



Framing Smartphone Photos for Shotcrete Jobs Using the Rule of Thirds

By Cindy Spires, Managing Editor

With the improvements in smartphone technology over the last decade, many of the phones we have in our hands are just as good at taking quality photos as some point-and-shoot cameras. In the absence of a professional photographer to follow us around and shoot pictures at our job sites, it turns out we have the next best thing in our pockets!

The only catch is that we might need to use a modified approach to framing our shots to maximize our photos so they depict the craftsmanship and aesthetics of our work. A photo can be a piece of art. Your shotcreting is a work of art—regardless of whether its function is as a tunnel lining or as an intricately sculpted water feature in a magnificent home's backyard.

Some job site photos end up in *Shotcrete* magazine, and I bet many of them end up on your websites or social media channels as promotion for your businesses. So, taking a few extra moments to set up a photo is worth it because it may ultimately also serve as a marketing or promotional tool for your business or in an article for *Shotcrete* magazine.

Even if you don't have the newest iPhone or Android phone, you still have a sweet piece of easily accessible technology at your fingertips to accomplish this task!

Let me introduce what is referred to as the Rule of Thirds and compare it to the classic style of framing the focal point in the center of the image. If you've never considered the Rule of Thirds before, I hope this provides context for how to start integrating the technique as you take photos of your shotcrete jobs.

RULE OF THIRDS

This one is relatively easy to do once you understand the method. First, you divide your smartphone's camera screen into nine equal squares in a grid with three rows and three columns.

Most smartphones allow us to turn on a grid for our cameras in the Settings, though some might not. If you have an iPhone, for example, go to Settings > Camera > Grid, and turn on the toggle for the grid.¹ Most Android phones have Camera Settings > Grid lines.

If you don't have the ability to turn on a grid on your smartphone's camera, you can still use your imagination to frame images this way. I will show you some examples to help you with this.

According to Adobe.com², "the rule of thirds is a composition guideline that places your subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two thirds more open."

To be more exact, you place the subject along the right or left gridlines where the squares intersect: "you can think of it as giving you four crosshairs to target a shot's important elements. This will help you balance your main subject with negative space in your shot to nail an effective photographic composition that will draw the viewer's eye."²

Let's look at an example of a centered focal point (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) against the Rule of Thirds being used (Fig. 3-6).

As you can see in these photographs of a zinnia from my flower garden, the zinnia is centered in the image (Fig. 1).

Please note that The Rule of Thirds is also in play when we make sure that the top and bottom spaces of the image are in equal distribution—it is technically still in play with



Fig. 1: A zinnia flower as the centered focal point.



Fig. 2: Smartphone gridlines overlaying a centered zinnia.



Fig. 3: Zinnia flower framed on right using the Rule of Thirds.

the direct centering of the point of focus in Figure 1. Think also about taking a photo of a beautiful sunset at Del Mar, CA on the Pacific Ocean: the horizon is dead center and there are equal amounts of sky and water flanking the horizon above and below. That is also the Rule of Thirds because the horizon is in the center-third.

However, for the purposes of this article, I want to focus on another aspect of the Rule of Thirds: the slight, off-centering that we will come to understand is an excellent way of framing an image.

In Figure 2, the gridlines show how the focal point is directly in the middle of the nine boxes that make up the three rows and three columns of the grid. The grid lines intersect in four corners, in this case, framing the zinnia perfectly in the center square.

This photograph is intended to showcase the single flower directly in the center of the foreground. It has accomplished its purpose to be framed this way. It is not a bad photograph or incorrectly framed; in fact, it is quite well-balanced in terms of the size of the flower relative to the size of the boxes on the grid. It is just centered. Part of what the Rule of Thirds asks us to do, however, is to slightly off-center the focal point with the purpose of framing the photo differently.

The intersecting grid lines we see in Figure 2 are where we will now build our understanding of how to accomplish taking a photograph that follows this aspect of the Rule of Thirds.

Here are two more sets of photos (Figure 3 and Figure 4), of the same zinnia, that illustrate the Rule of Thirds in practice.

Using the Rule of Thirds, I have framed the zinnia to be slightly off-center to the right (Fig. 3). In Figure 4, the grid lines showcase the centering of the image along the two intersection points on the right. The top and bottom of the magenta flower's petals are balanced between those intersecting grid lines on the right. This framing opens the background up a little differently than what is seen in the centered images (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 4: Smartphone gridlines overlaying zinnia flower framed using the Rule of Thirds.

Is this photo better or worse than the images where the zinnia is perfectly centered in the frame? This is up to the viewer to decide which is more aesthetically appealing or functional. There is nothing wrong or right about either method. What we learn when we practice the Rule of Thirds is that we are being more deliberate with how we are framing our focal point, especially when whatever is in the background of the photo is still contributing to the accentuation of our slightly off-centered focal point.

In Figure 5 and Figure 6, I have taken a photo of the same zinnia using the Rule of Thirds, but I have centered the flower along the intersecting points on the left.

It creates a different aesthetic because now the purple flowers in the lower right of the background are actually visible, whereas they were previously covered up when I framed the zinnia on the right. (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) Which is better? Viewer's choice! (I kind of like this one better, to be honest!)



Fig. 5: Zinnia flower framed on left using the Rule of Thirds.



Fig. 6: Smartphone gridlines overlaying zinnia flower framed using the Rule of Thirds.

USING THE RULE OF THIRDS FOR JOBSITE PHOTOS

This Rule of Thirds framing will come into play when you are photographing a shotcrete job that, for example, may have a nozzleman shooting a wall. While the nozzleman is going to be the focal point of the image, you still might want to have a sizeable amount of the wall in the image too. In this case, you would treat the nozzleman like my zinnia—lining him up along the intersecting gridlines on the right (or left), so that you can get the nozzleman, the wall, and the shotcrete equipment all documented in a deliberately framed way.

Here is a great example of the Rule of Thirds being used to frame a shotcrete job that is exactly what I just described. This image was submitted as part of ASA's recent Outstanding Shotcrete Awards issue (2nd Quarter 2023) featuring Shawn Radomski, Lloyd Keller, Daniel Sanchez, and Rusty Morgan's job, Mt. Pleasant Station: Eglington Crosstown LRT. (Fig. 7)

As you can see here (Fig. 7), the two nozzlemen are framed off center to the left along the imaginary intersecting



Fig. 7: Nozzleman and blow pipe operator shooting a congested test panel; framed using the Rule of Thirds.

grid lines I showed you in my earlier figures. The rebar is filling the space to the right giving context to the area they were working in. With this framing, following the Rule of Thirds, the viewer gets a great idea of the scope of what was happening in this action-based moment.

Here is another great example of a vertically oriented image following the Rule of Thirds (Fig. 8). Bruce Russell submitted this photo for his article on High-Production,



Figure 8: Scaffolding and finishers on a water tank; framed using the Rule of Thirds.

Quality Shotcrete, appearing in this issue (3rd Quarter 2023), from his job in Nicholasville, KY.

As you can see in this impactful image, the sheer size of the water storage tank and the multitude of platforms on the scaffolding create quite an awe-inspiring impression of the size of this shotcrete job. It is framed following the Rule of Thirds with the scaffolding off-center to the right and with the area between the men and the scaffolding lined up directly along those imaginary gridlines' rightmost intersections. In this case, using the Rule of Thirds showcases the enormous size of the concrete tank for a dramatic perspective. Had this particular image been framed with the men and the scaffolding centered, you'd have more of the sky and the trees on the right and less emphasis on the craftsmanship that was at play in this shot, as well as less emphasis on the size of the structure. This shot, in particular, has a wow factor because of how it was framed.

Both of these photos showcase the Rule of Thirds at play and how effective this type of framing can be for shotcrete-specific photography.

IN CONCLUSION

Sometimes we take photos using the Rule of Thirds out of instinct because it makes sense based on what we see in front of us, and sometimes we take them because we learned something new about the Rule of Thirds, and we want to spice things up a bit to really represent our work in a more deliberate, impactful way.

I encourage you to consider using the Rule of Thirds the next time you take photos of your shotcrete jobs. All it takes, really, is a keen eye to take in the elements you see in your smartphone camera's viewfinder and a small, deliberate movement of your hands to frame the shot!

In fact, try this: take three versions of a photo with the same point of focus, just like I've shown you in this article. Take one photo with the point of focus centered, one with it following the Rule of Thirds aligned to the right, and the last following the Rule of Thirds aligned to the left. Then decide which works best for your purposes. You might send in the left-aligned photo for your next article submission to *Shotcrete* magazine, and the one that is centered might be best used on your social media. Best case scenario: you have three photos to choose from, all of which look just a little differently from one another, like my zinnia photo examples.

With that being said, sometimes we throw the Rule of Thirds out the window because a beautiful sky above our primary point of focus is like icing on the cake, and we absolutely must get it all into one photograph without trying to be artistic about it. Sometimes centering the focal point dead center in the middle is the best choice because you thought about it and that's what you're going to do. Sometimes taking an extreme closeup is necessary to show texture, and the entire image becomes the focal point. And sometimes, some other framing is what that particular photo calls for. Regardless, you are the judge as you juxtapose

your focal point against impactful, efficient, or aesthetically driven framing.

I encourage you to play around with the Rule of Thirds when taking photographs of your shotcrete jobs. Frame your images using this method, and see what you come up with! Then you can do two things: tag #artofshotcrete on social media, and send those images to us at *Shotcrete* when you write articles for the magazine or when you submit your jobs for the next Awards issue!

WHY USE THE RULE OF THIRDS?

- Context – insights to what's going on
- Perspective – insight into scope of work, magnitude of work
- Balance – visually highlights focal point
- Space – allows comments for marketing purposes
- Interest – allows the eye to travel



Cindy Spires recently joined the American Shotcrete Association (ASA) as the Managing Editor of *Shotcrete* magazine. Her background is in teaching writing at the university level and in developmental and copy editing for professional and academic writers. Originally from the deep south, Cindy moved to San Diego in 2000 and earned a B.A. in English from San Diego State University. She has lived in the Detroit area since 2005 when she came to Wayne State University to earn her M.A. in English. One of Cindy's greatest strengths is helping writers communicate their intended purpose through their writing.

REFERENCES:

1. Brady Snyder, "How to Use the iPhone's Camera Grid to Create Perfectly Framed Photos," Screen Rant, August 24, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/iphone-camera-grid-frame-photos-use-how/>.
2. Khara Plicanic, et al. "How to Use, and Break, the Rule of Thirds," Adobe, <https://www.adobe.com/creativecloud/photography/discover/rule-of-thirds.html>.