Street photography definition for WPS competitions

1. Current definitions and descriptions

There is no universally accepted official definition of Street Photography used across all photographic competitions. None of the major photographic institutions has an official competition definition of Street Photography. However there is some useful guidance.

SPA has no formal street photography definition or description:

- Street photography is treated as part of Open photography.

FIAP also has no formal street photography definition or description:

- FIAP generally treats Street Photography as an optional salon section where the organiser supplies the interpretation and rules, rather than a globally standardised FIAP genre.

RPS offers the following description in their Street Photography Guide:

- 'Street Photography is candid and unscripted moments captured in a public place.'
- The guide notes that it does not need to be on a street and can include places such as shopping centres or public transport.

The **World Street Photo Awards** describes street photography as follows:

- Street photography is work that documents life in public spaces and captures "real moments," "spontaneous moments," human connections, urban environments, and the atmosphere of everyday life.

A **commonly accepted competition-oriented interpretation** is:

- Street Photography captures unscripted, candid moments of life in public or publicly accessible spaces. The emphasis is on observation, spontaneity, human interaction, behaviour, irony, gesture, or visual storytelling rather than staged or directed scenes

The key debates in competitions are usually not about the location but about:

- Was it candid or directed?
- Is it documentary or constructed?
- Does it depict real life rather than a set-up scene?
- Would it still qualify if no people are visible?

The last point is where judges often disagree. Some accept "street" without people if it strongly conveys human presence or urban life; others expect a human element.

For UK club competitions (PAGB/SPA/Federation level), judges often apply the RPS-style "everyday life in a public place" interpretation rather than a strict FIAP-style rulebook definition.

2. Comparison with Urban Landscape

Urban Landscape is not a sub-category of Street Photography. It is a distinct genre, but the two genres do overlap.

- **Urban Landscape is primarily about place.**
- **Street Photography is primarily about life within a place.**

Urban Landscape

The primary subject is the built environment.

Typical characteristics:

- Architecture
- Streetscapes
- Infrastructure
- Graphic design, geometry, light and shadow
- Human presence may be absent, incidental, or very small

Examples:

- A deserted alley in morning fog.
- A modern office block reflecting sunset light.
- A railway station emphasizing structure and form.
- An elevated view of rooftops.

Street Photography

The primary subject is life occurring within the environment.

Typical characteristics:

- Human behaviour
- Chance moments
- Gesture
- Interaction
- Juxtaposition
- Observation of real life

Examples:

- A commuter rushing through a shaft of light.
- Two strangers mirroring each other's posture.
- A child chasing pigeons in a square.
- A humorous coincidence between a billboard and a passer-by.

The Overlap

Many strong images are both. For example:

- A lone figure crossing a vast modern plaza.
- Silhouetted pedestrians framed by dramatic architecture.
- A cyclist passing through geometric shadows between buildings.

Such images could legitimately be entered as either Urban Landscape or Street Photography, depending on what the photographer wants the judge to focus on.

A Competition Judge's Test

Consider these questions:

Question	Street Photography	Urban Landscape
If you remove the people, does the image largely lose its meaning?	Usually yes	Often no
Is timing of human activity critical?	Usually yes	Not necessarily
Is the built environment the main subject?	Usually no	Usually yes
Is the decisive moment more important than composition of place?	Usually yes	Usually no

3. Proposed WPS definition for the Jim Cottrill Cup

Here is a suggested single sentence definition that is clear enough for exhibitors, broad enough for creativity, and defensible to judges:

'Street Photography portrays authentic, unposed moments of everyday life in public or publicly accessible spaces, where the image depends primarily on observation, timing and the spontaneous interaction of people, place and circumstance.'

Here is an extended version that provides more guidance to entrants:

'Street Photography is the depiction of unposed, unscripted life in public or publicly accessible spaces.

The image should arise primarily from observation rather than direction by the photographer and should convey a sense of real human experience, behaviour, atmosphere, interaction, irony, or visual narrative.

The location need not be a street and may include any public environment such as parks, markets, transport systems, shopping centres, beaches, or similar spaces. The

presence of people is desirable but not mandatory, provided the image clearly communicates human presence, influence, or activity.

Images that are clearly staged, directed, heavily constructed, or created primarily as portraiture, fashion, or commercial photography would not normally be considered street photography.'

A simple judging test

A judge could ask:

- Was the scene essentially found rather than arranged?
- Does it depict or imply real life in a public environment?
- Is the photograph's strength derived from observation, timing, anticipation, or awareness?
- Would the image still exist in essentially the same form if the photographer had not intervened?

If the answer to all four is "yes," it is probably street photography.

Borderline examples

Usually qualifies

- People crossing a road in dramatic light.
- A lone commuter on a train platform.
- Reflections, shadows, gestures, juxtapositions.
- An empty bus stop conveying human presence.
- Urban scenes where human influence is the subject.

Usually does not qualify (staged or constructed)

- A model asked to stand in a doorway.
- A planned fashion shoot in a city street.
- A portrait session in a market.
- A composite image built from multiple captures.
- A street performer specifically directed by the photographer.

Usually does not qualify (urban landscape)

- Tower block with one tiny pedestrian.
- Railway station with a few commuters.
- City skyline with scattered people.