tilts the camera horizontally to fit them in.

If I see a tall structure or a vertical flow, I flip instinctively.

“Don't think it — feel it. Composition lives in your gut, not your head.”

Your camera becomes an extension of your intuition.

You respond to rhythm, light, and geometry — not theory.

Experimentation Is Key

Don't lock yourself into one orientation. Tilt your camera, rotate it mid-scene, and embrace the imperfections that come with spontaneity.

The small quirks in how you switch between orientations become part of your unique visual language.

Street photography is unpredictable — the moments are fleeting, the light ever-changing.

So your shooting should reflect that same energy: loose, instinctive, alive.

“In street photography, every orientation is an opportunity.”

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day, composition is **where you position your body** in relationship to your subject and the world around you.

You'll start recognizing the *sweet spot* — that perfect alignment of instinct, geometry, and timing — the more you shoot.

Stay fluid. Stay curious.

Let your instincts decide whether to turn the camera or not.

And remember — **life is out of our control**, but how we *frame* it isn't.

Learn More

If you enjoyed this lesson, explore more on my website:

👉 <https://dantesisofo.com>

Free eBooks:

- *Contact Sheets: Behind the Scenes of My Frames*
- *The Ultimate Ricoh GR Street Photography Guide*
- *Mastering Layering in Street Photography*

Thanks for reading — and as always,

stay spontaneous, stay fluid, and keep shooting.

Peace 🕊️