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“*Dentro la Città*”: Gabriele Basilico’s Photography and the Embodied “Experience of Place”

Abstract: This essay investigates Gabriele Basilico’s photography and aesthetics of place through a broad selection of his works from the 1980s and 1990s, which confirm him as one of the most influential photographers of his generation, both within Italian photography and beyond. Drawing on critical debates on architecture, landscape, photography, and the body, I discuss how Basilico’s photography offers a unique portrayal of the demise of the modern industrial city, and of the recent changes undergone by the “città diffusa,” such as the collapse of a clear distinction between the urban and the rural and the growing focus on redeployment areas since the 1990s. Moreover, I demonstrate how, in line with some of his contemporaries, Basilico foregrounds the “experience of place” as an embodied, affective and multifaceted experience of inhabited space, and, in so doing, how his work makes an important contribution to reshaping our contemporary understanding of place.

Keywords: Gabriele Basilico, body, urban photography, experience of place.

Introduction

As one of the most published contemporary photographers of architecture, not surprisingly Gabriele Basilico (1944-2013) has become for many synonymous of a vision of contemporary urban space.¹ Indeed, Basilico defined himself as an “architetto-fotografo,” as he turned to professional photography in the early 1970s, before completing his degree in architecture at Milan Polytechnic in 1973—a career change common to many Italian photographers of his generation. From then on, he continued to photograph urban spaces and to shape the image of the contemporary city, often working with renowned architects, such as Aldo Rossi, Álvaro Siza and Stefano Boeri, and collaborating with leading architecture journals, including *Domus*, *Abitare* and *Lotus International*. While repeatedly portraying his native Milan in many of his photographic series, Basilico also explored the morphology of numerous European and world cities, from Berlin to Moscow and Beirut, and, no less importantly, of diverse landscapes and suburban spaces. Italian photography scholars, from Uliano Lucas to Antonello Frongia, associate Basilico’s photography primarily with the city and celebrate it as one of the best outcomes of the so-called 1968 generation, alongside artists such as Luigi Ghirri and Guido Guidi. In particular, Basilico’s photography is praised for its compositional rigour and clear perspectival framing, and for the strong contrast of his images, predominantly black and white, which are inscribed within a classic

¹ I would like to thank Giovanna Calvenzi for the kind permission to reproduce Gabriele Basilico’s photographs in this essay.

tradition of urban photography—from Eugène Atget to the Alinari brothers to Paolo Monti in postwar Italy. Although Italo Zannier, in his seminal book *Architettura e fotografia*, sees this consonance with tradition as a limitation of Basilico’s aesthetics, which arguably builds on old schemes within architecture photography (125), other scholars celebrate Basilico’s coherent aesthetics and absence of rhetoric (Frongia 71) and recognize his influence on contemporary photography and on cognate disciplines, such as architecture and urban planning, and, more broadly, his impact “on the collective perception of the city,” as Orlandi suggests in *Visioni di città* (48). It is within this framework that I will explore Basilico’s photography in order to demonstrate the centrality of his lesson in our understanding and imagining of the contemporary city and its changing morphology, starting from the collapse of a clear distinction between urban and non-urban spaces.

While Basilico repeatedly acknowledges his main interest to be the city and particularly post-industrial landscapes in the shift to postmodernity (*Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* 8), in many of his critical essays he also reflects on his work on landscape and suburban places, starting from his participation, as sole Italian photographer, in the DATAR project (1984-1989), the landmark Photographic Mission organized by the French Délégation à l’Aménagement du Territoire et à l’Action Régionale (Delegation for Territorial Planning and Regional Action), for which he contributed a portfolio on the coast of Normandy. As he reveals in the book *Architettura, città, visioni*, this commissioned work led him to embrace a new aesthetics in the 1980s, based on an affective approach to places, which allowed him to combine two opposite drives—*misurazione* and *contemplazione*—namely, a scientific measuring method, such as that of the architect, urban planner or documentary photographer, with an aesthetic gaze, in the sense of an embodied, slow contemplation of a landscape or any place—an approach that he defined “lentezza dello sguardo” in the eponymous essay of 1992. This new stance—which coincided with his moving to a large format camera, affording him greater precision and slowness—was not merely applied to photographing landscapes or villages, such as those pictured for the DATAR project, but rather extended to all places and spaces in his subsequent work. From then onwards, alongside some of his closest commentators, such as photography historian Roberta Valtorta, Basilico defined his work with the expression the “experience of place”; this phrase extends the focus from urban spaces to any place and conveys his ethical/aesthetic commitment towards portraying the exterior in its various facets and historical layers, as lived by its inhabitants. Such an approach lays emphasis on the relational, embodied experience of any places—whether urban, rural or in-between spaces—and posits it as an ongoing, creative dialogue between an ever-changing exterior and the sensing body of the photographer intent on “listening to the city” from within.

As I seek to shed new light on Basilico’s photography, I intend to explore his aesthetics of place in a broad selection of his works from the 1980s and 1990s,

including photographs from the series *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* (1981), *Bord de mer* (1981; 2017), *L'esperienza dei luoghi. Fotografie 1978-1993* (1993), the commissioned work for the large-scale Milan-based project *Archivio dello spazio* (1987-1997), and the Emilia Romagna-based project on redeployment areas: *L. R. 19/98: la riqualificazione delle aree urbane in Emilia-Romagna* (2001). A number of these projects originated from external commissions, while others were later re-elaborated as personal projects; in each case, these series are key in understanding both Basilico's aesthetics and, more broadly, a shift in the representation of places occurring in those years. As Nicoletta Leonardi reminds us, "during the 1980s and 1990s, in conjunction with urban construction and development projects in Europe, several photographic campaigns on the theme of urbanised landscape were commissioned by local, regional and national government agencies" ("Void/Density" (4)), some of which involved Basilico. By inscribing his work within this broader context and by expanding the restrictive label of "architecture photographer," I aim to highlight Basilico's seminal contribution to rewriting both urban spaces and more widely the many in-between spaces that have emerged from the "breakdown of traditional distinctions between the urban and the rural," as Davide Deriu succinctly puts it in his introduction to *Emerging landscapes* (7). More broadly, I contextualize Basilico's work within the change of sensitivity towards the environment that took place since the 1980s (Zerbi 1998), and which Italian photography creatively negotiated in its turn to landscape, and within the concomitant shift, as Deriu proposes, to a "more experientially driven engagement with places" (7). In the above photographic series, Basilico foregrounds the "experience of place," as an embodied, affective and multifaceted experience of inhabited space, thus making an important contribution to reshaping our understanding of places. Drawing on recent architecture, landscape and photography theory, as well as theories of the body, I put forward that Basilico's photography offers a unique portrayal of the demise of the modern, industrial city, and of its iconic image conveyed by classical photography, as well as the changes undergone by the "città diffusa" in the past few decades, such as the growing focus on redeployment areas, especially since the 1990s. In particular, I will discuss the key role played by the body and the senses in the photographer's experience of place, thus negotiating both continuity and change in constructing an image of the city and of any places; at the same time, photography is deployed as a slow gaze that retains a deep, affective connection with place, in counter-tendency with the growing speed and virtualization of contemporary culture.

Basilico's Photography within the Debate on the Body and Urban Space

In his seminal *Prima lezione di urbanistica* Bernardo Secchi argues that, while modernity tends to expel the presence of the body from the city, as the latter is taken over by the new mechanical society, late twentieth century recuperates the body and with it a phenomenological, experiential, multisensorial approach to the

exterior, with a greater focus on the everyday (143)—a position that is broadly consonant to that put forward by Richard Sennett in his book *Flesh and Stone*. From yet another angle, in *The Art of Interruption. Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, John Roberts concurs that, “with the advent of identity-politics cultural theory in the 1980s, the body as theme and subject has taken on an unprecedented conceptual autonomy” (168), leading to an unparalleled literature on the body in various disciplines, including photography, starting from Britain and the US, which are the foci of Robert’s study. Basilico’s photography is consonant with these diverse frameworks; indeed, it brings together old and new theories on the body and the city from different disciplines. On the one hand, his work draws on a long-established tradition in architecture, literature and the visual arts which employs the body as a rhetorical strategy for representing balance and for comprehending and depicting place, in particular the city, as a living organism, as maintained by Secchi in *Prima lezione di urbanistica* (25). On the other hand, Basilico’s aesthetic stance is consonant with, and can fruitfully be read through, the recent corporeal and affective turn in cultural studies, and in particular with the greater attention to materiality and experientiality both in photography (Leonardi, *Fotografia e materialità*) and in architecture (Deriu et al.). The emphasis on the image of the body in Basilico’s writing, which is unparalleled in the work of other contemporary Italian photographers, suggests a conscious effort to reinscribe the body and the senses within the conceptualization of photographic (and architectural) practice and, in so doing, to retain a sense of agency in appreciating an increasingly complex and fast-changing exterior. This stance can also be read as a response to the growing digitalization and speed of the photographic image and to the abstract planning approach of much contemporary architecture, whereby, in Piero Orlandi’s words,

molti architetti dediti alla pratica professionale perdono di vista il rapporto con la realtà fisica, oggettuale in cui si dovrebbero muovere con il loro lavoro, mentre al contrario un fotografo vi si immerge in modo diretto, prolungato, potremmo perfino dire voluttuoso.

(*Visioni* 50)

Strikingly, Basilico’s photography succeeds in bringing to the fore the embodied, multisensorial experience of being inside the place he photographs, by portraying the photographed space as an empty space, devoid of human presence. This visual stratagem follows classical architecture photography that sees the human presence as disturbing and the modernist tradition of representing the city as a void, thus aligning itself with the contemporary photographic representation of places established since the 1980s by Ghirri, Guidi and Basilico himself, among others, as a means of foregrounding the growing invisibility of places and of the individual in postmodernity.

When reflecting upon his photographic practice, and on the changing nature of contemporary urban spaces, Basilico repeatedly employs the image of the body. For example, in the book *Abitare la metropoli* (2013), he claims:

[...] vedo la città come qualcosa di vivo, come un organismo che respira, come un grande corpo in trasformazione. Mi interessa cogliere i segni di questa trasformazione, esattamente come un medico che indaga il cambiamento della forma di un corpo e ne coglie la struttura nelle pause del respiro, quasi in uno stato di sospensione. Questa condizione mi permette di renderne visibile la forma. [...] nello stesso tempo serve anche un'attesa, cioè lo spazio per l'ascolto di qualcosa che deve ancora accadere, di qualcosa che sta davanti a noi apparentemente invisibile, ma che è pronto a rivelarsi se osservato nel modo giusto. [...] La fotografia diventa allora un montaggio sensibile delle tracce di queste linee e delle somme di questi sguardi. Si sviluppa in questo intreccio una possibile coincidenza di due realtà: quella più oggettiva, che documenta un luogo preciso, e quella più nascosta, soggettiva, che dà energia e identità alla visione. La città da estranea può divenire un luogo di appartenenza, basta osservarla con occhio disincantato.

(57)

This passage brings together a number of recurring metaphors in Basilico's writing that posit the city as a body, a living being, a breathing organism that requires auscultation, thus an attentive ear as well as a clear gaze. Through a medical metaphor that implicitly posits the city as ill, a long-standing literary *topos* applied to the city, as Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy remind us (12), Basilico compares the work of the photographer to that of a doctor or an acupuncturist, engaged in seeking the city's energy points, its innermost make-up that is only visible to a patient gaze.² Suggesting a Zen-like, holistic approach, these metaphors convey an embodied experience of place that acknowledges both its continuous changing, in time and space, and the awareness that, in Basilico's words, "space can only be perceived sensorially," as if it were "seen through the skin," namely, through an effort to "be inside the things he photographs," as we read in his conversation with Arturo Carlo Quintavalle:

"Io cerco, se possibile, di essere dentro le cose che fotografo, cerco di appartenere, vorrei in qualche modo sparire ed essere assorbito da queste cose che chiamo contesti, luoghi."
(185).

As Basilico puts it in the dialogue with architects Yona Friedman, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Stefano Boeri that introduces his volume *Scattered city* (2005),

"Lo spazio lo si può percepire camminandoci dentro, ascoltandone il respiro, misurandolo con i nostri sensi, cercando quindi di fare l'esperienza della realtà anche attraverso un approccio sensoriale."

(8)

In this light, the work of the tographer, in Basilico's view, becomes the overlapping of two realms and approaches that are united in the body: a more

² Alexandra Tommasini plays on the double meaning of "patient" in her 2014 PhD thesis and subsequent 2017 article on Basilico.

objective, documenting, measuring approach and a more subjective, experiential, hidden one, which gives identity to one's vision and allows the city, or any place, to become inhabitable. With these words he conveys the two main interlinked *foci* of his aesthetics that I employ here to underpin my essay: on the one hand, the balancing act between a measuring and a contemplative approach, which is posited as the key framework of the architect/photographer; and, on the other hand, the centrality of the body and of sensorial experience in his photographic practice and theory. In so doing, Basilico rewrites two interlinked *topoi* of modernity, that of balance/measure and of the body, as the measure of the world, as [redacted] effectively summarises: “Una delle grandi figure della modernità, dal Rinascimento in poi, è stata quella dell’equilibrio” (*Prima lezione* 24); and later, “Una delle principali e più antiche strategie di rappresentazione dell’equilibrio è stata quella di far ricorso [...] ad altre figure, pensando la città come un organismo vivente [...] soprattutto un corpo umano” (25). In the following pages I will analyse how Basilico foregrounds the bodily experience of place and activates the above *topoi* in his photography of both urban and suburban spaces, and how in doing so he rewrites classical photographic framing, such as frontality and perspectival views, composition and lighting.

Basilico's *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche*

Given his training as an architect in the early 1970s, it is perhaps not surprising, that, when defining his work, Basilico talks repeatedly of *misura*, a measure understood as the sense of composure, balance, and of “measuring space”; that is, establishing a proxemic relationship with the exterior and finding the right place in which to position his camera, his point of view, and ultimately his body. This approach is in line with a classical/modernist view of space that is informed by a rhetoric of reality, precision and legibility—as argued by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*—a space to be approached both through cognitive mapping and multi-sensorial experiences, and negotiated through a set of cultural practices and discourses that require affective investment. Indeed, according to Vittorio Gregotti and Manfredo Tafuri, the dialectics between order and disorder, and between functionalism and aesthetics, still deeply informs the contemporary debate on architecture; Basilico's coexistence of *misurazione* and *contemplazione* can be seen as a variation of this paradigm, in both cases positing the body at the centre. The centrality of *misura* or balance and of the corporeal experience of space clearly emerges in the extensive preparatory work that Basilico undertook for all his projects, scouting the chosen area and planning his shots to be later executed with a large format camera. This approach is true in particular in the series *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* (1978-80), his first main project planned as a book, and, in Basilico's own words, according to Elena Pontiggia, his “primo lavoro impegnato” (36), which he shot in black and white with a Nikon F2 35 mm camera. Part of this work was initially exhibited within *Milano ambiente urbano* at the Milanese gallery *Il Diaframma* in 1978, and, once the series was completed

in 1980, first published in book form in 1981. For this work Basilico revealingly chose to focus on the disused, industrial Vigentina area in Milan, firstly by methodically exploring it on a 1:25,000 map, then by travelling through it on his scooter while the city was deserted, thus more easily legible according to the teachings of architecture photography. As in photographic portraits, and in documentary photography, here Basilico favours frontal shots alongside fewer perspectival views and offers a series of close-ups of buildings and streets—all rigorously empty of the human presence—conveying the multiplicity of these urban fragments as remains of a former industrial power by then in demise. At the same time Basilico defines this series not as a “lavoro sulle *grandi fabbriche*” but rather a “lavoro sulla *periferia dove ci sono le fabbriche*,” revealing his main focus to be on the changes of peripheral urban spaces and their relation to their industrial past, as Orlandi argues (*Visioni* 51).

One of the many striking examples in this series is the frontal shot of a building composed of four little entrances that Basilico chose as his cover picture for the 1981 edition of the volume, *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* (Fig. 1). In this image the frame is nearly entirely filled with a close-up of the building, in its simple modularity, and includes only a few details in the foreground that suggest the human presence through its traces. Its essentialism showcases Basilico's effective use of frontal composition, strong contrasts, empty spaces and shadows in his portrayal of these disused factories, and his effort to retain their dignity as bodies that continue to live. In his book *Abitare la metropoli*, he explains his use of shadows as a means of measuring space and establishing relations between buildings—“le ombre che modificano le forme delle facciate, misurano costantemente le distanze, avvicinano un corpo a un altro, oppure lo separano, cambiando la forma degli edifici” (25)—and reveals his preference for a strong lighting condition, which enhances the clarity of the photograph and creates an effect of liveliness within the frame:

Nella luce tagliente, nelle condizioni atmosferiche ideali in cui da allora normalmente fotografo, il calore del sole alle spalle mi fa sentire tutt'uno con lo spazio nel quale sto lavorando, e lo spazio da luogo inanimato diventa cosa viva.

(*Abitare la metropoli* 25)

In treating urban space as a “lyrical presence” (*Architetture, città, visioni* 101), and in foregrounding voids while suggesting hidden presences, Basilico inscribes himself within an established visual and literary tradition of representing the modern city, and particularly Milan, that goes from Mario Sironi's haunting portraits of Milan to Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical empty urban spaces to Alberto Savinio's love for Milan, as conveyed in his book *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*—all of them Basilico's acknowledged influences. Within Italian photography, Basilico is clearly aware of the tradition of representing urban, industrial space, from the Alinari brothers to Paolo Monti, who first mapped the Milanese industrial periphery in the 1950s by employing negative spaces and stark

contrasts, as noted by Zannier (*Architettura e fotografia* 125) and Giovanni Chiaromonte (265). More broadly, Basilico draws on the tradition of “documentary” photography and its rhetoric of frontality, as variously interpreted by Atget, Walker Evans, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, who documented the demise of German post-industrial architecture in the 1960s and 1970s with their portraits of “anonymous sculptures.” However, despite acknowledging Evans’s and the Bechers’ ethical and aesthetic lesson, Basilico distanced himself from the Germans’ typological method, striving instead for greater affective dialogue with places, as he revealed in interview with Clara Gelao (11), and as remarked by Valtorta (“L’esperienza dei luoghi” 5). This affective relation to space is evinced in the above photograph in the dynamic use of shadows and in the composition of the details in the foreground, including a small, budding tree in the centre of the frame, which, while standing in for the photographer, draws the viewer into the picture, establishing a more empathetic connection with the photographed space. In *Abitare la metropoli* Basilico acknowledges what he calls his “bulimic” approach to the exterior, namely, his nearly compulsive drive to catalogue every single facet of this derelict industrial site, following the teachings of the Bechers, and, before that, the lesson of photographic reportage, which dominated Italian photography until then and had an impact on his early work. However, he reveals that this swift, cataloguing approach was mitigated by “an affective relationship that led *his* movements,” and made him recogniz[e] “familiar presences” (41) both in his native Milan and, later, in every city—a deeper affective relation conveyed by his choice of composition and perspectival views which seek to bring the viewers “into” the frame, rather than positioning them merely “in front of” the photographed space.

The DATAR and the “Experience of Place”: *Bord de mer* and *L’esperienza dei luoghi*

In the essay “Fotografare l’architettura, fotografare il paesaggio,” Basilico claims that the work for the DATAR was the second most important experience in his photographic career, after *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche*, and taught him to broaden his horizons and to open up his view of photography to one whereby architecture and landscape intersect and merge with each other, thus in turn expanding his approach towards a more dynamic view of the world (41). This series also marked his move from a small to a large format camera, as he first swiftly and “bulimically” scouted the area, taking 3000 shots with a small 24x36 cm camera, and then returned to the same places with a 10x12 inch camera, taking 640 large photographs, a selection of which was first exhibited in 1985 and later published in the volume *Bord de mer* (Quintavalle 29; Basilico, “Architettura come frammento di città” 23). According to Basilico, this new gaze is best exemplified by the landscape view of *Le Tréport*, in Normandy, France. To photograph a black and white, open, raised view of this marine village required him to wait patiently for the ideal weather and lighting conditions, thus teaching him to disappear as a

photographer and to find himself "inside the landscape", as he revealed in conversation with Gelao (13). While acknowledging and inscribing himself within an established tradition of landscape representation in the visual arts, including Vermeer (e.g., *View of Delft*, 1660) and Bernardo Bellotto (e.g., *View of Dresden*, 1748-50), Basilico is keen to emphasise his experiential relationship with the landscape, which is not merely looked at from a distance but invites the photographer and the viewer to "enter" it—an approach that he declares to have applied to any place, whether urban or rural. In his words, quoted by Gelao, "Ma quando la porzione di spazio inquadrato è diventata sempre più ampia, quando il punto di vista si è allontanato progressivamente dal soggetto, allora mi sono trovato dentro al paesaggio, naturale o urbano non fa differenza" (13).

The series and volume *Bord de mer*, which was first published in 1981 as a selection of photographs from his DATAR project, exemplifies his opening to a more dynamic and affective view of space, and establishes what is now recognised as Basilico's style through a number of clean formal choices, including careful composition and perspectival framing. The volume has undergone a number of publications; here I will consider its most recent 2017 edition, which was edited posthumously by Angela Madesani with previous Basilico's approval and which includes an ample selection of the DATAR series, namely, 71 black and white photographs, as opposed to the 37 photographs printed in the 1981 volume. This series beautifully showcases his balancing of the interlinked drives that underpin his art—the measuring or hyper-analytical and the contemplative drive, alongside his aesthetic shift from a small to a large format camera. The series presents all black and white, long-distance shots of villages and suburban areas on the Normandy coast, including landscape photographs, such as the above mentioned *Le Tréport*, frontal shots of buildings and empty streets, and a series of port areas, one of Basilico's declared passions. Many of these images use a one-point perspective, with a central vanishing point; yet, the majority employ accidental perspective: either a two-point perspective, that is, an eye-level shot with two vanishing points and a central corner building; or a three-point perspective, which complicates the previous framing through a raised or lower standpoint, similarly suggesting depth and stratification of space and time through a multiplicity of viewing trajectories. Drawing on classical photography, such as Atget's portraits of Parisian corner buildings, Basilico experimented with accidental perspective since his early practice; indeed, one of his Ur-photographs, *Milano 1970-73*, shows simply a close up of the corner of a derelict house, with a one-way street sign in front of it pointing upwards, and a two-point perspective of two streets departing from left and right, splitting the viewer's gaze between two vanishing points at each side. While this early photograph appears somewhat static, in later photographs Basilico continuously revisited this composition by increasing the sense of movement through playing with what he called energy lines, namely, electricity lines or poles, which underline the perspectival framing and convey his vision of "the urban texture as a compact artery often stratified through different

perspectives and depths” (“Per una lentezza dello sguardo” 6). This more dynamic composition turns the viewers into active participants in the visual construction of the image.

A revealing example of this composition is the photograph *Ault 1985* (Fig. 2), from the series *Bord de mer* (2017, no. 30), which is also reproduced in his exhibition catalogue *L'esperienza dei luoghi*. This image shows a three-point perspective of a crossroad with a row of terraced houses in the centre declining diagonally towards the sea. As in the case of *Le Tréport*, this photograph is taken from a slightly raised position, which is common to much of Basilico's work, as his camera is placed on a raised street overlooking these buildings, which are flanked by two side streets that lead the viewer's gaze towards the sea at both vanishing points. Interestingly, Basilico chose this very photograph in his text *Leggere le fotografie* to instruct readers on how to construct or read perspective in a photograph; in particular he highlights how the two vanishing points bring the horizon and the landscape closer to the buildings (54), and how the diagonal trajectories of the electricity lines over the row of houses reinforce the perspectival framing and depth of field, adding dynamism to the picture and further drawing the viewer in. Showcasing what he defines above as the intersection between architecture and landscape, this photograph, like many others in this series, teaches us how Basilico used framing, composition, lighting and shadows (obscuring the two side streets and the immediate foreground) to convey a dynamic and embodied sense of place, which is further underlined by the movement suggested by the clouds in the sky, as it also occurs in *Le Tréport*.

A similar pattern is repeated in the photograph *Le Crotoy 1985*, on the following page of the 2017 edition of *Bord de mer* (no. 32; Fig. 3), another two-point perspective composition where the complex intersection of the electricity lines in the sky is mirrored by the different directions suggested by the zebra crossings and by the intricate texture of lights and shadows. These visual strategies create an emphatic accidental perspective which reinforces the centrality of the body of the photographer (and his camera) as the point of departure for these lines, casting him in the role of a “râdomante” (“Un bambino che si stupisce” 142); that is, a water diviner, who is intent on finding the energy lines or points of a given place and thus connects deeply with the identity of the place. In his essay “Fotografare la città,” included in the volume *Abitare la metropoli*, Basilico presents the city “come un grande corpo fisico—dei punti lungo i meridiani nei quali si attiva l'energia [...] mi piace pensare che anch'io, come fotografo, in fondo mi muovo come se cercassi dei punti nello spazio fisico nei quali collocare il punto di osservazione e da dove infine proiettare lo sguardo” (51). Basilico posits this approach as a way for photography to “rieducare alla visione dei luoghi” in order to “aiutare a rivelare ciò che è davanti ai nostri occhi ma spesso non è riconoscibile” (51); in brief, with the purpose of reconnecting with places that are often overlooked.

"Essere dentro le cose" from a Balcony: Beirut

Alongside the above strategies, another means employed by Basilico to establish an affective connection with the photographed places and to convey his presence as a photographer "within" the body of the city—while at the same time casting his own centrality in portraying place in a culture that increasingly seems to challenge this very positioning—is the recurrent picturing of a balcony at the bottom of the frame, a balcony which protrudes either into a landscape or a city view, often from a raised position. Like the above-discussed visual techniques, this framing similarly conveys the coexistence in his work of a classical, frontal, hyper-analytical view, intent on seeing "everything" and a more experiential, embodied sense of space from within. It brings together the established tradition of pictorial, raised landscape views, which is epitomized by Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic paintings, with a more experiential engagement with places, as perceived from the inside, multi-sensorially. An example of this approach is another photograph of Le Tréport, *Le Tréport—Mer sur Bains, 1985* (*Bord de mer*, 2017, no. 10), where the marine village is framed from a raised viewing balcony, which reinforces the theme of looking and which emphasises the photographer's centrality, in a way not dissimilar to what I discussed above for *Ault 1985*. An even more striking example is the photograph *Beirut 1991* (Fig. 4) in *L'esperienza dei luoghi* (95), where Basilico adopts a similar raised position to depict war-torn Beirut and its coastline framed by a protruding balcony that signals the photographer/viewer's inserting his gaze into the city, while acknowledging his standpoint. While the open, raised view, as in the above landscape view of *Le Tréport—Mer sur Bains*, could be seen as an attempt to aestheticize ruins and to inscribe the destroyed body of the Lebanese city within the tradition of landscape views, what strikes us here is the permeability between the viewing position and the object of the gaze, through the all-encompassing presence of debris, both around the buildings and in the pile of rubble inside the balcony in the foreground. The framing gives equal weighting to a group of destroyed houses neatly arranged on the right-hand side of the picture and a section of wasteland on the coastline on the left-hand side of the frame, a wasteland that is recalled by the debris within the balcony. The wall of the balcony is crumbling, as if to suggest the overwhelming destruction of this area, and the permeable, two-way connection between the viewing subject and the object of the gaze, which is granted some agency in the ability to look back and erode the fixity of the viewer's standpoint. While clearly foregrounding the viewing position, the photograph leaves it vacant, thus drawing the viewers into the landscape and questioning their agency, and at the same time suggesting a space beyond and behind the frame.

In reflecting on the experience of being invited to photograph Beirut immediately after the war ended, in his book *Architetture, città, visioni*, Basilico reveals his difficulty in approaching the subject, given the overriding sense of death, and his refraining from the temptation of aestheticizing ruins, as often

found in the iconographic tradition, finally finding his entry point in focusing on life within destruction. While hinting at the ghostly nature of this space, as contended by Steven Jacobs in his essay “Amor vacui” (116), which links the *topos* of the empty city in photography since Modernity to a sense of alienation and solitude, Basilico manages to overcome this impasse by looking at Beirut as a living organism, like any other city, positing the photographer’s slow gaze as best tuned to accessing the city’s dormant or remaining life, with a view to contributing towards the reconstruction of this place. By foregrounding a balcony, and thus signalling the necessarily limited and subjective position of the photographer, Basilico acknowledges the make-up of his photographic eye and his hyper-analytical “anxiety of control,” while at same time conveying his commitment to entering the body of the city and establishing a dialogue with the place. Moreover, the balcony functions as both a personal and a rhetorical *topos* of an in-between viewing standpoint, which protrudes from the safe space of the home and is at once distant and participatory, resonating with the experience of place in countries like Italy, where balconies are common architectural features of many flats or houses. In her essay for the memorial volume *Caro Gabriele*, the Milanese director Marina Spada recalls that Basilico once voiced his love for the balcony of his family flat in via Cusani, in central Milan, where he grew up in the immediate postwar period, choosing the balcony as his favourite place, as a young boy, for looking out, instead of playing in the courtyard with his friends (127).

This stance recalls the rhetorical strategy of signalling the writer’s gaze, and in particular Calvino’s gaze onto his native San Remo, which he cast as “*la città, uno spiraglio di tutte le città possibili*” (*La strada di San Giovanni* 8), just as Milan worked for Basilico as the model for all cities. In the descriptive opening of Calvino’s autobiographical narrative *La strada di San Giovanni*, the balcony similarly signals a way of entering the landscape from the protected space of the home, which allows the protagonist to experience the city at a distance both through seeing and hearing. Here, the narrative voice clearly positions his stance against his father’s love for the woods above, choosing instead a downward gaze, from his balcony towards the port down below, which can hardly be seen but rather has to be imagined, just as the city has to be created through writing—a stance that is echoed in many of Basilico’s photographs. Another striking resonance with Calvino—one of Basilico’s favourite writers, along with Gianni Celati and Peter Handke—can be traced in the photographer’s account of his first main project, *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche*, and the city narrated in *Marcovaldo*, which stages the eponymous protagonist’s nostalgia for nature and his disillusionment with the modern city, or, in Francesco Bonami’s words, “the disappointment of a community becoming aware of having missed the opportunity to transform itself into a mature modern society” (6). In his account of his early photographic series, Basilico lyrically recalls the favourable lighting conditions, with a strong sun casting clear-cut shadows and a wind that clears the view, a description that, in foregrounding his sensorial experience, echoes the

opening passage of Calvino's *Marcovaldo*, whose commitment to finding pockets of nature in the modern city is paralleled by Basilico's effort to re-evaluate disused factories, which become synonymous with the exit from modernity, as Orlandi reminds us (*Visioni* 80). Just as in Calvino's case, Basilico's aesthetic stance lies in negotiating the dialectics between modern and postmodern paradigms, and the role of the artist in creatively recording the exterior.

Archivio dello spazio and the Milanese Periphery

Another seminal work that marks Basilico's centrality in rewriting the photography of place as embodied space in contemporary Italy is the large-scale project *Archivio dello spazio* (1987-1997), sponsored by the province of Milan and curated over a decade by Achille Sacconi and Roberta Valtorta. Drawing on the example of the French state-commissioned DATAR project, and in line with a growing number of publicly commissioned landscape photographic projects in Italy and in Europe (Valtorta, *Luogo e identità*; Nappi), this ambitious project engaged fifty-eight Italian photographers in seven photographic campaigns, giving rise to an archive of approximately 8,000 photographs, and resulting, in Valtorta's words, in "the longest, most articulated and cogent work publicly commissioned ever carried out in Italy" ("Point of arrival" 102; "L'incerta collocazione"). The scope of the project, which brought together diverse photographers, was to "inventorize architectural landmarks and environmental assets within the most industrialized parts of Italy, covering almost 200 municipalities" around Milan, as Pelizzari notes (157). Yet the project went beyond what Pelizzari identifies as its immediate archival aim and made an important contribution to shifting the attention away from urban spaces to peripheral spaces and to forging a new idea of "beni culturali e ambientali," moving away from an outdated definition of landscape as "bellezze panoramiche considerate come quadri" (according to the 1939 Bottai Law) to the "aspetto estetico del territorio, di qualsiasi territorio" (according to the 1985 Galasso Law), as quoted in D'Angelo (64). At the same time, as Valtorta maintains, *Archivio dello spazio* gave Italian photographers—and Italian photography more generally—a new authorial identity on the international scene ("La fotografia dei luoghi" 123; "Archivio dello spazio" 38), and contributed to positing photography as a "bene culturale"—something which will be ratified by law in Italy only in 1999 (Valtorta, "Fotografia paesaggio istituzioni" 32). Among the many photographers involved in the various campaigns, Basilico was by far the favourite, as he was asked to contribute the vast majority of photographs to the archive (over 500) and his work appears in all the published volumes. Indeed, in her introduction to the first volume of the series, *Archivio dello Spazio. Olona, Lambro, Matesana* (1991), Valtorta acknowledges Basilico's pivotal role within the archive and his influence on the visual strategies adopted for the whole project, alongside other lines of influence that she attributes to Ghirri and Guidi ("Carta d'identità").

As John Foot suggests in his essay “The Urban Periphery, Myth and Reality: Milan, 1950-1990,” although the Milanese periphery has always occupied an important place in the image of the city, it has long suffered from an idealized and outdated image of urban space. The significance of Basilico’s work—and of this project more widely—is to bridge a classical view of the city and its periphery with a renewed gaze that forces us to look again, more closely, with a view to redressing canonical views of peri-urban spaces. In all the black and white photographs by Basilico published in the *Archivio dello spazio* volumes edited by Sacconi and Valtorta, the photographer turns his gaze to non-iconic places in different suburban areas around Milan, modulating his tested formal techniques, including empty space, evocative lighting, and central and accidental perspective, while adding movement through electricity lines and curved shapes. For example, the photograph *Ponte della Padregnana* (progr. n. 5246) depicts the entrance to a small bridge in the Comune di Robecchetto con Induno, in the North West outskirts of Milan (*Archivio dello spazio* 4). The view is framed by the curved lines of the bridge and of the electricity lines above it, which point to the central perspective. This perspective, however, is blocked by a tree in the distance, following a framing pattern that hides the vanishing point, commonly used also by Ghirri. In other photographs, such as the series taken around the Comune di Sesto San Giovanni for the second volume of *Archivio dello spazio* (1993), Basilico employs accidental perspective and fuzzy lighting to suggest the ghost-like presence of former industrial buildings, such as the disused steel factory portrayed in the photograph *Acciaieria Falck, viale Italia* (progr. 2174), that stands diagonally in front of a deserted street and a row of blank publicity posters, as if to emphasize a dying industrial modernity, which is heightened by the vanishing accidental perspective. The third photograph in this series, *Cassina Gatti* (progr. 3263), presents another example of what Secchi calls “frammistione” of heterogeneous elements and “dismissione” (*Prima lezione* 80) of buildings seemingly no longer in use, in the juxtaposition of an old farm house with a 1960s high-rise block of flats, which foregrounds both change and continuity between the urban and the rural. The view is framed by diverse buildings according to a central perspective, which is reinforced by diagonal poles and lines, and by an inclined tree, which stands in for the photographer, as a sole remnant of a bygone world, while an all-enveloping light makes the viewer feel part of this space. While employing established visual techniques, Basilico is at pains to draw the viewer in an emotional engagement with these spaces, highlighting the multi-layered morphology and complex history of the Milanese periphery, which stands in for any place. Although his work could be read as a melancholic operation, as suggested by Orlandi (*Visioni* 46) and Tommasini (“Emptiness”), I believe that Basilico’s stance is not merely looking back nostalgically but also positively forward, with a view to learning from the past in order to construct a livable space for the future. In his words:

Mi piace osservare i luoghi usurati e vissuti, in particolare quelli dove compaiono i segni della civiltà industriale, non con lo spirito dell'archeologo industriale né con nostalgia, ma con la coscienza che questi luoghi sofferenti sono una realtà con la quale convivere, luoghi che ci condizionano, che sono un patrimonio di vita e di cultura, un passato e un presente con il quale il futuro dovrà fare i conti. [...] Forse i miei tentativi di arrivare alla familiarità, anzi alla identificazione antropomorfa, che a volte mi sembra di raggiungere con le forme del paesaggio, rendono possibile la rilettura del mio lavoro in chiave di comprensione e di indulgenza, così da interpretare il mio agire come un gesto di recupero estetico.

(“Fotografare l'architettura” 40)

L. R. 19/98: la riqualificazione delle aree urbane in Emilia-Romagna

In 2001 Basilico was commissioned by the Istituto Beni Culturali (IBC) in Emilia-Romagna to photograph the changing morphology of this region and its cities, following recent national (1993; 1994) and regional laws (1998) that sanctioned the recuperation of disused industrial areas. This legislation gave rise to a plethora of regional “programmi di riqualificazione urbana” (Orlandi, *Visioni* 29), namely, “la riqualificazione dei grandi vuoti urbani derivanti dalla dismissione nelle sue varie forme: industriale, ospedaliera, ferroviaria, militare” (54). Since the 1990s the issue of disused and redeployed industrial areas has become central to photographic practice and theory as well as to the debate on architecture and urban planning, indeed rising, in Orlandi's words, to a “tema-simbolo dell'urbanistica del nuovo millennio” (54). The project resulted in a touring exhibition of about a hundred of Basilico's photographs, both in Italy and abroad (Boston, Barcelona, Paris), and a volume enigmatically titled *L. R. 19/98: la riqualificazione delle aree urbane in Emilia-Romagna*, with reference to the regional law no. 19 of 1998. Basilico had already worked in Emilia Romagna for some of his earlier projects (*Dancing in Emilia*), and had contributed to key collaborative national and regional projects led by Ghirri, such as *Viaggio in Italia* and *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia*. That he was chosen as the sole, non-Emilian photographer for this commission—in the context of regionally fragmented artistic affiliations and cultural policies in Italy—can be read as a further confirmation of his stance, as Orlandi writes, as a “riconosciuto maestro della fotografia di paesaggio” (*Visioni* 53), and as a key participant, through his photographic work, in the debate on redeployment areas. Though a smaller scale project than *Archivio dello spazio*, this photographic series is no less ambitious, as Basilico took a total of 700 photographs in 27 municipal areas surrounding cities and small towns in the region. His purpose was not merely to document places in a moment of transition, just before the redeployment work was started in 2002, but also to show what they could become in the future (54). In his introductory essay to the volume on Basilico, “Le città in attesa,” Orlandi inscribes Basilico's work within the iconographic tradition that goes back to Monti's photographic mapping of Bologna's city centre in the 1950s (also commissioned by the regional “Beni Culturali”) and highlights the “forza espressiva” of Basilico's photographs and their imaginary energy in creating a “città ideale,” which becomes a “modello a

cui tendere” (13). Along similar lines, Roberta Valtorta, in her introduction titled “Fotografia come produzione di relazioni,” reflects on the limitations of a rigid separation between architecture and landscape photography and praises Basilico’s mastery in foregrounding the relational aspect of photography, casting it as “experience” of places. In his essay “Verso Roadtown E-R,” Richard Ingersoll inscribes Basilico’s photography within the decentred production model championed in Emilia Romagna, which combines a century-long territorial fragmentation, yet also proximity to cities along the main regional axis of the Via Emilia, with recent systems such as the “megalopoli padana” (Turri) and new models of molecular capitalism or “territorio come fabbrica” (Bonomi).

Drawing on this historical framework, and following earlier regional projects such as *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia*, to which Basilico contributed a series of black and white shots in 1986, *L. R. 19/98* includes a selection of 172 black and white photographs which are arranged along the eastward trajectory of the Via Emilia, starting from the intersection with the Po river in Piacenza to the confluence with the Adriatic Sea in Rimini. Shot mostly at eye level, the photographs employ a variety of framing and compositions, and rely extensively on central perspective for both outdoor and indoor settings, many of them factories or depots in demise. This formal choice establishes a close, protected, theatrical space whereby buildings frame the view on each side, while the composition conveys a sense of staging, illusion and suspension in time. The impression of an all-enveloping space is maximised in the photographs shot indoors—for example in the series on the “ex-mercato ortofrutticolo in Bologna” (78-82)—but is also present in the outdoors shots, which are by far the majority. In many of them, Basilico chooses to frame the view not just laterally, but also vertically, by including bridges framing the picture at the top, and shadows at the bottom of the frame, as in one of the initial photographs taken along the Po river in Piacenza, *Lungo Po* (29; Fig. 5), thus creating an effect of being “inside” this space which deepens the viewer’s affective response to these places. Unlike Monti, who in the 1950s chose to picture iconic features like the arcades in Bologna, Basilico moves away from recognizable or artistic places and focuses on seemingly unattractive post-industrial ruins, in order to highlight the ongoing changes undergone by the urban and suburban fabric. At the same time, he seems to transpose the notion of the *portici* as “spazi protetti” (Ingersoll 22) to the places he chooses to depict, in order to convey a sense of collectivity and the “spirito cooperativo” which Ingersoll highlights as distinctive of this region. If in *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* the gaze was more backward-looking as the emphasis lay on the demise, or “dismissione” of these factories, here the emphasis shifts more to the future, that is, to a possible redeployment of these places, while casting photography as a productive means of urban planning for these “aree di riqualificazione.”

Conclusions

In his series *Dentro la città*, published in his book *Appunti di un viaggio*, as well as in the project tellingly titled *Scattered city*, which collects photographs of different cities taken from the 1990s until 2005, Basilico reflects on the dialectics between city and periphery that define the modern city and on its changing morphology, claiming that

la perdita della forma della città non interessa solo gli urbanisti, anche altre discipline, altre culture, fotografia compresa. Questa ridestata attenzione pluridisciplinare ha prodotto almeno due fenomeni: in primo luogo ha innescato una collaborazione più intensa tra fotografi, architetti, urbanisti, e specialisti di altre discipline, impegnati a leggere i problemi derivanti dalla trasformazione urbana. In secondo luogo ha contribuito allo sviluppo e al consolidamento di un linguaggio nuovo, di una vera e propria tendenza, che potremmo chiamare 'nuova fotografia di paesaggio'. Il mio lavoro ha una forte relazione con questi due aspetti, ma non credo vada inteso come una documentazione rigorosa e scientifica. Forse piuttosto, come un libero tentativo di attraversamento di un'esperienza problematica e senz'altro anche critica degli ultimi decenni.

(101-14)³

In this passage Basilico positions his work within a renewed interdisciplinary debate on the changing morphology of the city and within what is often referred to as new landscape photography, foregrounding the deep changes at work in both fields in late twentieth century. Through his photographic and critical work, Basilico played a pivotal role in strengthening this cross-disciplinary dialogue and in reinstating photography alongside architecture, urban planning and other cognate disciplines, as a creative and collaborative gaze onto urban and non-urban spaces—a position that is yet to be fully acknowledged for photography, too often relegated to an ancillary role. In his substantial body of work, and in particular in his seminal series in the 1980s and 1990s, he foregrounded the breakdown of commonly accepted distinctions between urban, peripheral or rural spaces, and offered a dialectical framework of *misurazione* and *contemplazione* through which to negotiate the post-modern city, that is, through the body of the ographer. He achieved this goal by reconciling a desire for clarity and “legibility of the cityscape” (2), which for Lynch informed the modern city, with an affective exploration of the fragmentation and heterogeneity of postmodern cities and landscapes, casting his gaze on the many disused and redeployment areas as integral parts of the urban space. In his essay “Movimenti dello sguardo,” Stefano Boeri puts forward four ways of experiencing the contemporary city, namely, through frontality, a raised gaze, a new focus on peripheries, and through crossing the city, moving away from a merely measuring approach towards “entering the body of the city,” scouting it erratically like a water diviner. Though unacknowledged, this metaphor clearly echoes the one used by Basilico, with whom Boeri collaborated at length; moreover, the four categories put forward by Boeri seem modelled on the different visual approaches employed in the analysed

³ The quotation is interspersed by a series of illustrations; hence the extended pagination.

photographic series. These consonances indirectly confirm the impact of Basilico's photographic and critical work in the architects' conceptualization of urban and peripheral spaces. By employing and rewriting shared visual strategies, Basilico's photography establishes an affective dialogue with viewers, inviting them to look again, more slowly—in counter-tendency with an age that invites us increasingly to speed up—and to apply this approach equally to “iconic” or well-known sites and to “whichever” places, from beautiful landscapes and villages in Normandy to war-torn Beirut and to peripheral redeployment areas, which are afforded the same aesthetic attention and value as monumental spaces.

As evinced in the series analysed here, the impact of Basilico's legacy is maximised by the rigour and legibility of his aesthetics and by his rewriting well-established visual frameworks, including perspectival views, black and white and large format photography, all features which increase the visibility and impact of his work. As Orlandi reminds us, Basilico was one of the first Italian photographers to exhibit series of large format photographs and to be acquired by foreign collections for his photographs of urban spaces (*Visioni* 47). His choice of working predominantly in black and white in the 1980s and 1990s, before using colour sporadically later in his career, is consonant to the teaching of classic architecture photography and the tradition of photographers who documented the Milanese periphery in the postwar period (Carla Cerati, Uliano Luca, Gianni Berengo Gardin, Toni Nicolin), as Foot points out (16). However, it is in counter-tendency with many of Basilico's contemporaries who operated in colour from the 1970s and 1980s—the prime example being Ghirri—and conveys Basilico's own effort to slow down the gaze and disrupt accepted ways of seeing. As Elio Grazioli reminds us in *Corpo e figura umana nella fotografia*, quoting one of Basilico's main literary influences,

se Alberto Savinio rimproverava alla fotografia di ridurre il mondo in bianco e nero, si potrebbe anche ribaltare l'affermazione pensando al fatto che solo la fotografia ce lo ha fatto vedere in bianco e nero, mettendone in risalto aspetti che altrimenti non avremmo potuto apprezzare allo stesso modo.

(291)

By foregrounding the notion of “experience” as a relational, embodied approach to spaces, with tripod and large format camera, Basilico succeeded in slowing down the gaze onto “any place,” foregrounding both the demise and the “riqualificazione” of the modern city, and in putting photography at the centre of this operation. This experiential approach is consonant to that of much recent theory on urban space, which for Amendola defines its object of study as no longer the city per se but rather the “urban experience” (22), while suggesting, in line with Secchi's teaching in *Un progetto per l'urbanistica*, that the “crisis” of the contemporary city is first and foremost our inability to “imagine” it. If, according to Stefano Chiodi, Basilico “has rivoluzionised documentary photography and transformed it into a means of reflection and an engaged analysis of the forms of

urban and natural space" (8), I believe that his work does not simply stop at analysing places but rather succeeds in "evoking, describing, reinventing" places (*Architetture, città, visioni* 132), while establishing photography as a pivotal means of negotiating the experience of place in postmodernity.

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