

The DIY photographer: how to arrange your studio

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You've got a large room or garage that you can use for your own studio, but will it be big enough? A little judicious use of space will go a long way, but get used to the fact that this will always be a GARAGE used as a studio, so you'll be forever fighting for space with the lawnmower and old surfboards.

Your gear

The most important thing to ensure when you rig your own studio is to make sure you make things comfortable for yourself – you don't want to pack things away every time you've finished a shoot.

So try to rig your backdrops, reflector boards and the like so that they are easily put into action.

Backdrops, for instance, are a pain. Get them out of the way. Roll the backdrop onto a cardboard or aluminium pipe, put up two curtain holders onto the wall or roof beams, if they're exposed, and roll your backdrop out of the way until needed.

You may even use pieces of rope tied to the roof beams with loops at their ends. Now suspend the backdrop onto this by pushing a pipe or rod through the backdrop's cardboard roll. It's crude, but it works.

What does a professional studio look like, by the way? Below is a picture of MKC studios in Hollywood. They use a Cyclorama, a huge white infinity curve, as a permanent background.



If you have the space to build something like this yourself, but using only one wall and the floor, you often don't even need paper or cloth backdrops. You can bend a long piece of Masonite or hardboard into a soft curve as in the picture, and then nail it onto a frame to hold it in the bended position.

Then get a builder to screed the edge between the board and the floor, and the edge upwards between the board and the wall with crestone to hide the transition.

If you're brave, do it yourself with Polyfilla, then sand to a smooth finish when dry. Then paint the wall, board and floor with a matt white paint.

Light

When you work in the studio, you want all extraneous light excluded. Get some card board or Masonite, cut them to exactly the size of your window openings and cover them up so that your garage or room is dark. That way you won't influence the light on your subjects.

If you are setting up a more permanent studio, you can even use little hinges on these boards to allow you to open up the area and let light in when you need it.

Next in the comfort stakes is the availability of power. Again, if you are using the room extensively, set up your own power leads to where you need them most – rig them against the roof trusses or against the walls, out from under your feet.

If you're feeling your way around a dark studio, you don't want to trip over your power leads and bring the entire lighting setup crashing down. It will be an expensive mistake.

Bring the power cords down from the roof where you are likely to place your lights, and terminate them into double adapters so that you may plug in one or two lights into one source. Just make sure that your home circuit can take the load.

Store your polystyrene reflector boards in the roof too, if you can, by suspending them against the trusses with two sections of rope or seatbelt-type webbing tied to two adjoining trusses. If you don't have space, store them against the wall – where they are guaranteed to get blown over each time you open the garage door. To stop this, buy yourself some crocodile clamps. The types used on jumper leads for cars are perfect. Tie a rope to a nail in the wall on one side of the stored boards, tie the other end of the rope to the crocodile clamp, stretch the rope tautly across the reflector boards, and clamp the croc onto anything handy to keep them in place. The clamps allow for quick release and stowing, rather than tedious tying and untying. They're also hugely handy for keeping suspended backdrops in place, as you'll see later.

But that's all for now.

In coming editions:

- Build your own continuous light source
- Build your own flash units
- Build your own fold-up reflector
- Build your own reflector boards
- How to trigger your flash units
- Building stands for your reflectors
- Build your own infinity curve
- Making backdrops
- Softening your on-camera flash

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Cheers
Jaco Wolmarans

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