



# EAHN

## 7th International Meeting

### Conference Proceedings

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## Photography as Criticism: Gabriele Basilico and the Project of a “Small Utopia”

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### Abstract

The camera has been used as a tool of architectural representation since the mid-19th century. But can photography be rightly considered a form of criticism? Affirmative answers are suggested by the works of several architects who have embraced this medium to explore the built environment and reflect upon its material and social conditions. Indeed, the writer and photographer Eric de Maré went as far as pronouncing that the photographer was possibly the best architectural critic. In the late-20th century, a key role was played by Gabriele Basilico, who set out to depict the mutation of urban landscapes under the effects of deindustrialisation. Working for magazines as well as for public institutions, the late Italian photographer developed an analytical method that allowed him to probe the complexity of cities as human habitats. The paper revisits Basilico's early work and discusses its relevance to architectural criticism. It argues, with reference to a series of photographic journeys that span from the 1970s to the 1990s, that his landscape vision was integral to a wider rethinking of the built environment. Driven by a relentless pursuit of harmony, Basilico sought out an intimate relation with places while eschewing the eulogistic rhetoric that dominated in the architectural press. His contemplative images contain the seeds of what he called a “small utopia”: a personal quest nourished by critical dialogues with writers, journalists and architects.

### Keywords

Basilico, Gabriele, criticism, photography, urban landscape, utopia.

...the photographer is perhaps the best architectural critic, for by felicitous framing and selection he can communicate direct and powerful comments both in praise and protest.<sup>1</sup>

The opening citation, attributed to Eric de Maré, is taken from the last paragraph of *Building with Light*, the international history of architectural photography published by Robert Elwall in 2004. As a curator of photographs at the British Architectural Library, Elwall advocated the critical role of a profession which, especially in the second half of the 20th century, had largely been devoted to the artistic representation of buildings and to their celebration in the architectural press. “A little more protest,” he concluded with English understatement, “might not come amiss.”<sup>2</sup>

De Maré himself had trained as an architect in the interwar period before he took up photography, a conduit between the two disciplines he shared with prominent colleagues of his generation such as George E. Kidder Smith and Ezra Stoller (all three were born in the 1910s). Among them, de Maré was perhaps the one who wore the critic’s hat more comfortably: committed to fostering a modern visual education, he worked as an editor at the *Architects’ Journal* and published a number of photobooks along with essays on architectural photography and on photography, tout court. As a contributor to *The Architectural Review*, in the post-war period he spearheaded the study of early industrial buildings.<sup>3</sup> Elwall found de Maré’s work so congenial as to borrow his succinct definition of photography — “building with light” — for the title of his own book. Through its pages one can also find mentions of a photographer of the following generation, Gabriele Basilico (1944–2013), who exerted a significant impact on architectural culture in the latter part of the century.

Born in Milan during World War II, around the time de Maré published his first book, Basilico often reminisced about playing among the ruins of the bombed city during his childhood. He went on to study architecture at the Politecnico, forging his political consciousness during the socio-cultural upheaval of the late 1960s. Meanwhile he had developed a passion for the camera and, as soon as he graduated, set up shop as a photographer in 1973. That was the period when leading Italian architects such as Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino and Giorgio Grassi promoted a neo-rationalist approach that came to be known as *Tendenza*. Rossi, who taught at Milan’s Polytechnic when Basilico was a student, set out to challenge the orthodoxy of modern functionalism by investigating the “permanences” underlying the evolution of European cities.<sup>4</sup> These ideas would have a crucial impact on Basilico’s photographic practice. From the early projects, he regarded the urban landscape as expression of a complex set of formal and spatial values which could not be reduced to isolated functions; as Rossi theorised, the city had to be read in its totality.

During his prolific career Basilico took up commissions in many parts of the world and gained especial acclaim in Italy and France; yet his work was comparatively less known in the English-speaking world until the turn of the century. Elwall himself noted how the photographer’s predilection for urban landscapes, typically shot in overcast light and devoid of people, was aligned with the time-honoured documentary tradition but eschewed

the emphasis on individual buildings that was prevalent within architectural culture: “Usually empty foregrounds, devoid of photographic devices for drawing the viewer’s eye into the picture, intensify the mood of alienation, while the normal concentration by architectural photographers on significant buildings yields to an analysis of urban space in which all structures are deemed equal, whatever their architectural pedigree.”<sup>5</sup>

This “levelling tendency” was indebted not only to the work of interwar documentarians (Walker Evans above all), but also to the typological studies of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose teaching at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, from 1976 onwards, laid the foundation for the so-called Düsseldorf School of Photography. Harking back to the 1920s’ aesthetic of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the Bechers set about recording industrial structures as the “anonymous sculptures” of a civilization on the wane. While recognising this major influence, Elwall related the eerie atmospheres of Basilico’s photographs to other cultural references as well, including Michelangelo Antonioni’s films: “Basilico’s desolate, monochrome cityscapes represent a kind of ‘neutron bomb’ photography, in which all structures remain intact but the inhabitants have chillingly vanished.”<sup>6</sup>

This passage sums up a recurring trope in writing about Basilico, yet it seems to overlook a critical aspect of his photography. If taken at face value, his work might be associated with the *New Topographics* movement that emerged in the mid-1970s, prompted by a seminal exhibition that showcased work by American photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore, as well as by the Bechers.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Eugenie Shinkle argues, Basilico’s work differed in fundamental ways from their deadpan style insofar as it was animated by a concern with the relational nature of space.<sup>8</sup> While Adams and others drained the landscapes of any emotional charge in an attempt to expose the traces of post-industrial capitalism, Basilico approached his subjects with an altogether more engaging attitude: one that was driven by a humanistic belief in the agency of the photographer as an observer who inhabits the urban environment and seeks to decipher its visible signs.<sup>9</sup>

With reflective hindsight, Basilico articulated this idea in the final years of his life: “The photographer’s task is to work with distance, to take measures, to re-arrange space, to find an equilibrium between here and there, and ultimately to seek out the impossible meanings of a place.”<sup>10</sup> This approach recalls the work of de Maré, who sought to recover the beauty of anonymous industrial buildings and canals that constituted a neglected “functional tradition” in Britain.<sup>11</sup> While the latter’s visual language was integral to his work of criticism (writing and images being complementary to one another), Basilico invested photography with a revelatory power that was tinged with mysticism. In his dogged quest for harmony, the labour of memory percolated through his observation of every subject.

The pursuit of a constant relation between the places he visited and those of his memory defined, for Basilico, “the project of a small utopia.”<sup>12</sup> This expression offers a precious insight into his practice and the circumstances in which it evolved. In 1973, when Basilico started his photographic career, is also the year in which Manfredo Tafuri published *Progetto e utopia*,

which put forward a critique of architectural ideology and its embedded role in the structures of modern capitalism.<sup>13</sup> While the radical claims of the avant-garde were subjected to a thorough revision, at the same time the utopian function of narrative was revived by the philosopher Louis Marin, whose *Utopiques: jeux d'espaces* was issued the same year.<sup>14</sup> Sparked off by the student movement of 1968, this semiotic deconstruction of Thomas More's *Utopia* explored the discursive space in which text and image conjure up an alternate reality. To some extent, Basilico's inclination towards the photobook as a self-enclosed space of representation calls to mind Marin's pronouncement that utopias, if intended as spatial configurations, are mostly depicted in books.

Basilico's intimate relation with cities was born out of his desire to comprehend how urban landscapes bore the signs of social mutations. His habit of setting up the camera in the early hours of the day, before traffic and activities filled the streets, was not intended to convey a de-humanised view of buildings, nor to reproduce the idealised representation that is a staple of architectural magazines; on the contrary, the absence of people in the frame allowed him to foreground the qualities of space itself, which are easily reduced to mere background whenever the viewer's attention is drawn to the fleeting presence of passers-by. What at first sight appears to be empty space is in fact the main protagonist of his photographs: "a void that fills itself up and therefore becomes the subject of the image".<sup>15</sup>

If Basilico's photographs may seem to depict a post-human world, they are in fact the result of a restless process that led him to identify the most eloquent point of view in every place. He compared this technique to the wanderings of a water diviner searching for a well (*la tecnica del rabadomante*); in similar fashion, the photographer scouted every site for the right place on which to set his tripod. The morning hours allowed him to capture his urban subjects in a state of suspension between dream world and humdrum reality. As he explained, "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".<sup>16</sup> This purpose marked a departure from conventional architectural photography and informed a way of seeing, of framing places and reflecting on them, that was more akin to a work of criticism.

Seeking to record space itself on camera, Basilico adopted what might be called a long depth of field: not only with regard to the optical technique that retains objects in focus across the distance, but to his studied attempt to decipher the layers of time inscribed in an urban scene. The expansiveness we feel while beholding his photographs derives from a conscious effort to evoke the complexity of human landscapes. Reversing the "decisive moment" approach that informed his beginnings as a reporter, Basilico looked for connections between past and present while also instigating reflections on possible futures. This mode of engagement with cities revealed a critical awareness of temporality that is seldom present in architectural photography.<sup>17</sup>

Basilico immersed himself in every city until he had established an intimate relation with it ("vibration" is a word he often used). This method announced itself in his first major project, *Ritratti di fabbriche*, a documentation of factories in the periphery of Milan carried out between 1978

and 1980. The term *portraits* alluded to an individual characterisation of buildings that, indebted though it was to the Bechers' typological studies, sowed the seeds for an alternative outlook.<sup>18</sup> By capturing the decline of the manufacturing industry, this campaign allowed the photographer to articulate his empathy for human labour and its visible manifestations. It was also his first use of the photobook format, which would remain the favourite means of expression throughout his life.

In the 1980s Basilico's vision was sharpened by the DATAR campaign, which allowed him to develop a "slow gaze" by travelling along the northern coast of France.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the decade, he completed his major survey of European port cities, published in the photobook *Porti di mare*. The revelatory force of those photographs was admired by Rossi himself who found in them a "new beauty".<sup>20</sup> At a time when architectural critics were still reeling from Tafuri's dictum, "there is no criticism, only history" (a pronouncement aimed at architects who filled the columns of professional magazines), Basilico pursued a patient and systematic project that excavated the traces of a civilisation undergoing profound change.<sup>21</sup> His crisp photographs realised with a large-format camera often appeared in *Domus* and other magazines. Whether he depicted the abiding structures of Le Havre's harbour or the ruins of war-ravaged Beirut, he observed cities *as* landscapes rather than focusing on isolated buildings.

Subsequently, his attention shifted to the urban peripheries. Working with the architect Stefano Boeri, he applied his analytical method to six "analogous portions of territory" across the Italian peninsula for a survey that was exhibited at the 1996 Venice Biennale. The resulting photobook, *Italy: Cross Sections of a Country*, confirmed his propensity for travel and for collaboration: two distinguishing traits of his practice. While photographic missions required spending long periods of time out on the field, his research was nourished by critical dialogues with writers and editors as well as architects ranging from Álvaro Siza to Luigi Snozzi.

An avowed predilection for the narrative form characterised the production of Basilico's photobooks, which were meticulously laid out by his wife and photo editor Giovanna Calvenzi. The format allowed them to "construct urban stories" through a careful editorial work.<sup>22</sup> Somehow this process allowed the photographer to transcend the static nature of the picture frame and to set images in motion, as it were: once composed in a sequence, they came to "represent a journey".<sup>23</sup> Far more than a hackneyed metaphor, travel was an integral component of Basilico's practice, one that was inextricably bound up with his utopian project.

Basilico developed his vision at a time when the so-called "Italian landscape school" was emerging. The manifesto of this movement was the collective book *Viaggio in Italia*, curated by Luigi Ghirri in 1984.<sup>24</sup> Its intent was to break away from the canon of landscape photography that, for a whole century, had been fixed by the vedute of the Alinari brothers and fellow documentarists. Along with photographers like Olivo Barbieri, Guido Guidi and Giovanni Chiaramonte, Basilico contributed to rediscover the long-neglected signs of ordinary landscapes up and down the country. Their endeavours sought to reassert the dignity of the everyday over the exoticism of travel photography.



Throughout his career, Basilico never yielded to the pretence to objectify human landscapes but claimed instead the heuristic role of his own experience, approaching every subject with a deep aesthetic curiosity. Although his work contains an unmistakably critical kernel, as noted by Roberta Valtorta, this was never wielded as a programmatic intention but remained intrinsic to his practice.<sup>25</sup> In a published conversation with Valtorta, Basilico declared: “Mystery and energy are integral to contemplation, and so too is criticism. It is not possible to rationally construct a critique, as this would take away all the magic of contemplation.”<sup>26</sup> If his images have a *critical* potential, that is the result of a set of subjective and often instinctual decisions mediated by the camera’s eye. Thereby the photographer asserted the autonomy of a visual practice which allows the gaze to wander freely, detecting unpredictable relations across times as well as spaces. This contemplative attitude, which set Basilico’s photography apart from the Bechers’ quasi-scientific approach, has not only inspired a number of young photographers who have emerged in recent decades but has left a significant impression on architectural culture.

The aim of Basilico’s research was neither to praise nor to protest but rather to understand the mutation of built environments as complex socio-spatial formations. Without ever claiming his photographs would have a direct influence on design or planning, he believed instead they might offer a tool for interpreting the world.<sup>27</sup> The impulse to cultivate a new sensibility towards the built environment is arguably one of his main legacies: one that may contribute to establish an alternative ground for architectural criticism.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Basilico’s empathic approach resonates with Michael Sorkin’s suggestion that, “the focus of criticism must be moved from the territory of authenticating procedures to the terrain of desirable effects.”<sup>29</sup> If Sorkin argued that criticism should rediscover its vocation as a “service profession” committed to progressive social values, Basilico’s project might be revisited in a similar light. At a time when architectural photography found new spaces —and new markets— in the world of museums and galleries, his lifelong project was nourished by a labour of patient observation informed by critical dialogues and collaborations. While Basilico rejected the mantle of “critic”, his way of framing architecture as landscape suggests that photography might have the capacity to revive the function of criticism by visual means. Rather than considering this faculty in clear-cut terms of praise or protest, then, his meditative gaze provokes us to situate architecture within a complex social world —an intimation that is bound to become ever more relevant in our urban age.

## Notes

1. Eric de Maré, quoted in Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (London: Merrell, 2004), 201. The original source is: Eric de Maré, “Eric de Maré,” in *Art Without Boundaries 1950-1970*, ed. Gerald Woods et al. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 100.
2. Elwall, *Building with Light*, 201.
3. Andrew Higgott, “Eric de Maré: Between the Functional and the Beautiful,” *The Journal of Architecture* 21, no. 6 (2016): 873–89.
4. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1982 [1966]).
5. Elwall, *Building with Light*, 199.
6. Elwall, *Building with Light*, 199.
7. The exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” (1975) was curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York.
8. Eugenie Shinkle, “The City Inhabits Me: Space, Topology, and Gabriele Basilico’s *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche*,” *The Journal of Architecture* 24, no. 8 (2019): 1070–83.
9. Gabriele Basilico, “Inhabiting the City,” in *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation*, ed. Davide Deriu, Krystallia Kamvasinou, and Eugenie Shinkle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 17–24.
10. Basilico, “Inhabiting the City,” 21.
11. Higgott, “Eric de Maré,” 876.
12. Gabriele Basilico, *Architetture, città, visioni: riflessioni sulla fotografia*, edited by Andrea Lissoni (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2007), 130. This and other translations by the author.
13. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1976 [1973]). See also Carla Keyvanian, “Manfredo Tafuri: From the Critique of Ideology to Microhistories,” *Design Issues* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 3–15.
14. Louis Marin, *Utopiques: Jeux d’espaces* (Paris: Minuit, 1973).
15. Basilico, “Inhabiting the City,” 19.
16. Basilico, “Inhabiting the City,” 19.
17. Iain Borden, “Imaging Architecture: The Uses of Photography in the Practice of Architectural History,” *The Journal of Architecture* 12, no. 1 (2007): 57–77.
18. Ramón Esparza, “Entropía y espacio urbano (fotografiado). Entropy and (photographed) urban space,” in *Gabriele Basilico: Entropía y espacio urbano / Entropy and urban space* (Madrid, La Fábrica, 2017), 25–31.
19. See also Davide Deriu, “Portraits of Places: Gabriele Basilico and the Slowness of the Gaze,” *Candide: Journal for Architectural Knowledge* 12 (2021): 55–72.
20. Aldo Rossi, [untitled preface], in Gabriele Basilico, *Porti di mare* (Udine: Art&, 1990), 5.
21. Manfredo Tafuri, “There is no criticism, only history,” *Design Book Review* 9 (Spring 1986): 8–11. Interview conducted by Richard Ingersoll in Italian and translated by him into English.
22. Gabriele Basilico, quoted in Filippo Maggia and Gabriele Basilico (eds), *Gabriele Basilico: Berlin*, trans. Ruth Taylor (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 5.
23. *Gabriele Basilico speaks with Roberta Valtorta* (Madrid: La Fábrica, 2011), 23.
24. Luigi Ghirri, Gianni Leone, Enzo Vellati (eds), *Viaggio in Italia* (Alessandria: Il Quadrante, 1984).
25. Roberta Valtorta, “Architecture, City, Landscape: A Conversation with Gabriele Basilico,” *The Journal of Architecture* 24, no. 8 (2019): 1134–48. Originally published in *Conversations with Photographers* (Madrid: La Fábrica/Fundación Telefónica, 2010).
26. Valtorta, “Architecture, City, Landscape,” 1142.
27. Basilico, *Architetture, città, visioni*, 147–48.
28. His work and legacy were the subject of the seminar “A Photographer’s Sense of Space: Looking at the Work of Gabriele Basilico”, convened by the author together with Alexandra Tommasini at the University of Westminster, London, in May 2016, which led to the publication of a themed issue of *The Journal of Architecture* (vol. 24, no. 8, 2019).
29. Michael Sorkin, “Critical Mass: Why Architectural Criticism Matters,” *The Architectural Review*, May 28, 2014. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/critical-mass-why-architectural-criticism-matters>