

FIELD GUIDE / 2026 EDITION

The View From Above Answers What No **Eye-Level** Image Can

Altitude and angle and what each one says, why the context model is the real cost, drone plate against pure CGI, and an aerial brief you can fill in and send.



START HERE

Five questions only an aerial can answer

Every eye-level image shows one place, at one moment, from one person's height. That is the right tool for selling a room or a doorway. It cannot answer the questions a buyer, a neighbour or an investment committee asks first, because those questions are all about relationships — between blocks, between phases, between the scheme and the things already around it.

THE QUESTION	WHAT THE IMAGE HAS TO MAKE OBVIOUS
Where is it, really?	The scheme in its actual surroundings — the coastline, the ridge, the motorway, the town centre it is sold as being near. This is the single job an aerial does that nothing else does.
How do the blocks relate?	Heights against each other, the spaces between them, which windows face which, where the sun lands at the time of day you chose.
How do I get in, and where do I park?	The entrance, the route from the road, visitor parking, service and refuse access, and whether cars are on the surface or underground.
What gets built when?	Phase boundaries, and honestly, what the site looks like while phase two is still a construction compound.
What is the open space actually like?	How much there is, whether it is usable or left over, and whether the planting shown is at year one or year fifteen.

Decide the question before the camera

An aerial that tries to answer all five at once answers none of them. Pick the one question this image exists to settle, write it at the top of the brief, and judge every later decision — altitude, angle, how much context, what gets labelled — against that one sentence. Two aerials answering one question each beat one that is merely comprehensive.



STEP 01

Altitude and angle, and what each one says

Height and tilt are not taste decisions. They change which of the five questions the image can answer, and they change the cost, because the higher you go the more of the world has to exist.

VIEW	WHAT IT COMMUNICATES	WHAT IT CANNOT DO
Low oblique Just above the roofs	Architecture, materials and the street. Still feels human, and reads as a place rather than a plan.	Shows very little of the layout. Rear blocks disappear behind front ones.
Mid oblique The workhorse	The whole scheme with its immediate surroundings, blocks still reading as buildings with facades. The best single image for most developments.	The far side of a large site is small and unreadable. Facade detail starts to be lost.
High oblique	The scheme in its wider setting — the town, the coast, the valley. This is the context and connectivity image.	Individual buildings become massing. Do not expect anyone to judge architecture from it.
Near-plan Steeplly down	Layout, phasing, parking and open space, with enough 3D left to show height. The best base for overlays and labels.	No sense of what it is like to be there, and roofs become the dominant material in the image.

Direction matters more than height

Choose the direction from the thing you want in the background. Viewing towards the sea, the park or the skyline puts your best argument behind the scheme for free. Viewing towards the industrial estate puts it there instead, and no amount of light fixes that. Pick the direction first, then find the height that makes it work.

Lens, and the honesty problem

A wide lens from close in makes a scheme look expansive and separates the blocks. A longer lens from further away compresses it and shows the density more truthfully. Both are legitimate; they are not equally honest, and a consultee who visits the site will notice which one you chose.

Ask for a set of quick untextured massing views before the image is made, so the altitude and direction are chosen on evidence rather than described in words. It is the cheapest decision-making in the whole job.



STEP 02

The context is the cost

People assume an aerial is expensive because it is big. It is expensive because of everything that is not your building. At eye level you model a street. From a high oblique you are modelling a district, and every roof, tree, car park and river in that district has to exist and be plausible.

BAND	WHAT IT NEEDS TO BE
Your scheme	Full detail, from the issued drawings, at the current revision.
Immediate neighbours	Modelled properly with real materials. These are what a reviewer compares your heights against, and the part people check first.
The middle distance	Simplified massing with representative textures. Correct footprints and heights matter far more than detail here.
The far distance	Terrain and imagery, softened by distance and atmosphere. Cheap if planned, and the thing that makes the image feel like a real place.
Landmarks	Anything recognisable must be recognisable. A local landmark rendered as a grey box undermines the whole image for the audience that knows the area.

Set these bands as distances in your brief. "Full detail to 150 metres from the boundary, simplified massing to 600, imagery beyond" is a sentence that lets a studio price the job accurately and stops the context quietly growing.

AI helps most where nature carries the frame — greenery, water, planting. It helps least on bare urban blocks, where everything has to be built.

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Which is directly useful here: a landscape-heavy masterplan gets cheaper help than a dense urban block does, and the context bands are where that difference shows up in a quote.

Drone plate, or pure CGI?

Real drone photography as a plate

Unarguably real surroundings, and almost no context modelling. In exchange you accept the weather and the season you got, a camera position that cannot be adjusted afterwards, and a flight that has to be arranged, permitted and repeated if it fails. Ask your operator what permissions apply where you are, and ask for the camera height, position and lens to be recorded on the day — without them the montage cannot be built accurately.

Pure CGI aerial

Any camera, any season, any time of day, any phase, and it can be revised. In exchange you pay for the context model and you carry the risk that the surroundings look generic. Best when the site is changing anyway, when several phases must be shown, or when nothing yet exists to photograph.



STEP 03

Phasing, labels, and the brief

Phasing overlays

Build one camera and render every phase from it, as separate layers, in one sitting. Produced together they cost little more than one image and they can be animated, printed as a sequence or dropped into a deck. Produced a year apart they are a new job and the camera never quite matches.

Ask for the completed-scheme version and the phase-one-only version at minimum. The second is the one a neighbour and a funder both actually want, and it is the one nobody thinks to commission.

Labels that survive the print

Labels on an aerial sit on top of a busy photographic scene, which is harder than labelling a flat plan. Keep them short, set them on a plain plate or a solid leader line rather than directly on the image, and never rely on colour alone to distinguish phases.

Then check them at the size the image will actually be seen: a slide at the back of a room, an A1 board from three metres, a portal thumbnail. Anything you cannot read there is decoration. Always ask for a clean unlabelled version as well — it is free at the time and it is what every later use needs.

AERIAL / MASTERPLAN BRIEF scheme _____ rev _____

THE ONE QUESTION THIS IMAGE ANSWERS _____

AUDIENCE _____ SEEN AT _____ (board / deck / portal)

VIEW

Altitude low oblique / mid oblique / high oblique / near-plan

Viewed from _____ looking towards _____

In the background must be _____

Season _____ Time of day _____ Weather _____

CONTEXT BANDS (distance from site boundary)

Full detail to _____ m Simplified massing to _____ m

Imagery / terrain beyond _____ m

Landmarks that must be recognisable _____

BASE pure CGI ____ drone plate ____

If plate: who flies _____ permissions confirmed by _____

Camera height, position and lens recorded on the day? ____

Topographical survey supplied ____ Tree survey ____

PHASES render from this one camera: _____

Phase-one-only version required? ____ Animated sequence? ____

LABELS items to label _____ longest label _____ characters

Legible at the viewing distance above? ____

Clean unlabelled version also delivered? ____

Layered file, phases as separate layers? ____

Send this with the drawings rather than describing it in an email. The two lines that save the most money are the context bands and the single question at the top.

WORKING WITH A STUDIO

Cost, and how to brief it

Two things people ask us before anything else. Both answers are short.

COMMISSIONED WORK	FREELANCER	STUDIO
Single exterior still	\$100 – 300	\$250 – 600
Single interior still	\$120 – 350	\$300 – 700
Package, 5–8 views	\$600 – 1,500	\$1,500 – 4,000
Animation, per minute	\$1,000 – 3,000	\$3,000 – 8,000

Market ranges we are willing to publish. Turnaround and revision-round figures are deliberately not in this table: ours vary too much by project type to state as a benchmark, and an invented number here would be worse than none.

How to brief it — shorter is better

This is the opposite of what most people assume. Four things:

- What you need — **how many images, and of what**
- The plans and elevations, as they are
- A few reference images for mood and light
- One clear line on what the images are *for*

Inflating a small job into a fifty-page specification backfires: taken literally it comes out ugly, and it misleads the people doing the work. Tell them the intent and let the team that does this daily handle the detail.

The mistake that costs the most

The biggest failure we see is not choosing the wrong vendor. It is **timing**. People start looking only after the first supplier has already failed and the deadline is on fire, then choose in a panic.

Line up and vet rendering partners **before** you need one. One, ideally a few, briefed and ready to take work. It costs an afternoon now and saves a project later.

10+

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VISUAL STORYTELLING

350+

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EMPOWERED GLOBALLY

95%

CLIENT
SATISFACTION RATE

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INCLUDE MOTION OR 360



MAVERICK
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When the image has to hold up, **talk to us**

We are a CGI studio: architectural and product rendering, 3D modelling, animation, 360 tours and VR. Ten years, 350+ brands and agencies, and the kind of work that still looks right when somebody counts the windows.

Send us the plans and a line on what the images are for. You get a scope and a price, and no obligation to use either.

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Maverick Frame production render. · Cost ranges are market ranges as of 2026 and are not a quotation.

