

A Photographer's Sense of Space: Looking at the Work of Gabriele Basilico

ABSTRACTS

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Gabriele Basilico and the New Topographics aesthetic

Gabriele Basilico's early photographs of the city and its outskirts are often said to conform to the 'new topographics' aesthetic – an approach to landscape representation linked to the work in the 1975 exhibition of the same name. In this paper I examine two of Basilico's early projects – *Ritratte di Fabbriche* (1978-80), and *Bord de Mer* (mid-1980s) – to show that his work departs from the new topographics aesthetic in important respects. The New Topographics photographers used repetition – of architectural typologies and framing strategies – to level distinctions between individual images, to draw attention to the homogeneity of built space, and to diminish any signs of the photographer's subjectivity. Basilico, on the other hand, is consistently drawn to the heterogeneity of the built environment, using light and shadow to highlight the individuality of architectural forms and the way that they are networked into the urban fabric. Where the New Topographics work was broadly concerned with the refashioning of the city's edges as abstract spaces of global capitalism, Basilico's work constitutes a sustained reflection on the concrete character of real space.

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Gabriele Basilico's photography and the experience of place

In this paper I reflect on some key aspects of Basilico's aesthetics and analyse both extracts from his writing and selected photographs. In particular I explore his photography in relation to the 'experience of place', in the sense of aesthetic experience, in the etymological sense of the word 'aesthetics', namely something pertaining to all the senses, and an experience that bridges an intellectual with an affective and imaginative approach to the exterior. I aim to show how this experience for Basilico results from a balanced approach between 'misurazione e contemplazione', that is between measuring up, mapping a space, and contemplating a place, namely a more experiential, embodied approach to places, which connects the individual to a place and a collectivity, and therefore their history and memory. This challenges a clear-cut dichotomy between documentary and artistic photography and rather sees them as coexisting approaches to the exterior, at once ethic and aesthetic. By contextualizing Basilico's work within a 'change in the collective sensibility' (Zerbi 1998) towards the environment – which is paralleled by the convergence of scholarly debates on place and landscape (often broadly referred to as 'spatial or landscape turn') since the mid-1980s – I contend that his work has made an important contribution to the contemporary depiction, narration and theorization of place and landscape, by championing a slow gaze and an aesthetic view that broadens the notion of landscape from merely aesthetically pleasing sites to what-so-ever places to be both documented and reimagined.

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Gabriele Basilico and 'the deserted dog days of August'

When thinking of Gabriele Basilico's photography it seems quite impossible not to imagine empty cities of a silently destroyed civilization. To get a clearer idea of his visual research every enthusiastic of stylish architectural photography should flip through the pages of the photo-book *Ritratti di Fabbriche*. Here you can truly experience what a suburban street in Milan looks like during a hot summer day. The theme of uninhabited urban industrial space is a major *leitmotiv* of Basilico's celebrated work. His search for a documentary meaning in photography evolved during his lifetime. Starting from his portraits of abandoned factories, Basilico translated into images the emptiness of physical space, and gave a new aesthetic value to the absence of human figures in the picture. His vision was able to give back to Milan's empty suburbs their charming poetry and the magic suspension of early morning lights.

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My point of arrival': Gabriele Basilico's photobooks

The photobook was an integral part of Gabriele Basilico's practice and he was often very involved in the editorial production and process of his volumes. As he himself stated, 'Books, large or small, were often my point of arrival, the shape in print and on paper of a project' (Basilico 2006). During his lifetime, Gabriele Basilico's work was published in over one hundred exhibition catalogues, photobooks, and group publications. In addition to monographs, his work has been included in a number of group photography volumes that usually address the theme of the built environment. Additionally, Basilico's work has been the subject of exhibition catalogues and photobooks that pair his work with other artists or photographers. So prolific was this output that an exhibition dedicated to his volumes, *Gabriele Basilico: Photo Books 1978-2005*, was held in Milan in 2006. My paper explores Basilico's photobook production by looking at two example volumes: *Milan Berlin Valencia* (2001) and *Cityscapes* (2000). It develops a comparative analysis of the design, narrative, sequencing, and presentational elements of these two volumes. The paper investigates how the presentation of each of Basilico's photographs work in conjunction with the narrative capacity of the book format to advance a position on urban space.