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Shinkle, E.**

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The city inhabits me: space, topology, and Gabriele Basilico's *Milano*.

Ritratti di fabbriche

Eugenie Shinkle

University of Westminster

shinkle@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract:

The 1975 *New Topographics* exhibition has been inscribed into the history of photography as a starting point to which nearly all visually cognate practices can be traced back. This held back more subtle and nuanced readings of much English and European work of the same era, particularly in the English-language press. Set in a more extended historical and geographical context, the work exhibited in *New Topographics* can be understood as part of a wider process of photographic exploration that took place alongside shifting patterns of production and consumption that transformed the global landscape in the decades following World War II. The exhibition also set out a specific position regarding the nature of topographic photography itself. Although *New Topographics* did not take an explicitly critical stance vis-a-vis landscape, one of its most enduring legacies has been the emergence of a 'new topographics' aesthetic that is understood as critically engaged simply by virtue of its distanced, deadpan style. To argue that particular photographers work in the topographic mode is thus to overlook the socio-political and geographical specificities of the places they represent, in favour of formal similarities. This paper examines

Gabriele Basilico's first project, *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche (1978-80)* [Milan. Portraits of factories], through the photographs themselves, the context out of which they emerged, their presentation in book form, and Basilico's own approach to the environments in which he photographed. I argue that *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* shares less than we might assume with the *New Topographics* work. Rather, it embodies a way of understanding and representing space as *topological*: heterogeneous and fluid, composed of multiple and often contradictory objects, processes and agents.

Keywords: New Topographics; topology; Henri Lefebvre; built space; landscape;

Gabriele Basilico

Eugenie Shinkle

The city inhabits me: a topological study of Gabriele Basilico's *Milano*.

Ritratti di fabbriche

Every discipline has its historical touchstones. For twentieth-century photography, one such moment came in 1975, with the *New Topographics* exhibition. Widely – and rightly – regarded as one of the most important photographic exhibitions of its time, *New Topographics* did not make an immediate impression when it was first shown. Subsequently, however, it has been inscribed as the starting point of a global paradigm shift in landscape photography – a benchmark for a generation of photographers and a point of departure for those that followed.

The retrospective labelling of *New Topographics* as uniquely innovative – a wholesale rejection of earlier modes of landscape photography and the principal source of inspiration for a host of ensuing practices – has held back more nuanced readings of much English and European work of the same vintage, particularly in the English-language press.¹ Set in a more extended historical and geographical context, the work in *New Topographics* can be understood as part of a wider process of photographic exploration that took place alongside shifting capital flows reshaping the global landscape in the decades following World War II. This process took different forms in different countries. *New Topographics* presented landscape photography as an extension of the documentary mode and a vehicle for an objective vision. Though it did not set out a specific critical position vis-à-vis landscape, the exhibition is often

discussed, retrospectively, as though it had.² One of its most enduring legacies was the subsequent emergence of a generic ‘new topographics’ aesthetic – the human-altered landscape photographed in a distanced, deadpan style that acts as a shorthand for political and critical content.³

To argue that particular photographers work in a topographic mode is thus to overlook, to some extent, the socio-political and geographical specificities of the places they represent in favour of formal or aesthetic similarities. It is also to overlook the singular nature of relationships between photographers and the environments they photographed. Visually, socially, and historically, post-war changes to the urban landscape and its margins meant something very different to photographers working outside of North America. The fringes of most European cities, for example, do not bear direct comparison to the North American suburbs that defined the ‘new topographics’ aesthetic. As German photographer Holger Trulzsch remarked to American Lewis Baltz at a seminar in the 1980s: ‘You do not understand the difficulty we have in Europe. We have centuries of representation of landscape painting behind us, and we must put together a Romanesque church, a phone booth and a petrol pump. We must manage historical and visual data more complicated than yours.’⁴

It was exactly this sort of visual, social, and historical complexity that confronted Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico in the late 1970s when he created *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* [Milan. Portraits of factories] (1978-80). The project – an extended study of Milan’s industrial districts – was Basilico’s first major body of work. Though Basilico was aware of the *New Topographics* exhibition and acknowledged its importance, *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* owes less than one might think to the ‘new topographics’ aesthetic. The images themselves, their presentation in the eponymous book, and

Basilico's own relationship to the environments he photographed, all embody a way of understanding and representing place that is less topographic than it is *topological*. As a heuristic device, topology provides a more fluid way of thinking through the relationships between space, time, and representation. Rather than an objective assessment of visible features, topology is concerned with the relationships – social, historical, political, physical, and geographical – between landscapes and the various actors that operate in and on them.

The difference between the topographic and the topological can be mapped out loosely onto Henri Lefebvre's distinction between abstract space and lived space. The first of these terms corresponds closely to the way that space was formulated by the *New Topographics* exhibition. The second is more descriptive of Basilico's encounter with space and the way he used the camera to register this encounter. These two sets of terms – which I understand here as points on a continuum rather than as strict binaries – provide the framework for a retrospective critique of the *New Topographics* exhibition, and of the conceptual space opened up by the 'new topographics' aesthetic.

New Topographics

New Topographics opened at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, in late 1975. The brainchild of William Jenkins, then assistant curator of twentieth-century photography at Eastman House, it comprised 168 photographs by ten photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel Jr. Collectively, the work emerged out of a rich conceptual and historical foundation that included photographers and artists like Walker Evans and Ed Ruscha, and ideas drawn from emerging fields

such as landscape and environmental studies.⁵ Jenkins' catalogue essay, however, described a narrower compass. *New Topographics*, he maintained, was concerned predominately with the question of 'stylistic anonymity' – the appearance of neutrality and objectivity regardless of subject matter. 'Stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state', Jenkins wrote, the photographs in the exhibition '[convey] substantial amounts of visual information but [eschew] entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion'.⁶ All of the work in the exhibition conformed to a broadly similar idiom: taxonomies of built forms in images so bland and dispassionate that some viewers were not convinced they belonged in an art gallery at all.⁷ Levelling distinctions between diverse practices and individual images, the topographic mode suppressed evidence of the photographer's subjectivity, ostensibly sidestepping political or critical statements in favour of a purely descriptive function.

Although *New Topographics* was originally conceived as an exhibition of architectural photography, Jenkins (and Deal, with whom he collaborated in planning the exhibition) realised early on that the real subject matter was in fact the built environment. All of the photographers were concerned with vernacular structures set in the wider context of the North American landscape: from small towns in the American Midwest and Canada to motels along Route 66; from newly built industrial parks to the historical infrastructure of coal and salt mining. This diversity notwithstanding, the 'new topographics' aesthetic is routinely associated with the American suburbia as a motif for alienation and estrangement. The work that is most closely identified with this aesthetic – that of Baltz, Adams and Deal⁸ – concentrated, by and large, on the planned spaces of new residential and light industrial developments. Unpeopled and drained of affect, the drab reaches on

the edges of America's cities symbolised the collapse of regional identity and the retreat of built space from a dialogue with the individual.

With hindsight, the work in the *New Topographics* exhibition might be understood as a nascent interrogation of 'abstract space' – Henri Lefebvre's idiom for space as it is mobilised in the context of advanced capitalism. The concept of abstract space is part of Lefebvre's broader critique of the economic, political, and spiritual alienation that characterised capitalist modernity. Abstraction, for Lefebvre, is a historical process entailing the gradual withdrawal of social relations from lived space, and the suppression of the material, symbolic, and creative dimensions of lived experience. Just as capitalism regards human labour as a commodity available for exploitation, it understands abstract space as distinct from concrete or real space – a quantified materiality, a resource mobilised in the chain of production, distribution, and consumption.

Though modern abstract space, as Lefebvre defined it, did not emerge until the nineteenth century, earlier technologies of representation played a crucial role in emptying lived space of its affective qualities. Renaissance perspective was one such technology. Experimented with and formulated in 1429 by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi and set out as a pictorial technique in 1435 by Leon Battista Alberti, linear perspective – also known as Albertian perspective – had cognate forms in other fields. Euclidean space was the theoretical variant used in two- and three-dimensional geometry; the addition of a co-ordinate system by Descartes in the seventeenth century allowed any point in so-called 'Cartesian' space to be identified by its numbered position on a set of perpendicular axes. All of these representational forms proposed space as homogeneous, gridded, quantifiable, and exchangeable; for the purposes of this

argument at least, they are more or less synonymous. Historically, they have played an instrumental role in the commodification of space and the abstraction of lived experience.

Drawing on arguments made by Heidegger, Lefebvre regards such forms as part of the machinery of spatial abstraction. Deployed institutionally and by the state, Cartesian representations of space are technocratic instruments in the planning and production of abstract space. For the capitalist imagination, space is an empty, homogeneous volume to be mapped, organised and filled – as Lefebvre describes it, ‘a container ready to receive fragmentary contents, a *neutral* medium into which disjointed things, people and habitats might be introduced.’⁹ Configured by state power and the logic of capital ‘for accumulation and growth, calculation, planning, programming’,¹⁰ abstract space is the formal and ontological matrix of the ‘new topographics’ aesthetic.

Topographic maps are based on the logic of the grid. A similar schema is at work in perspective projection systems, cameras, and other visual technologies designed to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. William Jenkins’ definition of the topographic state as ‘the detailed and accurate description of a particular place [...] or tract of land’¹¹ thus implies a degree of complicity between the photographers’ subject matter and the structure of the camera itself. This was particularly pronounced in the work of Lewis Baltz. In the words of writer Gus Blaisdell, the buildings Baltz photographed were physical equivalents of the camera’s internal logic: ‘nothing more than the interior geometry of Baltz’s camera projected outwards against the original schematic’.¹²

Planned, rationalised, and purged of human sensibility, linked to the map and the standardised architectural form, landscape was found to be an ideal vehicle for

photographic neutrality – the framework for an objective, rational gaze, rich in visual information but emotionally neutral. The topographic state that Jenkins identified in his essay proposed both the camera and the photograph as analytical instruments – embodiments of a gaze which was, in Jenkins’ words, ‘anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic’.¹³ The ‘technocratic rationality’ behind the planning and production of abstract space – the instrumentalised forces ‘through which abstract representations are projected onto the terrain of lived experience, as blueprints for its material transformation’¹⁴ – are articulated here in an aesthetic which sees the collapse of space, structure, the camera, and even, by implication, the photographer her/himself into an ultra-rational assemblage.

Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche

It is tempting to slot Gabriele Basilico’s work into this model. Superficially, his images use many of the same formal devices – the open, empty foregrounds, the vertiginous perspectives, the featureless oblique views empty of people, the apparently rational, almost mathematical organisation of pictorial space – as the *New Topographics* work. (Fig. 1) But these visual affinities hide significant differences in the way that Basilico conceived of built space, his own position within it and the camera’s role in representing it.

The sites that Basilico photographed for *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* had long and complex histories. Like other major Italian cities – Rome, Turin, Naples, and Florence – Milan was built on foundations that predate the Christian era. Cities such as Milan, writes Antonella Russo, ‘only have sections of modernism, buildings and districts built in various phases or in segments, while mostly preserving and still living on the

architectural structures of the pre-modern city'.¹⁵ The city suffered heavy bombardment during World War II, losing almost a third of its historic, residential, and industrial buildings. In the two decades following the end of the war, Milan, along with other industrial cities in the north, experienced rapid development and economic growth. Large-scale rebuilding saw historic architecture replaced with high-density suburban housing built to accommodate waves of immigrants from Italy's south, and the replacement of the traditional agricultural workforce with low-skilled labour. By the early 1960s, the period of economic growth had come to an end, bringing widespread unemployment and social unrest. Clashes, often violent, between students, workers, and police became increasingly common. For many Italian photographers and filmmakers, the suburbs were symbols of this unrest. Filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini identified the suburbs with a 'process of acculturation [and] transformation of particular and marginal cultures into a centralized culture that homogenizes everything'.¹⁶ In *Milano, Italia* (1959), photographer Mario Carrieri rendered the alienation of modern life in grainy black and white images of industrial landscapes on the edges of the city.

If Milan's newly built suburbs were testaments to a political system that had failed its subjects, the sites that Basilico explored in *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* embodied a longer and more nuanced history. Basilico avoided the city's historic centre and only shot a handful of photographs in the areas immediately adjacent to it: those roughly corresponding to the Navigli, Porta Romana, Porta Vittoria, Città Studi, Corso Buenos Aires, Porta Garibaldi, and Fiera San Siro districts. The majority of his photographs were taken further afield, not in the new residential suburbs, but in industrial districts dating back to the late nineteenth century. Basilico's images depict sites that are historically layered and geographically dispersed. Ornate and imposing factories and

warehouses – monuments to the industrial boom that had taken place in Northern Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – sit side-by-side with the more recent vernacular forms of sheds, transport hubs, and silos, along with the odd high-rise apartment building. If his images embody class struggle and the unequal distribution of wealth, they are also emblems of past progress and technological optimism. As political symbols, they are equivocal – less clearly about alienation than the *New Topographics* photographers' bleak depictions of suburban developments.

Basilico trained as an architect – he often referred to himself as an 'architect-photographer' – and his photographs demonstrate a polymath's fascination with the heterogeneity of built space. There's little evidence of stylistic consistency in *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche*, or of the 'formal undifferentiated approach' adopted by the *New Topographics* photographers; there is no search for anonymous, archetypal structures, and no attempt to level distinctions between them. Spare, minimal images such as *Via Gianfrancesco Pizzi* are set alongside spatially and structurally complex ones (*Via Costanza*). Strong oblique angles sit next to rectilinear frontal views, distant shots are juxtaposed with closeups, entire buildings (*via Leone Tolstoi*) next to fragments (*via Vincenzo Monti (Pero)* (Fig. 2). Images such as *via Barletta* depict complex, layered spaces, the product of many years of building, demolition, and rebuilding. Many of the photographs include street signs, advertising, and company logos; all of the images are titled with the name of the street on which they were shot. The sites that Basilico photographed are neither anonymous nor homogeneous, and his images embody this diversity.

For all of its concern with the relationship between built forms and their wider environment, much of the work in *New Topographics* tends to single out structures from

their surroundings. Adams' tract homes, Baltz's industrial units, the Bechers' coal breakers and pit heads, Schott's motels, Shore and Wessel's modest single-story houses often occupy the centre of the frame, the subject of each image set apart clearly from its context. Even the photographs that don't fit this description – Deal's densely packed images, Nixon's meticulously detailed city views, and Gohlke's empty stage sets with their monolithic foregrounds – are remarkable for their corner-to-corner clarity, their almost excessive visibility. Basilico's strategy, on the other hand, often seems to be one of partial concealment. Though some structures are shown in isolation from their immediate surroundings, others are obscured by walls, electricity pylons, overhead cables, or trees. A few appear as nearly abstract fragments. In *via Giuseppe Ripamonti*, a street advertisement dominates the foreground of the image while the architecture is relegated to the middle ground; in *via Chiese* (Fig. 3), the tower that is presumably the subject of the image is nearly hidden behind a series of street billboards. Basilico preferred to shoot in bright sunlight, drawing out certain details while obscuring others; *via Riccardo Pitteri* (Fig. 4), for instance, consists almost entirely of deep shadow. It is not always easy to identify the precise subjects of his photographs.

A different kind of order

Basilico's own account of his process seems, superficially, to suggest a rational approach. Setting up his shots was an exercise in precision:

[taking] measurements, finding the right distance, altering the viewpoint.

Sending messages, like geometric projections in a virtual game waiting for

answers. My wish is to adapt a system of vision, a mechanism that helps you to find order and equilibrium in the multiple projections of the eye.¹⁷

As previous comparisons suggest, however, the order that Basilico sought is not Cartesian – there's little evidence of the rational, cartographic approach or the serial repetition that marked the work in the *New Topographics* exhibition.

Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche is divided into two sections: the first featuring 60 single images and the second consisting of multi-image spreads of selected images taken in specific administrative zones around Milan. A fold-out map at the back of the book identifies the zone in which each photograph was taken. The map describes a city that has evolved according to its own peculiar historical logic; its various districts organised as a collection of roughly triangular segments radiating out from the city centre. Rather than the grid on which many North American cities and their suburbs are based, Milan grew organically and disjointedly, its planning sporadic and intermittent. The book reflects the entropic nature of this space. In the first section, there is no obvious connection between the order in which images appear and their location on the map. Instead, the selection here appears to be based on structural and formal homologies between individual pictures. The second section includes some, but not all, of the images taken in each zone – in zone 14, for example, Basilico shot 18 photographs, but only 6 are featured in the second section of the book, and 10 of these, as individual images, in the first section. As a topographic representation, *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* is neither systematic nor complete – in fact it deliberately mitigates against the logic of the map and the grid. Both the city itself, and Basilico's depiction of it,

work against the systematic organisation – the spatial and temporal homogeneity – imposed by Cartesian space.

Much of the North American landscape is parceled out into precise segments, bounded and gridded by a system of roads that define ownership, bringing order to a vast and varied terrain. With the possible exception of the Bechers, all of the work in the *New Topographics* exhibition paid implicit or explicit homage to the road as a way of defining place and measuring space. Road and highway infrastructure anticipates and holds together Baltz's industrial parks, Adams' and Deal's subdivisions, Shore's small towns and Nixon's cities. Streets, driveways, and car parks make up the formal matrix of most of Gohlke's images; the road is the reason that Schott's motels exist at all. The road occupies a prominent place in the American psyche, and nearly all of the photographs in the exhibition acknowledge this, in their formal organisation or their subject matter or both.

Viewed from a car, the landscape is a framed space, moving past the observer along a defined course, in a measured and (ideally) uninterrupted narrative. As Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer wrote in *The View from the Road*, their acclaimed 1964 study of the aesthetics of highway design, 'The sensation of driving a car is primarily one of motion and space, felt in a continuous sequence. Vision, rather than sound or smell, is the principal sense.'¹⁸ Space viewed from an automobile is both dynamic and static – the landscape races past the observer in an insistent temporal flow, but one's relationship to it remains fixed. If the car made space increasingly accessible, it did so on strictly limited terms, presenting the landscape to the eye but not the body, and only then in terms of a prescribed view. The open road is a symbol of freedom, but it can also be understood as a technocratic

instrument and an emblem of increasing physical estrangement from the landscape. As such, it is an apt motif for the work in *New Topographics* – a culturally and historically specific description of the relationship between the human subject and a built environment that was increasingly designed for the movement of capital.

Like many European cities, Milan is amenable to foot traffic in a way that American cities and their suburbs are not. But Basilico's decision to engage the city directly and relatively slowly, on foot, was also a way of breaking down the distance between himself and his subject, incorporating himself as an actor in his immediate environment. He often compared the city to a living organism and likened the human subject to an individual cell in a larger body. Milan, he wrote in 1999, is

an organism respiring and expanding above us like a protective mantle which enfolds and bewilders us at the same time. [...] This city belongs to me and I to it, almost as if I were a particle floating within its enormous body. A constant need to know its corporeality obsesses me, a need to interpret its features and its hidden parts, but also its famous places and most known aspects, over and over again. [...] At times I get the feeling it's suddenly revealing itself more fully to me, that it's telling me of its obstructions, its consistency and its material. The city uses me, inhabits me.¹⁹

On first look, certain images, like *via Ernesto Breda* (Fig. 5), leave the viewer wondering what it was about this particular place that attracted Basilico. The

photograph itself appears to contain relatively little visual information – a pedestrian crossing, a featureless wall and billboard to the right, and straight ahead, obscured by a row of bare telegraph poles, the low rectangle of a warehouse, partially concealed behind a wall. Like many of Basilico's photographs, it is a complex, layered image, comprising a significant proportion of empty space.

Topographic landscape registers the space between things as an exploitable resource, a social and semantic void. Empty space is a span to be crossed, territory to be controlled, mapped, and filled. Epitomised in Baltz's industrial parks, Adams' subdivisions and Golke's suburban abysses, this inert space is the matrix of the 'new topographics' aesthetic. It is a metric of alienation and a metaphor for the distance between the photographer and her or his subject matter; the photographer her or himself is not to be found here. In Basilico's photographs, however, even empty space has a concrete presence. Although his photographs seldom include human figures, their presence is implicit; as Basilico remarked, 'I photograph empty space as the main subject with all its lyrical force and its humanising ability to communicate, because the void is an integral, even structural, part of architecture.'²⁰ In his later work, Basilico signalled the communicative character of space by deliberately including overhead wires and street markings as active parts of the image. The spaces above and below eye level are integral parts of the urban fabric, components of the invisible networks that crisscross lived space and shape the way that it is occupied and used. Rather than a container to be filled, the unoccupied space in Basilico's photographs is a dynamic medium, alive with unseen activity.

Architect Stefano Boeri has noted Basilico's propensity for 'positioning himself in space and measuring its thickness'.²¹ It is not just the camera's gaze that dictates the

photographer's choice of position, but the fact that something about the space intuitively *feels* right. Beneath the surfaces that reveal themselves to vision are solid, tangible volumes. As Boeri remarks of Basilico,

I imagine him in the middle of a survey or a photographic campaign while he drifts round an urban site. At a certain point something clicks, causing Basilico to start, in an almost automatic, seemingly unconscious way, to scrutinize everything that lies on the surface of that portion of city. But that's not all. His is a photography of textures, of cracks, of ripples and slitherings, of materials, and yet it is also a photography of volumes, protuberances, depths, holes, cavities, projections.²²

The buildings that Basilico photographs are not orthographic projections – information-rich schematics, reductions of reality – but real objects with a physical, sculptural solidity and a rich history of which the photographer himself is a part. Basilico's starting point, in other words, is the shared space in which site, structure, and subject – including the photographer himself – are enfolded, embedded, and embodied. Basilico did not view Milan from a point somewhere beyond it, but from within – a subject of its history and its phenomenological complexity, attuned to its moods, its vicissitudes and inconsistencies.

For Lefebvre, Cartesian space, and the imperative to planning that it embodies, is a rational abstraction concealing the manipulation of society by the state: 'By representing social space as homogenous, empty, quantitative, and geometrical [...] spatial planning erases contradictions and imposes an imaginary coherence that

functions to reduce reality in the interests of power.’²³ The camera’s geometry is part of this schema too, aligned with the logic of the map and the standardised architectural form. But Basilico did not work with this logic in the way that a photographer like Baltz did – his photographs resist the collusion between space, camera, and built form that defines the ‘new topographics’ aesthetic. The formal language of his images is rational only insofar as the camera and the photograph have imposed retrospective uniformity on spaces and structures that exist independently of the technology’s propensity for order. And if he sought ‘multiple projections of the eye’ when composing his photographs, these were gestures to be reciprocated, rather than abstract representations imposed onto lived experience. *New Topographics* proposed the camera as a surrogate for the photographer. Basilico’s eye, on the other hand, did not merge with the apparatus, but with the environment: ‘It is as though the eye merges with the city itself. Like an animal whose coat takes on the colours of the city.’²⁴ Here, the camera is an instrument that echoes, but does not stand in for perception; one that conditions, but does not determine, the photographer’s relationship with space.

Landscape, space, topology

As a heuristic device, topology invites us to think holistically about the nature of built space, and the various actors and forces that shape it. The boundaries of topological spaces are multiple and fluid; the processes, objects, and agents within them reach back and forth across time and space. As John Allen writes,

What happens elsewhere, in far-off places, and what is drawn from the past to make the present possible, are all part of the topological equation, where presence

does not have to be local, nor part of the same moment or time period, to be a link in a newly formed networked arrangement.²⁵

What counts in topological space is not the measurable distance between these actors and forces, but what holds them together. Lefebvre termed such space *relational*: produced by multiple actors, impossible to disentangle from time, difficult to reduce or to regulate by means of a single, overarching logic. If abstract space is shaped by the state and by capital, relational or topological spaces are given their form and contour by collective memory and lived experience, by actors both animate and inanimate. In a topological world, everything has potential agency.

Topological space is uncontrolled and unpredictable. The projection of abstractions onto the terrain of everyday life is rife with contradictions; the material reality of abstract space ‘fails to reproduce the rational coherence and social emptiness of its representations’.²⁶ Space, as it is lived, incorporates ‘disalienated’ possibilities that privilege use over exchange, difference over homogeneity, ‘the qualitative over the quantitative, the lived over the conceived’.²⁷ This is the contradictory, irrational space that Basilico photographed: layered and networked, subject to state power but resistant to its local impositions, challenging the camera’s ability to organise and normalise it. In principle, of course, the spaces documented by the *New Topographics* photographers were not much different. What *was* different, and profoundly so, was Jenkins’ preoccupation with a kind of spatial order that was grounded in representation and dependent on the absence of the photographer. With the withdrawal of the subject, space and its representations were purged of humanity, of affect, of life. Only an abstract container remained: a quantity ‘produced through the technology of spatial

planning'.²⁸ *New Topographics* understood the camera and the photographer as agents of this containment, instruments for measuring and controlling space. The 'new topographics' aesthetic acts in concert with the processes of abstraction that it claims to document, sanctioning the very schema that it claims (retrospectively) to critique. This difference plays out more starkly on paper than it did for the individual photographers in the *New Topographics* exhibition. But the distinction between the two positions – which was, until quite recently, framed as a choice between aligning oneself with the rationality of abstract space or engaging with the topological character of lived space – has had a lasting effect on the way that 'critical' landscape photography is understood in both photographic and academic communities.

For Lefebvre, the way we appropriate space is a fundamental dimension of our humanity. Carrying out a critique of the human-altered landscape need not rest exclusively on a (spurious) objectivity. Basilico himself admitted that he had little faith in the kind of critical distance that has come to be seen as a defining characteristic of the 'new topographics' aesthetic. 'It is not possible', he wrote, 'to rationally, practically construct criticism as this would take away all the magic of contemplation.'²⁹ Indeed, Basilico himself understood the idea of critical engagement as 'an element which forms part of the human conscience, which emerges when observing both humans and objects.'³⁰ If space is to be understood in its material, symbolic, and creative totality, then the photographer must begin by acknowledging their presence in it as an agent, and the photograph not just as a trace of what was seen, but of the lived experience of looking.

¹ In fact, the motivation and the aesthetic of the *New Topographics* images can be traced back to the 1950s, and possibly earlier. See Eugenie Shinkle, ‘The Universal Foreground: Ordinary Landscapes and Boring Photographs’ in *Boredom Studies Reader: Frameworks and Perspectives*, ed. by Michael E. Gardiner and Julian Jason Haladyn (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 99-111.

² See Jason Weems, ‘The Meaning of Landscape in Late Twentieth-Century California Photography and Vice Versa’ in *Seismic Shift: Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and California Landscape Photography, 1944-1984*, ed. by Colin Westerbeck, Susan Laxton, and Jason Weems (Riverside, CA: California Museum of Photography, 2011) and Alexandra Tommasini, ‘A “Patient” Aesthetic: Exploring the visual language of Italian urban landscape photographer Gabriele Basilico’, *Journal of European Studies*, 47.4 (2017), 411-25.

³ As photographer Paul Highnam (who wrote the catalogue essay for the version of the *New Topographics* exhibition that toured England in 1981) remarked of the work, ‘it always felt political to me, and *looked* political. It looked to be more engaged’. Interview with the author, 23 March 2010.

⁴ Raphael Bertho, ‘On Both Sides of the Ocean: The photographic discovering of the everyday landscape. Analyzing the influence of the *New Topographics* on the *Mission Photographique de la DATAR*’, *Depth of Field*, 7.1 (December 2015)

<<https://depthoffield.universiteitleiden.nl/0701a03/>> [accessed 25 July 2018].

⁵ See Britt Salvesen, ‘New Topographics’, in *New Topographics* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2009), p. 14.

⁶ William Jenkins, *New Topographics* (Carlisle, MA: Pentacle Press, 1975), p. 5.

⁷ Salvesen, ‘New Topographics’, p. 53.

⁸ In 1981-82, an abridged version of the *New Topographics* exhibition, comprising new work by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Joe Deal, toured the United Kingdom. Organised by Jem

Southam and Paul Graham, both of whom were working at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol at the time, the exhibition toured four venues: the Arnolfini, Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, and B2 Gallery in Wapping, London.

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell [1974] 1991), p. 308.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 307.

¹¹ Jenkins, *New Topographics*, p. 6.

¹² Gus Blaisdell, 'Bldgs.', in *Gus Blaisdell Collected*, ed. by William Peterson and Nicole Blaisdell Ivy (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press [1977] 2012), pp. 44-55, (p. 53).

¹³ Jenkins, *New Topographics*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Japhy Wilson, "'The devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived": The concept of abstract space in the work of Henri Lefebvre', *Space and Culture*, 16.3 (2013), 364-80, (p. 367).

¹⁵ Antonella Russo, 'A Self, a City. Representation and Identity in the Contemporary Italian City' in *An Eye for the City: Italian photography and the image of the contemporary city*, ed. by Antonella Russo (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Art Museum, 2001), pp. 12-17, (p. 13).

¹⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini quoted in Maria Antonella Pelizzari, 'The Edge of Vision in an Italian Context', in *Peripheral Visions: Italian Photography in Context, 1950s-Present* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2012), pp. 11-17, (p. 13).

¹⁷ Stefano Boeri, 'A "Perhaps" City. Telephone conversation between Hans Ulrich Obrist, Stefano Boeri and Gabriele Basilico', in *Berlin*, ed. by Gabriele Basilico and Filippo Maggia, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), pp. 6-12, (p. 8).

¹⁸ Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer, *The View from the Road* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1964), p. 4.

¹⁹ Gabriele Basilico, 'Letter to a city', in *Interrupted City*, (Barcelona: ACTAR, 1999), unpaginated.

²⁰ Gabriele Basilico, 'Inhabiting the Metropolis', in *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production*

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(London: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 17-24, (p. 19).

²¹ Boeri, 'A "Perhaps" City', p. 6.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wilson, "'The devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived'", p. 307.

²⁴ Boeri, 'A "Perhaps" City', p. 6.

²⁵ John Allen, 'Topological Twists: Power's shifting geographies', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 1.283 (2011), 283-98, (p. 288).

²⁶ Wilson, "'The devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived'", p. 374.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 373.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 370.

²⁹ Roberta Valtorta, Gabriele Basilico, 'Gabriele Basilico speaks with Roberta Valtorta', in *Conversations with Photographers* (Madrid: La Fábrica/Fundación Telefónica, 2010), p. 33.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 34.