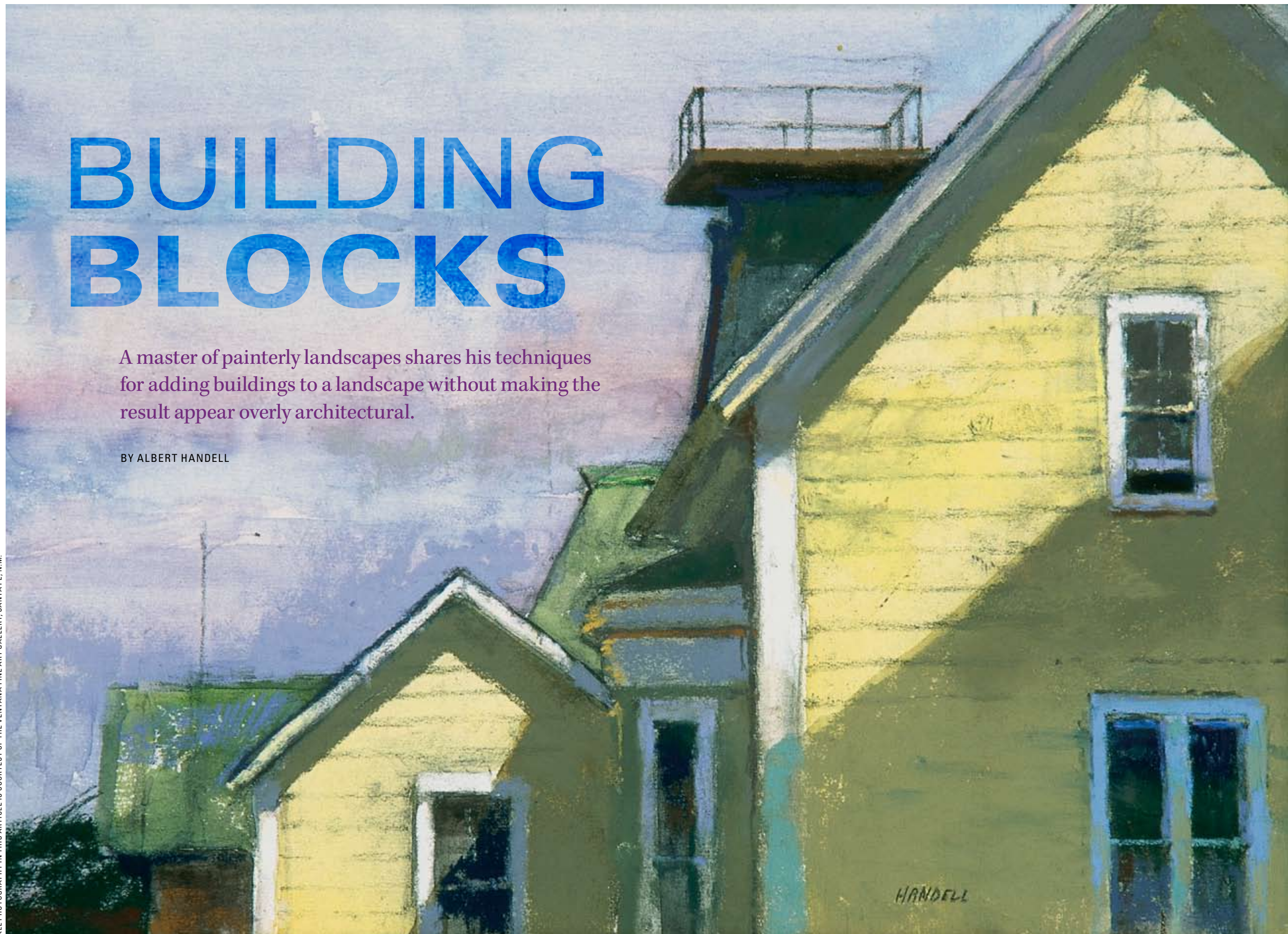


BUILDING BLOCKS

A master of painterly landscapes shares his techniques for adding buildings to a landscape without making the result appear overly architectural.

BY ALBERT HANDELL

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Take special care when painting architectural details, such as a church spire or a rooftop railing, such as the one seen in *Mendocino, CA, No. 2* (10x14). When seen against the backdrop of a luminous sky, these elements may appear black, but you're not seeing them in the context of the entire picture. If you paint it black, the railing or spire will appear pasted on, and you'll lose the sense of luminosity.



MY OBSERVATIONS OF ARCHITECTURE BEGAN YEARS AGO as a young boy growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y. I remember, in particular, one building, the corner candy store—a magical place where I could pay 2 or 3 cents for a small box of chalk. I spent hours with those chinks drawing all over the sidewalks, all around the block. I saw, from this vantage point, a variety of doorways and storefronts: grocery stores with boxes of fruit and vegetables spilling onto the sidewalk; shops with large barrels of pickles; fish stores with sawdust on their white checkered ceramic floors.

I observed these buildings up close; this was Brooklyn after all, and we didn't have mountains or vistas. The landscapes I've called home since then—particularly the open expanses of the American Southwest—have been dramatically different, but I continue to look to architecture as potential subject matter.

The presence of a building or group of buildings in a landscape can make a composition more interesting, but it adds a level of complexity, too. Over the years, I've learned how to capture the character of a building without having to record it in architectural perfection. And you can, too.

Cast shadows can be used to frame an area of interest. I painted *Roman Ruins in France* (12x18) during a workshop a few years ago. While I was painting the structure, the light started shifting and a slight cast shadow appeared on the bottom half of the bas relief. It was just the element I needed to resolve a less interesting area of the pastel.

Measure for Measure

My first thought, when composing a landscape that features buildings, is the placement of the center of interest—the specific area or element that grabs attention. This way, I can be sure that I'm able to keep the rest of the scene in correct relationship and size to this focal area. With a sense of the overall proportions, I can proceed in painting the focal area close to a finish. From there, I can continue painting, working from the center of interest out, and comparing everything that touches this area.

If I decide to focus on the window of a house, for example, I begin by placing the focal window on my paper. Then, once I've determined the height and width of it, I mentally draw an extended horizontal line, left and right along the top and bottom of the window. I compare the window to the door to determine whether the top of the door is higher, lower or on the same line as the top of the window. If it's higher, then I'll determine how much higher, and, if it's lower, how much lower.

I follow the same procedure with an extended vertical line, observing what's on either side of the line. Basic mental measuring like this is key to conveying the spatial relationship between elements and thus a believable rendering of the building. You don't want your painting to appear like an architectural study, but you do want it to look as though an architect built what you're painting.



Adobe and Green (14x18) illustrates two different types of cast shadows. Notice how dark and clear the cast shadows are on the adobe wall by the door. Compare these with the faint cast shadow on the wall to the right. It's fainter because the object throwing this cast shadow is further away from the wall.

Keep in mind, though, that measuring gets complicated as soon as two-point perspective is introduced. So, unless you've made a study of two-point perspective, it's wise to avoid a composition that includes both the front and side of a building. Instead, plan a composition that tackles the front only—or the side only—of a building straight on, so you're only dealing with a single plane. If you do, the basic measuring techniques will suffice.

A Closer Look

Another effective way to work out the composition is to include only a portion of a building. Just as I might opt to focus on a single tree in a landscape painting, sometimes the most interesting way to capture the character of a building is to pan in on a specific area, such as the rooftop or front entrance. See, for example, *Mendocino, CA, No. 1* (on page 40).

You'll still want to measure and carefully observe proportions to paint a partial view, but it will require less precision. To identify an interesting view, you can use a viewfinder (or the thumb and forefinger of both hands) to "frame" various options. Personally, I find it easiest to look through the zoom lens of a camera and adjust as needed to find a composition I like, and then paint it.



Including foliage—or even just the cast shadows of foliage—crossing over parts of a building is another way to prevent your pastel from looking overly architectural. It takes a fair amount of experimentation to determine the right amount for your purposes. Sometimes foliage features fairly predominantly, as in *Mid-Morning Santa Fe* (above; 14x16). In other cases, there may be much less, or even none at all, as in *Melting* (page 42).



Take advantage of lost and found edges to keep paintings of buildings painterly. In *Mendocino, CA, No. 1* (14x10), I painted just the suggestion of steps leading up to the door. I kept the edges varied to create interest and excitement.

Using mixed-media can be a beautiful, easy way to circumvent an overly architectural appearance. In the case of *The Old Family House in Lipscomb, Texas* (right; 18x17), I used pastel over watercolor. I put down the watercolor loosely, allowing for free-flowing “accidents.” As I continued with the pastel painting, I was careful to leave some of the watercolor underpainting showing through.



Melting (below; 11x9) is a good example of a straight-on front view of part of a building. I used vertical and horizontal lines to measure spaces in order to be sure that everything lined up correctly.



Afternoon Light, Apalachicola, Fla. (above; 11x15) and **Morning Light, Apalachicola, Fla.** (opposite; 16x20) are examples of paintings of the same subject. Painting the same structure more than once, in different light or different seasons, and in different compositions, is a good form of study, especially if the subject is a favorite.

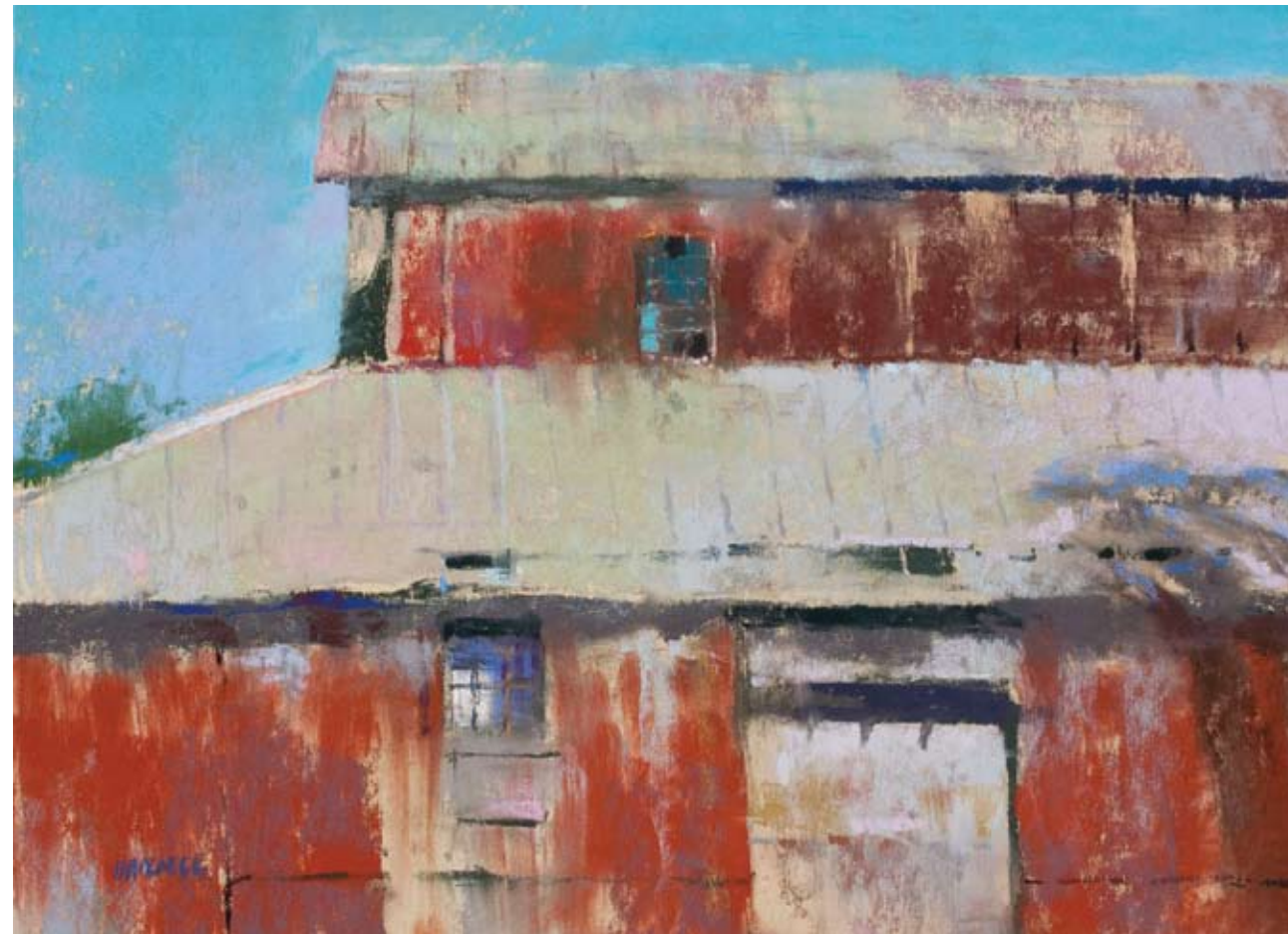
Window Treatments

If you're painting buildings, you're likely going to be painting windows as well. I've learned that not all windows are created equal; and there are certain situations that create more interest. Consider a curtainless window, left half-way open. Such a window is likely going to be one of the darkest areas of the painting, so don't hesitate to put emphasis on it. Many times I've even used black quite successfully for painting the open part of the window. Establishing these extreme dark elements will add to the artistic strength of your painting.

Look for variety in the windows of a building. Perhaps there's a closed window above the open one. It might also be dark, but it won't be nearly as black as the open part of the window. Be sure to take notice of these and other little delights and details as you render the windows of a building. They won't all be alike; be sure to look for the ways in which they differ, and use these variations to add excitement to the painting. See *Morning Light, Apalachicola, Fla.* (opposite) as an example of varying treatments.

At the Edges

Another way to dodge an overly architectural rendering is to make the most of lost and found edges. Don't keep all the edges in your painting



hard and emphatic, or the same. Instead, play down areas by softening some edges, and then strengthening edges in others. I included a variety of lost and found edges in the painting, *Mendocino, CA, No. 1*.

Its companion piece, *Mendocino, CA, No. 2* (on pages 36-37), is an example of how painting the same architectural subject from more than one vantage point can yield satisfying results. It can also be a wonderful exercise in measuring by relating sizes, shapes and relative distances.

In the Shadows

Cast shadows can be a powerful yet subtle tool in bringing a painting to a satisfying finish. I use them to frame areas of excitement and resolve areas in which I'm not very interested. Using cast shadows instead of mundane objects (such as that artificial duck on the top of a mailbox) can strengthen a composition by introducing strong abstract patterns of light and shade without referencing the kind of detail that can make a pastel too literal.

Including cast shadows also offers a clear indication of the direction of the light. And, since cast shadows also describe the shape of the object that's throwing the cast shadow, they can be used

to suggest that there's more to the scene—that things are happening outside the picture plane. See, for example, *Adobe and Green*, on page 39.

A Blueprint for Artistry

All of these techniques can be useful for taking a painterly approach to a landscape with buildings. It requires experience to feel your way comfortably around a composition with buildings, but if you pay attention to the points mentioned here—from the placement of the focal area to the handling of edges—there will be less risk of a finished pastel looking like a mere architectural rendering. ■



Albert Handell is a Pastel Society of America Hall of Fame artist who has been painting for more than 40 years. The author of several well-known art instructional books, he has also been a featured artist in many art magazines and publications, including the book, *Art Journey America: Landscapes* (North Light Books, 2011). Handell also shares his expertise as a teacher, offering plein air painting workshops and a Paint-A-Long mentoring program in which previous students or advanced painters join him for painting trips to his favorite locations. Visit www.alberthandell.com for more information.