

The critical route of Manolo Laguillo
through contemporary Valladolid
Mela Dávila Freire

“There is a right way; but we are very liable from heedlessness and stupidity to take the wrong one. We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world; and sometimes, no doubt, we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea”

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Walking*, 1862¹

“The city”, says Manolo Laguillo, “is the largest of all human-made objects”². The city, in marked contrast to the residential settlements of the rural environment, is also, without a doubt, the most characteristic habitat model of today’s world. And yet its close connection with the present does not exclude a burden of historical substance that is essential to its configuration: with very few exceptions, the urban environments in which our lives unfold are the result of a condensation that has taken shape over extensive historical processes, in which growth, sedimentation, transformation and loss have coexisted permanently, right down to the present day with no solution of continuity. The city is thus “an oscillating flow, open to ongoing reconstruction and full of historical past”³: a dynamic structure made up in equal parts of past and present, materiality and absence, stability and change. Combined in different ways, these components crystallise in architectural groupings and urban plots of a deeply varied typology, which the different disciplines that study them –urban planning, geography, anthropology– usually represent by means of

plans or statistical data. In the photographic project that Manolo Laguillo has been putting together around contemporary cities for more than four decades now, in which he specifically investigates the visual depiction of these components, Valladolid is now the most recent protagonist.

Valladolid is the seat of the government and Court of Castilla y León; it boasts a long and intense history dating back to prehistoric settlements. It took off as a proto-urban configuration around the beginning of the second millennium. In the Middle Ages, the court of Castile was held in the city on various different occasions, which provided it with various important administrative and religious institutions, such as the University, founded in 1241; what was to be the first printing press in Valladolid, in 1481; the first mint in Spain, dating from 1572; and a cathedral, the ecclesiastical rank to which the Collegiate Church was elevated in 1595. In the early seventeenth century, in the reign of Philip III, the city even became the capital of the Spanish Empire for some years. The transfer of the capital to Madrid in 1606

¹ Henry Thoreau, “Walking”, in *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics*, June 1862. Published in Spanish as *Caminar* (Madrid: Árdora Exprés, 2014), translated by Federico Romero, p. 22.

² Manolo Laguillo, text for the information sheet at the *Valladolid. Aquí y ahora (Valladolid, Here and Now)* exhibition at the Patio Herreriano Museum, September 2023 - February 2024.

³ Rodrigo Castro Orellana, “La ciudad re-flexiva”, in Ana Carrasco Conde (ed.), *La ciudad reflejada. Memoria e identidades urbanas* (Madrid: Diaz & Pons Editores, 2015), p. 116.

marked the beginning of a period of decline, which was not reversed until the progressive industrialisation brought about by the arrival of the railway, well into the nineteenth century, and the start of the iron and steel industry in the region. It was in the second half of the twentieth century that the city experienced the most rapid and far-reaching population growth in its history – the number of inhabitants more than doubled from 1960 to 1980, largely due to the coming of two large production centres that the automobile industry installed in its orbit.

In terms of urban configuration, however, the twentieth century will go down in Valladolid's history as a time of loss and erasure: the abundant and varied architectural heritage that had accumulated in the city over the centuries was rapidly eroded, not only by the bombardments of the Spanish Civil War, but above all by the indiscriminate application of a destructive town planning resulting from the combination of modernisation and economic liberalism, which led to the demolition of numerous valuable historic buildings, and which would end up shaping an urban fabric that has been described as "chaos without force, clumsy disorder and confusion"⁴. The first of the town planning projects that were implemented in the city throughout the century was named after its author, the architect and engineer César Cort (1939), and proposed the expansion of Valladolid towards the western bank of the River Pisuerga. The Cort Plan was never developed to any significant extent, although it did provide a mechanism for the widening of the streets which, in the following decades, applied indiscriminately, led to the disappearance of numerous Renaissance palaces, Baroque houses and nineteenth-century constructions to be replaced by concrete buildings set back for housing, made much higher than what was desirable because of the profit involved, and

proportions which completely shattered the harmony of the old quarter. The successive plans that were developed in the 1970s and 80s did not alleviate the damage. The prolonged absence of general criteria of orderly formal zoning ended up, in the words of the town planner Manuel de Solà-Morales, with a "conflict between old monuments, nineteenth-century fragments and speculative blocks, unconnected streets and intrusive housing"⁵, so characteristic of the historic centre of contemporary Valladolid.

It is precisely because of this sense of chaos and disorganisation that the urban fabric of Valladolid is so resistant to being deciphered... and consequently, to being appreciated. This feature is particularly evident in a country like ours, with a very high density of monuments, in which one of the pillars for the transformation of the "tourist impulse" into the indisputable first national industry is precisely its architectural and monumental heritage. It often happens that our contemporary gaze, conditioned as it is by the tourist phenomenon, establishes a particular relationship with its surroundings with which it does not exactly seek to see the present, but rather to look towards the present in order to contemplate the past in it. In Valladolid, this almost unconscious desire is frustrated time and again by a configuration that does not lend itself easily to the "marketing of nostalgia"⁶, so typical of today's consumer society. If "eating up the Other" is a metaphor used profusely in anthropology to explain the processes of commodification of culture that tourism unleashes, it could be said that, from this perspective, the city of Valladolid, as it appears to us today, is not easily digestible.

In response to a commission from the Patio Herreriano Museum, in October 2022 Manolo Laguillo set about the task of photographing Valladolid with the intention of producing a photographic representation of the city that would be faithful to his own "working

⁴ Manuel de Solà-Morales Rubió, "Valladolid: la constante reforma de crecer sobre sí misma", in *Urbanismo*, No. 1, 1985, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ Fernando Estévez González, "Una maldición para el turismo rural", in *Souvenir, souvenir. Un antropólogo ante el turismo* (Valencia: Editorial Concreta, 2019), p. 164.

ideology⁷ as a documentary photographer. The procedure he chose to put this representation together –the same one he has been using since he began his long series of photographic essays on cities– consisted of “reading” the urban texture of Valladolid over some twenty long walks, based on the idea that the walk, as Michel de Certeau pointed out, can constitute a “space of enunciation” of the city:

The act of walking is to the urban system what enunciation (the speech act) is to language or to utterances made. At the most elementary level, there is in fact a triple “enunciative” function: a process of appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and assumes the language); it is a spatial realisation of the place (just as the speech act is a sonorous realisation of the language); finally, it involves relations between differentiated positions, i.e. pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is “allocution”, sets the other in front of the speaker and brings into play contracts between speakers). Walking, then, seems to find its first definition as a space of enunciation⁸.

Thus, when Laguillo sets out on his walks through the cities he intends to photograph, his intention is not only to apprehend the environment through his own physical movement, but also –above all– to trace a route in which the movement of the body stimulates the curiosity of the gaze and the agility of thought, in such a way that wandering around becomes both a form of reflection and an impulse for the imagination. This way of considering the relationship between movement and thought

boasts a wealthy tradition in the West, among whose many written manifestations are the reflections of the German essayist Karl Gottlob Schelle, dating from the early nineteenth century. He emphasised the difference between mere bodily movement from one place to another and walking as a genuine form of introspection and knowledge. “What determines the true walk”, said Schelle, “is of an intellectual nature, although many walkers, whose minds are either too empty or too indolent to play their part, may in their walks be no more than machines in motion”⁹. In the context of this tradition, the specific relationship between city and walk that Laguillo brings into play when working on his photographic essays is by no means accidental: in the wake of the Romantic fascination with walking, this relationship was also consolidated in the early nineteenth century, at the very time when the preponderant role of the bourgeoisie in modern capitalist society was taking hold, and the city, as we know it today, was acquiring its form: “A blend of conscious hygienism and revolutionary spirit, the promenade should be related to the emergence of cities, the bourgeois, modern gardens and new ideals”¹⁰. Baudelaire’s *flâneur* was one of the stages in the evolution of this connection, which later, well into the twentieth century, was called into question by the Surrealists, Fluxus, the Situationists –with their theory of drift, which served as an inspiration for psychogeography– the Beats and other groups of avant-garde artists, because it entailed a bourgeois tradition that “reaffirms the values of class society and exalts a contemplative relationship with the world”¹¹. In the city, of course, physical configuration and class system are particularly inextricable. This is why, as Walter Benjamin pointed out –among

⁷ Valentín Roma, “Documento, sensualismo y realidad en la fotografía de Manolo Laguillo”, in *Manolo Laguillo: razón y ciudad* (Madrid: La Fábrica y Fundación ICO, 2013), p. 82.

⁸ Michel de Certeau, *La invención de lo cotidiano. 1 Artes de hacer* (1990) (Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana, colección Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, 1996, translated by Alejandro Pescador), p. 110.

⁹ Karl Gottlob Schelle, *Die Spatziergänge oder die Kunst spazieren zu gehen*. Leipzig: Martini, 1802. Published in Spanish as *El arte de pasear*. Madrid: Díaz & Pons, 2013 (edited by Federico L. Silvestre, translated by Isabel Hernández), p. 117.

¹⁰ Federico L. Silvestre, “El mundo a tres kilómetros por hora”, in the introduction to Karl Gottlob Schelle, *El arte de pasear*, idem, p. 9.

¹¹ Idem, p. 13.

other examples— in his metropolitan *Book of Passages*, walking through urban environments in a reflective and critical way not only allows us to appreciate the historical layers that are superimposed, whether orderly or disorderly, on the architecture and fabric of a city, but also the social and political conditions that shape the lives of its inhabitants.

Manolo Laguillo is aware that representing a city in photographs implies capturing in images, simultaneously, the contemporary city and the memory preserved in its walls; he himself has pointed out that “Each epoch leaves a layer in the city, and the sediment that forms over time is comparable to that of geological strata. As there are also faults, fracture lines and overlaps in the city, i.e. areas where the different fabrics meet and come up against each other, if we locate them we can observe the vertical accumulation —one on top of the other— and the horizontal accumulation —one next to the other— of the successive strata”¹². Thus, during his walks, the streets he observes closely are not only “the space of what passes, in the double sense of what circulates repeatedly and of what represents the appearance of novelty”¹³, but also —it might be added— the place where the structures that “pass” become visible when they fall into disuse, wither away or are simply, in general, replaced by new ones and the passing of time distances them more and more from the present. The sediments that accumulate in the urban fabric, however, are not only discernible diachronically, but also synchronically, since they cross the social strata that coexist in each city; or, in other words, “the different cities that take up the same space”¹⁴. The walk, therefore, implies a movement through three dimensions —spatial, temporal and social— in which “the city manifests itself as a place of both

simultaneity of time and stratification of levels of meaning”¹⁵ through its architectural forms.

For Manolo Laguillo, the traces of this multidimensionality should not be sought in the monumental or grandiose aspects of the city, but rather all the opposite: “To go into the detail, to illuminate it, to underline it, is to go from the complex to the simple, from the major to the minor, from the whole to the parts, from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete, from the illness to the person suffering”¹⁶. This perspective undoubtedly finds echoes and resonances in the work of other professionals situated at different points along the spectrum along which documentary photography connects with street photography. Thus, for example, the Anglo-Nigerian photographer and writer Akinbode Akinbiyi expresses himself in similar terms when he states that “...It is in the details that reality comes to the surface with force. So often ignored or indifferently overlooked, but present, and silently singing its resonant notes, its threads ever weaving outwards in irregular, almost frantic movements”¹⁷.

In Laguillo’s work, however, attention to detail is not merely a way to represent the reality that exists beyond the monumental, but it also has the virtue of endowing the photographic gaze with a certain emotional nuance: “The task of documentary photography perhaps consists of drawing up the clinical history of the city. [...] Looking at the detail in a photograph with attention is an intensified form of relationship with reality, it is a form of compassion and tenderness, it gives access to its redemption”¹⁸.

From this starting point, what is the result of Manolo Laguillo’s approach to the city of Valladolid? How is the city revealed to us in the photographs presented in the exhibition *Valladolid, Here and Now*? Or rather,

¹² Manolo Laguillo, op. cit.

¹³ Rodrigo Castro Orellana, op. cit., p. 114.

¹⁴ Valentín Roma, op. cit., p. 154.

¹⁵ Ana Carrasco Conde, “Los reflejos de la ciudad”, in *La ciudad reflejada. Memoria e identidades urbanas*, op. cit., p. 101.

¹⁶ Manolo Laguillo, “Para una historia cultural del detalle. La fotografía documental”, speech on joining the Reial Acadèmia de Ciències y Arts de Barcelona (RACAB), April 2023. Published in *Memòries de la RACAB*, vol. LXIX, No. 7, 2023, p. 399.

¹⁷ Akinbode Akinbiyi, text for the brochure for the exhibition entitled *Sometimes to be lost is to be found*, Kunstverein Hannover, November 2023 - January 2024.

¹⁸ Idem.

what are the mechanisms by which these photographs reveal the city to us? Other previous photographic essays by Laguillo –on Beirut, Berlin, Lérida, Gandía, Gerona, Madrid, Mexico City, Paris, Trieste– some of whose images are reproduced in this book, are a good introduction to the Valladolid project, by framing it within the artist's broader project, while also highlighting some of the constants in his working methodology.

Valladolid, Here and Now consists of one hundred and fifty images, which constitute the final selection from Laguillo's extensive photographic survey of the city in 2022-2023. These photographs were grouped together in the exhibition in different sets, which were displayed with a regular cadence which only sixteen images differed from, like "accents" of particular intensity that broke the rhythm at certain moments of the contemplative journey.

In this book, the same one hundred and fifty photographs of Valladolid are presented in a rigorous chronological order. When they were shown at the Patio Herreriano Museum, however, their syntax in the rooms replicated the way in which one comes into the city: the photographs of the outskirts were close to the entrance into the different rooms, while those of the city centre were placed towards the back.

Even though the exhibition and this book follow different orders, the sequential nature of the whole, which is particularly evident in both forms, nevertheless responds to the use of different strategies. On the one hand, instead of identifying the places shown in the photographs –something you would expect from a conventional urban documentation– Laguillo has titled them by assigning them the reference of the exact moment at which they were taken, which explicitly emphasises the double spatio-temporal dimension of the work. The presentation of the images of Valladolid, exhibited in showcases in the different rooms at the Patio Herreriano Museum, in a format similar to that of the contact sheets, reiterates this sensation, vaguely evoking the succession of stills from a strip of film.

On the other hand, when the photographs are viewed one at a time, it is immediately apparent how faithfully they adhere to the parameters that Manolo Laguillo calls his "principles of action". These principles, which he himself has disseminated in different versions, invariably include the maxim that in each photograph there must be at least "three realities"¹⁹. Very often, these multiple realities are materialised in frames that emphasise the superimposition of different planes –or levels of depth– which in turn form highly accentuated vanishing points that underline the almost three-dimensional depth of the images. Laguillo's fondness for recording with his camera those places in the urban fabric where two or more roads converge favours this type of "layered" composition, as well as responding to the photographer's manifest desire to "work on the joint lines where the different urban fabrics meet"²⁰. This type of framing also has the virtue of extending the space portrayed beyond the limits of each photograph, by implicitly expanding the photographed motifs outwards. The fact that a significant number of the structures Laguillo portrays are cut off, either from above or from the sides, endows the frame with an overflowing effect.

In addition to following certain fundamental principles, Manolo Laguillo has described his working method as a process of "double reading". The first of these readings would be the one he himself makes of the urban environment when he wanders through one city or another, deciding what to photograph, and from where, spontaneously, but based on what could be called his "informed intuition", which in turn is based on the experience he has acquired and the visual training that this experience has given him. The second reading takes place later, in the tranquillity of his studio, when he goes back over all the shots he took during the walk, in order to appreciate them in detail and choose the ones that will definitively become part of the new photographic essay. In both phases, as in the modes of public presentation of

¹⁹ Manolo Laguillo, text for the information sheet at the exhibition *Valladolid, Here and Now*, op. cit.

²⁰ Idem.

his images, none of the decisions he makes are random. Ultimately, they all tend to enhance the multiple “associative itineraries”²¹ along which the people who contemplate his photographs will, in turn, come, almost without realising that, along the way, it is the photographer’s hand that is guiding them with delicate determination.

It might seem that discipline in adhering to these and other principles throughout the series of photographs could result in uniform or monotonous photographic patterns. This, however, is not the case; just as it has been said that Robert Walser, the writer-walker *par excellence*, “always wrote the same thing, but never repeated himself”²², we might say that Manolo Laguillo never repeats himself either, even though, in a certain sense, he always photographs “the same thing”. This is largely because nothing, or almost nothing, is “just” what it seems at first sight in *Valladolid, Here*

and Now, starting with the main topic, which is not the mere architectural configuration of the city but rather the volume, devoid of material corporeality but nevertheless concrete, that this architecture surrounds and shapes when it “embraces” the urban space to give it a particular form. Just as with Laguillo’s other work, close observation of these photographs immediately reveals, in fact, the extent to which different levels of representation come into play in each of them –as well as in the whole– combining the “visible” with the implicit, creating suggestive associations of meanings. These associations, as well as the perceptive smoothness of the editing and presentation decisions, are the result of the photographer’s conscious will, and display the virtue of highlighting the specific capacity of photography to express meanings that lie beyond the expressive abilities of language —

²¹ Aglaia Konrad, “Iconocity”, in Antonio Cataldo and Adrià Julià (eds.), *Photography Bound. Reimagining Photobooks and Self-Publishing*, 2023, p. 49.

²² W. G. Sebald, *El paseante solitario. En recuerdo de Robert Walser* (Madrid: Siruela, 2007, translated by Miguel Sáenz), p. 17.