



FIELD GUIDE / 2026 EDITION

Hiring a CGI Studio in California

Images that have to survive a public hearing rather than sell a unit: what a studio must be able to document, and how the light and planting give you away.



START HERE

A hearing room is not a sales gallery

A buyer wants to be persuaded. A hearing room contains people who drive that street every day, know which tree is on the corner, and are looking for the thing your image is not showing. They are a hostile reader in the technical sense, and a marketing image hands them their argument for free.

The distinction is not about quality. It is about what the image is for. A flattering camera angle is doing its job in a brochure and is evidence of bad faith in a staff report.

	SALES IMAGE	ENTITLEMENT IMAGE
Viewpoint	Chosen to flatter	Chosen because someone stands there — often nominated for you
Context	Simplified, softened	Accurate, including the buildings you would rather crop out
Planting	Mature on day one	Stated: at planting, or at a stated number of years
Light	The best hour of the year	A stated date and time, defensible and repeatable
The question it answers	Would you like to live here	Is this what will actually be there

You will usually need both, and they are two commissions, not one image used twice. The expensive mistake is producing the sales set first and then asking whether it can be submitted.



STEP 01

What the studio must be able to document

Ask for this list in the first call, before anything is commissioned. A studio that produces it routinely will say so in a sentence. A studio that has never been asked will offer to look into it, which is your answer.

RECORDED FOR EVERY VIEW	WHY IT GETS ASKED FOR
Camera location, as coordinates	So anyone can stand there and compare. A viewpoint described as "from the park" cannot be checked, which makes the image unverifiable.
Eye height above grade	A camera raised a metre changes what a building hides. State it and it is a fact; leave it out and it is an allegation.
Focal length and field of view	A wide lens shrinks a building. This is the single most common technical objection raised against a montage.
Date and time used for shadows	Shadow claims are geometric. They can only be checked against a stated moment.
Source and vintage of context geometry	Survey, aerial data, point cloud, modelled from photographs. Each carries a different accuracy, and someone will ask which.
What is proposed, existing, approved or speculative	Ideally rendered distinguishably. A neighbouring scheme shown as though built, without a note, is a real problem.
Photography data, for a montage	Position, lens, height, date, conditions. Without it the plate cannot be matched and cannot be defended.
Post-production actually applied	What was retouched, removed or added after rendering. Removing a parked car is ordinary; removing a building is not.

Two lines in the corner of each image — viewpoint reference, camera height, focal length, date and time — convert an image from something to be argued about into something to be checked. It costs nothing at production time and it is close to impossible to add later.

STEP 02

Honest massing, shadow and view impact

01 Show the building at the height it will be, from where people will see it

Including the roof plant, the parapet, the lift overrun and anything else that arrives after the pretty image was made. If it is going on the roof, it belongs in the massing view.

02 Include the neighbours you would rather not

The blank wall, the utility yard, the older block next door. Cropping them out is noticed, and once it is noticed everything else in the pack is read as advocacy.

03 State the planting assumption on the image itself

"Planting shown at approximately ten years" is a defensible statement. Mature canopy with no note is the fastest way to lose a room, because everyone present knows what a newly planted tree looks like.

04 Keep the shadow study geometric and separate

Shadow and overshadowing work is a measurement, not a picture. Produce it as its own set, at stated dates and times, and do not mix it with the marketing light.

05 Do not light the proposal better than its neighbours

One sun, one exposure, one atmosphere across the whole frame. A proposal that glows while the existing street sits in shade is the oldest tell there is.

06 Produce the unflattering view as well

Whichever view you are avoiding is the one that will be requested. Producing it yourself, with the camera data attached, is cheaper than producing it in a hurry between hearings.

Questions for your planning consultant — not answers from us

Requirements differ by city, by county and by application type, and they change. We do not advise on any of it. Get these in writing from your own consultant and from the jurisdiction before commissioning:

- Are visual simulations required, and to what standard or methodology
- Who nominates the viewpoints, and how many are expected
- Are photomontages required, or are model views acceptable
- What shadow, view or visual impact analysis must accompany the application
- Must a methodology statement or the underlying camera data be submitted
- What becomes part of the public record, and in what format and resolution

STEP 03

The light, and the planting that dates you

Two things mark an image as made by somebody who has not been there, and a room full of locals reads both instantly.

The light

Long dry months of hard, high sun with very little haze inland, and a coastal condition that is completely different — morning marine layer, flat grey light until it burns off, then clarity. A studio that renders the coast as though it were the valley, or either as though it were northern Europe, produces an image that is technically fine and locally wrong. Ask which condition they intend, and ask to see it in work they have already done.

The planting

Lawns and thirsty ornamental planting date a scheme immediately and invite a question you do not want in a hearing. Drought-tolerant and fire-conscious planting is not just correct, it looks current. Take the species list from your landscape architect and give it to the studio as a named list — not "some greenery", which is how a Mediterranean stock library ends up in a California submission.

ENTITLEMENT VIEW SET — brief sheet

VIEWPOINTS nominated by _____ count ____
for each: coordinates ____ eye height ____ lens ____

CONTEXT source _____ vintage _____
neighbouring approved schemes shown? ____
shown distinguishably from existing? ____

SHADOWS dates _____ times _____

PLANTING species list from _____
shown at: planting ____ years ____ stated on image ____

POST what may be retouched? _____

LABELLING camera data printed on each image? ____

OUTPUT resolution _____ format _____ public
record copy supplied separately? ____



Maverick Frame production render.

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+

YEARS RENDERING
VISUAL STORYTELLING

350+

BRANDS & AGENCIES
EMPOWERED GLOBALLY

95%

CLIENT
SATISFACTION RATE

40%+

OF OUR COMMISSIONS NOW
INCLUDE MOTION OR 360

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.

START HERE

maverickframe.com/contacts

SEE THE WORK

maverickframe.com/gallery

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