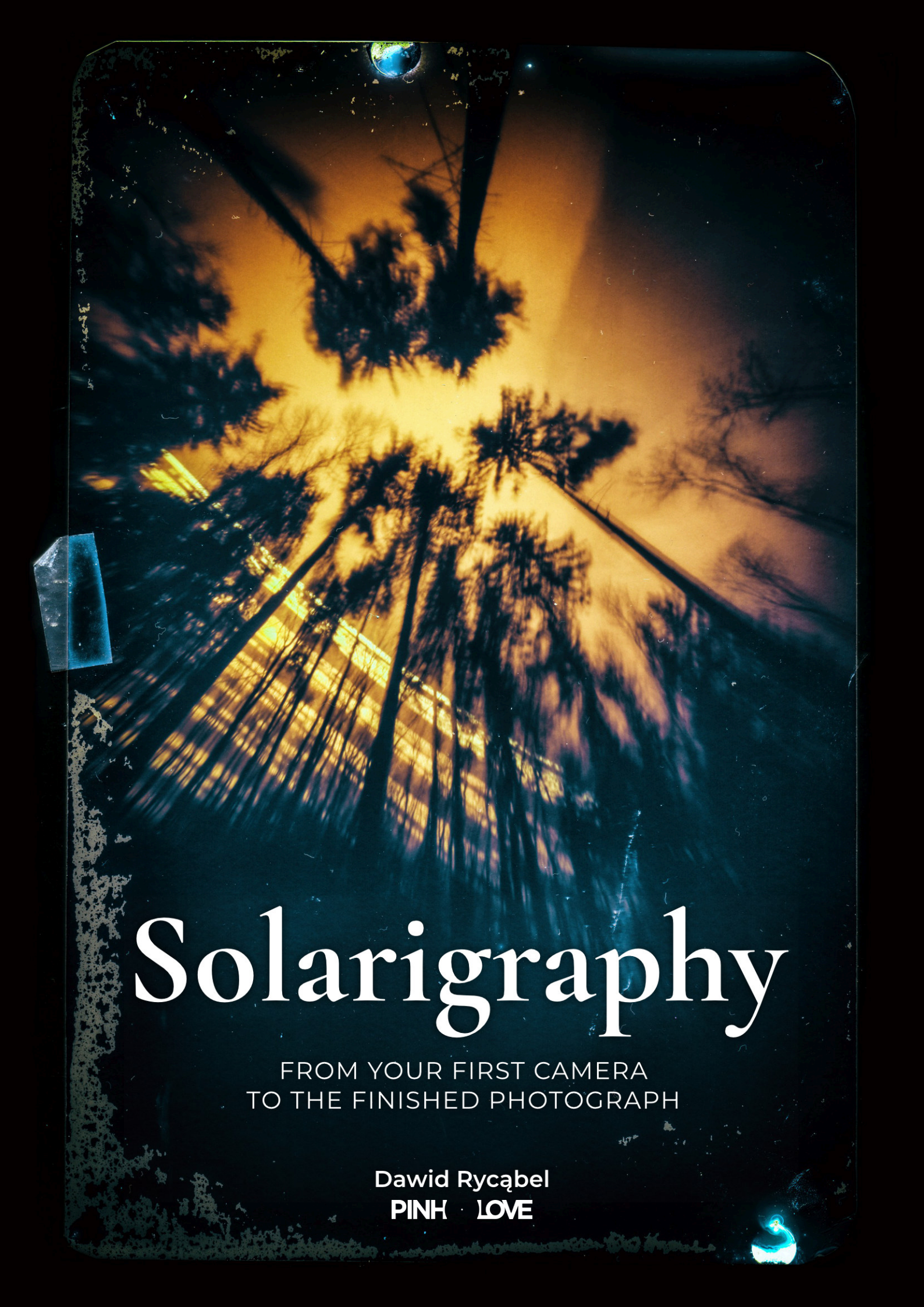

Solarigraphy

FROM YOUR FIRST CAMERA
TO THE FINISHED PHOTOGRAPH

Dawid Rycąbel

PINK · LOVE

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7. How Do You Choose a Location for a Solarigraph?

We now have the camera, the paper and a good pinhole. Now comes a question that may have a bigger influence on the final photograph than all the work so far: where should you put the camera?

In solarigraphy, we choose a frame whose result we'll only see in a few months' time. There's no screen on which we can check a test shot straight away and decide whether to move the camera half a metre. That's why it's worth taking a moment to choose the location.

Start with the direction

In Poland, I usually point my cameras towards the south. That's where we can record the characteristic arcs showing the Sun's path across the sky. The camera doesn't have to point exactly south. Sometimes a building or a tree gets in the way, or there simply isn't a suitable place to mount the can.

And that's not a problem. In solarigraphy, not everything has to be precisely calculated. A slight deviation towards the south-east or south-west can give an equally interesting – and sometimes even more interesting – result.



[Solarigraphs made with a camera pointing south.]

I also position cameras facing east and west. Then the places where the Sun rises or sets become particularly interesting, as they shift very noticeably along the horizon over the course of the year. I very rarely point cameras north. If what we mainly want are the characteristic sun trails, south, east and west offer far more possibilities.



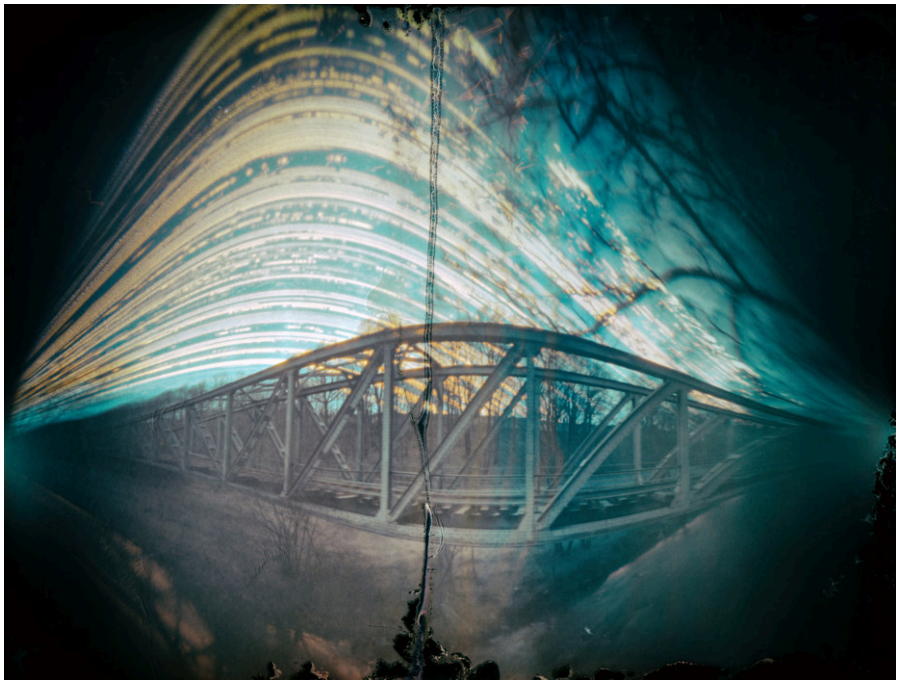
[Three examples – a camera pointing east, south and west.]

A beautiful view doesn't always make a good frame

This is one of the most important things solarigraphy has taught me. We're standing in front of a beautiful landscape. In the distance there are mountains, a valley, a forest and a small town. We look at it all and think: this is where a great solarigraph will be made. A few months later, we take the camera down and it turns out that the result is much less spectacular than we expected.

Why? A pinhole camera made from a can has a very wide angle of view. Distant features of the landscape become small in the photograph. Mountains that dominated the horizon to our eyes may look like small hills in a solarigraph.

That's why, in solarigraphy, I really like placing the camera close to the subject. A building, a church, a bridge, a monument, a distinctive tree or another stationary feature relatively close to the camera can give a much more interesting composition than a vast landscape seen from a great distance.



[A bridge close to the camera becomes a prominent element of the composition.]

What looks impressive to our eyes won't necessarily look the same through a pinhole.

Get closer

Beginners often place the camera too far from the subject. This comes from being used to an ordinary camera or a phone. We think that if we get too close to a building, it won't fit in the frame. With a pinhole camera, we can often get much closer than our intuition tells us.



[The camera's mounting location and the resulting solarigraph – the wide angle of view captured the whole church despite the short distance.]

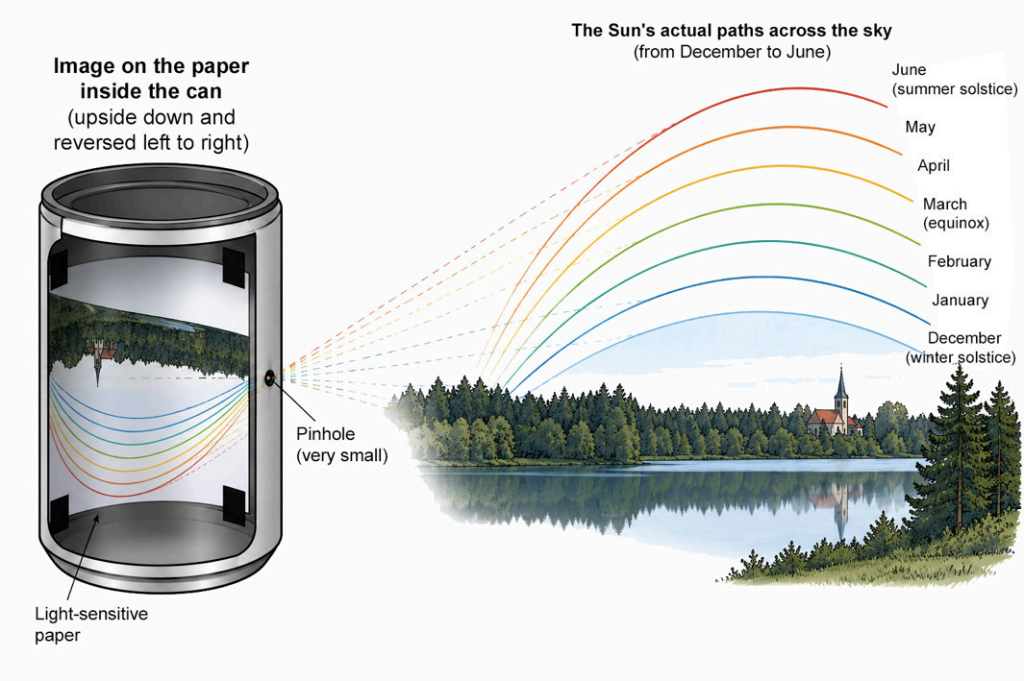
It's worth making deliberate use of this feature. A close foreground can become a strong element of the photograph, with sun trails appearing above it over the following months.

Think beyond today's Sun

A solarigraph records not one day, but whole weeks and months. If we start the exposure around the summer solstice and end it at the winter solstice, we'll record the change in the Sun's path from its highest to its lowest. In summer in Poland, the Sun is high above the horizon. With each passing month, its daily path runs lower and lower, until it reaches its lowest position around the winter solstice.

With a camera pointing south, what we'll mainly see is the change in the height of the successive arcs. When photographing a sunrise or sunset, the situation is even more interesting. Over the course of the year, the point on the horizon where the Sun rises and sets also changes.

That's why, when planning a six-month exposure, don't just look at where the Sun is today. Think about where it will be in a few months' time, too.

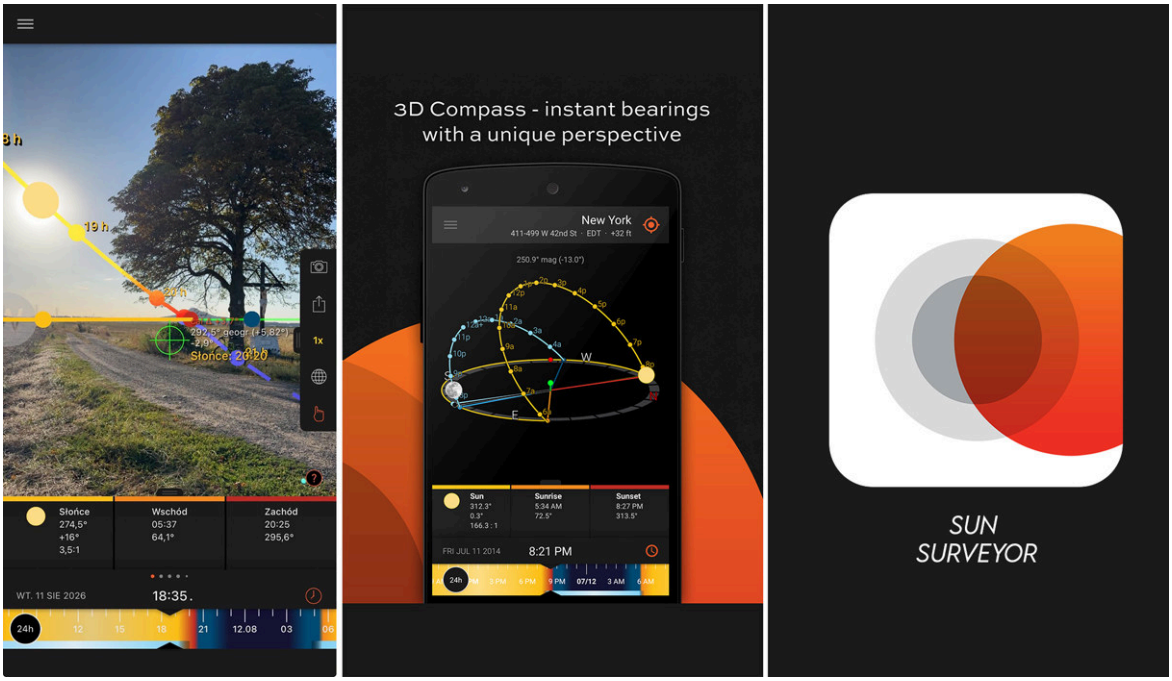


[The change in the height of the Sun's daily path between 21 June and 21 December.]

Your phone can be a big help

Of course, we don't have to predict everything by eye. When planning my cameras, I use the Sun Surveyor app, among others. It lets you see on your phone screen the direction and position of the Sun for a chosen date and time.

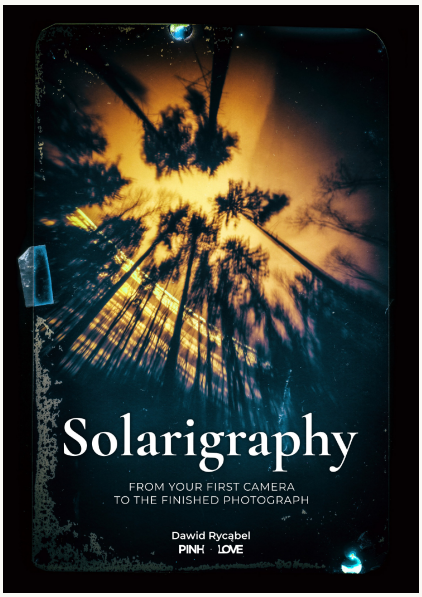
The view that uses the image from the phone's camera is especially useful. Standing exactly where the camera will be, we can see where the Sun's path will run. We can also check different dates. This makes it easier to predict, for example, where the Sun will rise in summer and where it will rise in winter.



[The Sun Surveyor app – a preview of the Sun's position and path while planning where to mount the camera.]

Your first solarigraph starts here.

From your first camera
to the finished photograph



This was a sample of the chapter "How Do You Choose a Location for a Solarigraph?" In the full guide, I will take you through the entire process, from preparing your camera to editing your own photograph.

Inside you will find:

· Camera building, choosing paper and making the pinhole.

· Mounting outdoors, planning and exposure times.

· Scanning, editing, and common mistakes and their causes.

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