

# THE POSITIVE SIDE OF NEGATIVE SPACE

BY RICHARD MARTIN

“NEGATIVE SPACE BRINGS ALL THE PARTS TOGETHER. IT PROVIDES THE FULLNESS. THE SPACE HAS FORM AND PROPORTION, AND FOR THE MOST PART, IT’S MUCH MORE COMPLEX THAN THE POSITIVE FORMS YOU’RE WORKING WITH. BUT YOU CAN’T GRAB IT. YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO SEE IT.”

—DEBERA JOHNSON



The relationship of positive and negative is more complex in this image. Although the main subject, a man sitting in the shadows, is the focal point in the composition, the negative space or shapes created are equally important in the final graphic effect. The alternation of dark and light makes us aware of the negative shapes in addition to establishing the overall mood and anonymity of the man.



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When we look at this photograph and squint our eyes so as to diffuse or distill the subject matter, we begin to see its simple symmetrical tonal structure. The rectilinear shapes of the architecture provide the context for the main point of interest. The placement of the man seated along the wall (the subject) breaks up this symmetry by adding both dynamic balance and contrast to the picture—contrast between the organic shape of the man (positive space) and the rectangular grid-like shapes of the background (negative spaces).



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Negative space is not a place where your mind escapes to when your creative spirit runs dry, nor is it the final frontier in a Star Trek episode. In spite of the fact that the word “negative” is often associated with other less positive meanings, the term has no negative connotation. In fact, it’s actually a remarkable, if often neglected, design element. Learning about it can have an agreeable positive effect on your photography and the way that you express your ideas in pictures.

In drawing, painting, photography, or sculpture, the empty areas, or the space around the objects, are called “negative space” or “background”. Negative space is a compositional tool used in both two- and three-dimensional work. The simplest way to describe it is: the space where other things are not present. The positive space is easier to understand. Generally, it is the space occupied by the subject. On the other hand, negative space is the space that is not the subject.



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Negative and positive spaces are of equal importance as design elements. You can’t have one without the other. They both have shape and, depending on how they are arranged in the picture space—in order of importance, or prioritized—one will make clear the other.

Negative Space is nothing that is something.

## PICTURE SPACE AND SHAPE

Space is an empty area or surface surrounding the subject matter. The illusion of space is translated in a two-dimensional photograph as shapes (both negative and/or positive). Space and shape, two of the elements of visual design, work collectively to form a composition. The location of shapes in the camera’s viewfinder organizes the picture space into positive and negative areas.

A prerequisite to making good composition is the photographers’ ability to recognize the general appearance of shapes in the picture space. This can be achieved with practice through the exercise of abstracting the visual elements, viewing them in their simplest form or tonal structure. In the corresponding illustration, the negative space is masked in black, and the positive shapes (the subject matter) appear in white. In some photographs the positive/negative relationship may appear more ambiguous than in others. It is important to realize that negative spaces are not limited to only empty or neutral areas.

Another way to examine negative space is by turning the picture upside down. This unfamiliar orientation can make it easier to abstract the various shapes because we are not focused on the subject’s label.



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A balanced arrangement of rhythmic lines and tones makes this design both exciting and engaging. A good understanding of the negative space around the objects in your viewfinder will offer a greater feel for its compositional balance.



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It is understandable that the shapes of the main subjects of the work determine the shapes of the positive spaces (see sketches accompanying the photographs). However, it is important to note that negative spaces have shapes as well. If one removes the subjects from a picture, the negative spaces are left with a blank in the shapes of the parts removed. As a result, the shapes of the positive spaces determine the shapes of the negative spaces.

### THE FRAME

In design, the negative space boundary is defined by the frame and the edges of the subject (the positive space). Because negative space surrounds the positive space, it defines the subject matter. In photography, the frame can be defined as the edges of the viewfinder, the print, negative, or slide; it could also be the edges

of paper or canvas, if you're drawing or painting. After teaching numerous workshops, I have discovered that many photographers are not fully aware of the edges of their viewfinder and of the important role that the frame plays in defining shapes. The skillful use of positive and negative spaces interacting with the edges of your design has considerable effect on the viewer's eye. It provides a road map for the viewer to explore the picture.

Consider three key elements in a composition: the frame, the positive space, and the negative space. Subjectively speaking, a composition works when there is a balance between the positive and the negative. A major factor in controlling this balance is the frame or edge of the picture. While the balance notion is easy to understand, the contribution of the frame is more difficult for many to come to terms with.

The placement of positive shapes within the picture space can create very different visual effects, as the location of the positive shapes immediately organizes the empty space into various shapes.



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To begin with, anything that can be seen has a shape that provides the main identification in our perception. An area of similar colour or tone produces shape. For the purpose of discussion, the term “shape” refers to the two-dimensional configuration or outline of an object, and should not be confused with form, which is three-dimensional (shape plus depth, which is illusory in two-dimensional design).

This photograph demonstrates positive/negative integration. In the corresponding illustration, the negative space is masked in black. There is a rhythmic unity in the form of these dancers—the way the contours define relatively simple movement and the long sweeping flow define varying proportions in both positive shapes and negative spaces.



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## RELATIONSHIP

The idea of studying positive and negative space is all about relationship. It’s about how the background shapes look in relation to the space occupied by the positive shapes—in terms of unity, balance, rhythm, and proportion. The answer is not yes or no; it’s yes in relation to something else or no in relation to something else. It cannot be formulated into something like a rule.

As soon as you place a shape in a space, a relationship begins.

It is important to be aware of the idea of relationship between positive and negative space. To be conscious of the background that is not the subject—the negative space. For example, if a hydro pole appears to stick out of the back of a person’s head in a photograph, then the pole interferes with the space. It becomes



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part of the positive space rather than being part of the background. It upsets the balance between positive and negative space.

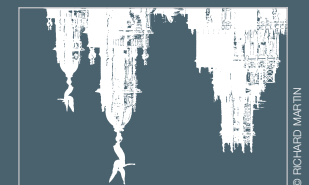
As a final point, negative space in its essence is an abstraction. As a photographer, your task is to methodically find your own way to see it, be aware of it, and develop a better appreciation of it. ■

**BIO** A long-time contributor to *Photo Life*, Richard pursues photography as a medium of visual expression. Well known for sharing his enthusiasm, creative vision, and passion for the medium, Richard has been leading annual workshops on photography and visual design in his native Kingston, Ont., for twelve years, and with Stephen Patterson in the Thousand Islands, each spring. He also conducts workshops and seminars across North America, including in Seattle, San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal. His fine art prints can be found at the Silver Light Gallery in Carmel, California, and at the Carlen Gallery in Ottawa. E-mail: [info@richardmartinphoto.com](mailto:info@richardmartinphoto.com). Web site: [www.richardmartinphoto.com](http://www.richardmartinphoto.com).

It is important to consider that negative space is not just the absence of something. It has weight and mass, and plays an important role in defining subject matter.



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