Lit Windows

DSDN 244 - Photographics

Brendan Dutton

A study of quiet Wellington streets at dusk, what a lit window gives away without meaning to.

Lit Windows

This project is about houses on quiet Wellington streets at dusk, specifically that moment when someone turns a light on before they've closed the curtains. For a few minutes you can actually see into their house from the street.

I walked around hillside suburbs like Brooklyn and Kelburn at dusk and photographed houses right as this was happening. A lit window doesn't actually show much, no people, not much detail, but it tells you someone's home. Something's going on in there that you're not part of. That's basically what I was after, that feeling of walking past someone's house at night and knowing they're right there even though you can't really see them.

I ordered the photos around the light changing. First one is still daylight, sun coming through cloud over some rooftops. Then three shots of actual houses once it's dark, each one just a lit window against the sky. Last one is an empty motorway at night, no houses in it at all, I wanted to end on the idea that this isn't just a house thing, the whole city does this after dark.

I didn't stage anything, just went out and photographed houses as I found them, which is closer to how Hido works than Crewdson. In editing I did push the colours further than what the camera actually recorded, deeper purple skies, stronger red and orange in the windows. That contrast was already there at dusk though, I just made it more obvious.

Mostly I wasn't interested in the houses themselves. I was interested in what a lit window accidentally tells you, that someone's home, and that privacy at night is pretty easy to see through if you're just walking past at the right time.

> **“A lit window doesn't actually show much, but it tells you someone's home.”**


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Todd Hido – House Hunting (Hido, 2001)

Hido shot House Hunting driving at night along the West Coast, photographing houses lit from outside and sometimes their empty interiors. He's said the work isn't really about the houses, it's about wondering who's inside, something he traces back to his own childhood curiosity about what goes on behind other people's doors. A lit window ends up saying more about privacy than people expect, it's less architecture and more a portrait made through someone else's window.

Relevance to this project: My approach follows Hido's method closely, walking Wellington's hill suburbs at dusk and photographing what's already there rather than staging anything. His outside/interior contrast also shaped my thinking around building a small, tightly edited set rather than a large one.






Gregory Crewdson – Twilight (Crewdson, 2002)

Crewdson's process is the opposite: heavily staged, full-crew colour photography shot specifically at dusk, built to make ordinary suburban scenes feel slightly wrong without anything dramatic needing to happen in frame. He leans on recurring rules across the series, twilight light, a threshold somewhere in frame, so the images read as one collective mood rather than separate staged scenes.

Relevance to this project: Even shooting unstaged, I borrowed Crewdson's rules directly, always include a threshold or window, shoot within that narrow dusk window, and let the light carry the story. His point that mood matters more than strict sequence also gave me room when my own images didn't naturally narrate in order.




Why both

Hido shows a small, tightly edited set can say more than a large one. Crewdson shows deliberate light and framing can get the same effect Hido gets from just waiting for the right house. My own project sits between the two.

Development documentation

PBA 06

Todd Hido - House Hunting

Todd Hido, started around 1998, mostly known from the House Hunting book (26 photos, all picked by him).
What it's about: Driving at night along the West Coast photographing houses. Some are lit up windows from outside, some are empty interiors of the same kind of houses.

The point of it: Hido says he takes them because he wonders about the families inside. Not really about the house, more about psychology and relationships. He's mentioned it ties back to his own childhood, wondering what's going on behind other people's doors.

Beyond the surface: It's less about architecture and more a kind of self portrait through other people's windows. Also plays with privacy, people think their house is private but a lit window says a lot from outside.

How the images work together: It's repetition that builds the feeling. One house doesn't mean much, but house after house at night starts to feel like a pattern, almost obsessive.

Relationships between images: Outside shots (lit windows, implying someone's home) sit against interior shots (empty, no one there). That contrast is doing a lot of the work.

Title vs project: "House Hunting" sounds like real estate but also sounds like "haunting." That double meaning sets the mood before you even see a photo.

Gregory Crewdson - Twilight

Started in 1998. Big, heavily staged colour photos, full film crew, shot at twilight.
What it's about: Suburban scenes where something slightly paranormal or off is happening, but shot to look completely normal and everyday.

The point of it: Making the suburbs feel like they're hiding something. The "American dream" setting turns into something anxious and strange underneath.

Beyond the surface: Everything in the series is liminal, thresholds, doorways, windows, that in-between hour of twilight itself. It's never really about the object in frame, it's about the feeling of something about to happen or just having happened.
How the images work together: Each image is its own huge production, not really a sequence. What connects them is the mood and the visual rules he sticks to every time (twilight light, frozen figures, a threshold somewhere in frame).

Relationships between images: Windows, doorways, and people mid-ritual show up again and again. Different images, same visual language, so it reads like one collective mood rather than separate stories.

Title vs project: Twilight is literally the lighting he uses, but also stands for the in-between state the whole series is about, day turning to night, normal turning strange.

Site Research & Test Shots





Reference List

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