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# ISLANDS

INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE URBAN DIMENSION OF THE CEMETERY AND THE  
SPATIO-POLITICAL SCOPE OF DEATH IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY.

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**POLITECNICO**  
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## Abstract

From a historico-philosophical reading of graveyards and their development into the modern cemetery form, the thesis investigates the political scope of funerary spaces by articulating concepts of territoriality, politics, and monumentality.

The role of architecture as the formalising element of death will be illustrated through paradigmatic examples in history, with fictional or unrealised project for cemeteries offering a glimpse into the potential for cemeteries to operate either as enforcers of societal norms or as transgressors to them.

The central portion of this work puts forth a succinct architectural theory for the contemporary large-scale cemetery. Arguments are drawn from a range of urban theories, in particular those of Aldo Rossi in *L'architettura della città* and of O.M. Ungers in *Die Stadt in der Stadt*.

The contradictions that arise from such an operation are not wholly denied nor embellished. Instead, a series of exits towards expanded readings of death in the contemporary city are proposed. These ramifications are characterised by the problematisation of death and its spaces outside of traditional architectural theory

and towards issues of identity, nationhood, and signification in the age of global migration flows and the dissolution of unitarian identities.

With a critical understanding of death and monumentality established, the thesis shifts its attention to one specific cemetery case, *Cimitero Maggiore* in Milan, and develops a global analysis of it on both urban architectural levels.

Accompanying the text are a series of schemes and illustrations by the author which suggest an alternative *mode of thinking* of the cemetery's future by proposing analogies to the city and its diverse architectural types. This graphic conclusion posits the possibility of conceiving an architecture for death which fosters open-ended narratives for a society increasingly marked by diversity in faith, norms and identity.



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## Introduction

"[...] cities, even if they last for centuries, are in reality great encampments of the living and the dead where a few elements remain like signals, symbols, warnings."

Aldo Rossi (1931-1997), *A Scientific Biography*, 1981.

Tradition has it that a cemetery must be separated from the public space of urban life. First, by sending it away and out of the perimeter of the city; then by walling it so that confusion as to what constitutes the limit between the realm of the living and that of the dead is no longer possible.<sup>1</sup> From this separation the cemetery becomes an explicitly independent geographic space - an island - which operates through its own set of rules. These rules arise from paradigms in city planning and religious practices, expressed most notably in the ancient Christian tradition of clustering graves around holy sites to achieve protection and salvation. Today, this might no longer be such a vivid preoccupation, but the tradition, which dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, is the genealogic benchmark for all present Western traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Cemeteries are so intimately linked to our most intimate fears (of death and disease) and beliefs (of salvation and resurrection), that change can only happen by small increments. Any brusque call for change has historically been shot down as an affront to creed, to social structures, or to human decency. The combination of faith, political ideology, and morals into one single entity makes the cemetery a particularly conservative institution. In comparison to housing and business districts, the cemetery offers a programmatic and organisational inertia which pertains to the realm of monumentality. The inertia of monuments, their particular tendency to resist change, derives from their perceived quality as works of art. As a collection of intentional monuments, cemeteries are imbued with historical value which safe-guards their survival.

Evidently, changes in the space of the city or the domestic realm can be met with resistance, but the suppression of a public equipment or the progressive shrinking of apartment sizes will hardly be grounds for claims that religious sensibilities have been hurt.

The tendency to remain the same, to stay loyal to traditions, and to safe-keep the image of ancestry turns the cemetery into a distinct territory in the city, even if it is designed through similar principles of order, economy, and beauty. Its commitment to history hinders its capacity

to offer a constantly updated image of the city. But such is the task of the cemetery: to operate as a repository of memory while allowing for new memories to etch themselves onto it. Not enough room for newness, and the cemetery becomes a museum; too much eagerness to erase, and it loses its purpose.

Because it serves the memory of the dead, those who can no longer speak for themselves or participate in the economy of life, the cemetery is a troublesome symbol for the contemporary metropolis. In an urban environment defined by production and the task of always consuming, in the space of the globalising city where real estate values are the metrics of success, in the never-ending stream of mass media, death poses an eschatological threat. Its definite character and inescapable nature defy modern living and urban dynamics based on capital accumulation and the myth of infinite growth.

The millenary fear of death is joined by the contemporary fear of losing physicality and leaving everything behind. Speculative urbanity and the spaces it produces thus appear antithetical to death and its own spaces. Philippe Ariès' statement that death has been "so obliterated from our culture that it is hard for us imagine or understand it" seems precisely addressed to contemporary metropolitan living.

One paradigmatic example of the prob-

1 This tradition can be found in early Roman settlements, such as along the Roman Appian Way, and in the fenced *extra-muros* cemeteries around basilicas of early Christianity. See Ariès, Philippe. "Place of Burial". *The Hour of Our Death*. Vintage Books, 2008. pp.29-95.

2 Ibid. pp.29-33.

lematic relationship between death and urbanity can be found in Milan. The city was one of the epicentres of 19th century funerary monumental tradition, a tradition that is deeply connected to the Italian Restoration and to the creation of a unified national identity (at least in death). Milan's urban development cannot be disconnected from the ethos of unification and national pride, expressed most clearly in its cemeteries, which ushered Italy into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the dramatic events that marked its first half.

Decades later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, China's market opening, and the creation of the EU (to cite only a few crucial international events) the image of Milan is dramatically different. Immigration, opening towards international investments, and the self-affirmation of being a cosmopolitan exception to the traditional Italian *città* have stirred the image of Milan towards that of a heterogenous amalgamation of individuality and diversity. In the second half of the 2010s, following the mediatic success of the 2015 International Expo, the city saw the swift inception of novelty branded districts.

These morsels of city, generally only a few blocks large, have drastically changed the established image of Milan with the introduction of towering monuments of an intrinsically competitive nature: the banking spiralling tower vs. the insurance company needle vs. the tech giant

block vs... In the process of economical reinvention, the Lombardian capital, much like London in the 90s, opened itself up to private investments and international economic flows, allowing its image to become a pointillistic collection of heterogenous communities and commodified districts.<sup>3</sup>

Against the backdrop of urban transformation and multiplying glass towers, Milan's cemeteries remain strikingly the same. Starting in the late 19th century and with the last significant expansion having taken place in the 1970s, the Milanese cemetery archipelago offers an image of the city that is still largely built on stone and on traditional values of nationhood and catholic faith. If the city of Milan has in the past years welcomed new decentralised forms of spatial organisation based on privatised city-making and affirmed its path towards a diverse urbanity, its cemeteries still reflect a much more hegemonic and centralised image.

To understand the specific context of Milanese cemeteries, it is not enough to analyse them presently and in pure compositional terms. Funerary architecture is intimately linked to religion and attitudes towards death; spanning from antiquity and early Christian practices to the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the three last centuries, its form cannot be reduced to a functional system of programmes

and technical norms. Furthermore, no two national funerary traditions developed in the same way; funerary practices across Europe were shaped by an amalgamation of Christian practices, national identities, religious syncretism, and military occupation (in Europe and overseas). This complicated pattern of mutual influence makes one single 'history' of the cemetery impossible and misleading. To establish a general understanding of the processes that lead to the consolidation of a relatively coherent European panorama (particularly through Christianity), key historical events and paradigmatic projects for cemeteries must be covered.

From the establishment of a general historico-philosophic process, attention must be turned to the cemetery as an urban entity that shapes and is shaped by the city. This investigation starts from the theory that cemeteries are cities within the city; islands clearly separated from the urban space which operate through seemingly similar rules but with a completely different behaviour. Drawing from O.M. Ungers theory for a multi-polar Berlin composed of 'fragments of city' in a sea of low-density green areas, the argument will be made for the existence of an archipelago of resisting totalising ideologies (the self-contained territory of the traditional cemetery) in stark contradiction to an ocean of 'mutually exclusive and divergent con-

3 Brenna, Sergio. "A Milano Dopo Citylife e Porta Nuova: Ancora Sparkling Buildings Contro Town Planning?" *Territorio*, no. 76, 2016, pp. 153–159., doi:10.3280/tr2016-076021.

ceptions' (the diffuse and globalised city).

The general question is renewed: with the on-going dissolution of a unitarian national identity and the consolidation of a multi-ethnic and pluri-confessional Italian identity, how well equipped is the monumental funerary tradition and its architectural form to welcome diverse and non-unitarian practices?

The first portion of the present work focuses on how cemeteries come to be defined as 'islands' in the city through specific planning and architectural devices. The argument will be developed through the investigation of cemeteries as cities in the city, and through the analysis of cemeteries both in theory and in actual built form through case studies. Cultural variations and contradictions will serve as proving ground for the thesis. With an established set of reading keys for the cemetery both as infrastructure and monument, an in-depth analysis of the Milanese case is then performed.

The final part of the work is an iconographic research into the typological and symbolic characteristics of funerary architecture in the modern age. Columbaria, their sub-types and possible analogies with the architecture of the city will be illustrated through text and diagrams. This architectural exercise will briefly introduce the context of Maggiore's consolidation as Milan's biggest cemetery and the history of

its expansion before focusing on current plans for development. A critical analysis of the most recent addition to the cemetery, the 2005's pyramidal columbaria building, will be followed by a counterproposal to the *Piano Regolatore Cimiteriale's* current plans for expansion.





**Part I: death, fear, politics**

## Gazing away from death

We should be preparing ourselves,  
We should be meeting the stages of death in  
our dreams,  
Noticing all that we sense in a fond way [...]

Kae Tempest (1985-), excerpt from "All  
Humans Too Late", 2019.

When the word cemetery is evoked, one is usually brought to think of the cemeteries that make up the urban environment today. That is, the cities in which people presently live. Perhaps the most immediate reaction is to picture rows of tombs neatly arrayed and composing a somewhat clear pattern of repetition; tombs may be marked by a horizontal or vertical slate, or by a religious symbol such as a catholic cross or by eclectic symbols such as the pyramid or the Roman urn. Some may think of a sequence of *aedicule*, or of walls lined with vaults and flameless candles, as is common in Italian cemeteries. The space between tombs may be paved or covered with gravel or grass.

If we focus our attention on the totality of the cemetery, we may think of a tall brick wall and a vaulted entrance portico, or of fencing and trees lining the limits. This self-contained limit can be understood as an island in the city. In modern city-planning, the image of the cemetery has no place in the middle of a lively neighbourhood. Nor is it supposed to be part of any attractive city centre. Whenever a cemetery becomes surrounded by dense city blocks, it seems to suggest unforeseen growth in that direction. The economics of a city have everything to do with it. When housing becomes saturated, expansion towards the cemetery may become an undesirable necessity. In reaction, zoning naturally tries to forbid the city from getting too close by establishing a perimeter where building is not permitted or otherwise by moving cemeteries to non-buildable, sub-urban zones. From a marketing perspective, given the choice between a view to a park or a view to a cemetery, tenants will always prefer the park. This has an impact on building close to cemeteries that further reduces private and public interest in investing around them.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the origins of this urban trend which affects cities around the globe today, an understanding of the historical place of the cemetery becomes necessary. The European case will serve as a starting point of anal-

ysis due to the large influence it exerted around the world through colonisation and cultural polination.<sup>2</sup> It is worthy to note that up until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Paris' primary burial space was still in operation in the heart of the city, a mere block away from today's Les Halles transportation hub. The Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, operating as a walled cemetery since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was only closed after an incident where 'mephitic air' cause the poisoning of residents in the area.<sup>3</sup>

In a thorough historical analysis on the evolution of the cemetery in pre-modern France, Richard Etlin points out that discoveries on the behaviour of gases and the transmission of diseases throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to a new understanding of cemeteries as threats to urban hygiene given their tendency to produce 'corrupted air'.<sup>4</sup> Three years after the decommissioning of the Holy Innocents, a royal declaration would implement a first version of the *ordonnance architecturale* which would later define the 'beautifying' works of Seine's prefect, Baron de Haussmann. It was the beginning of a transformative process which would define the French capital's image of large streets and spacious squares, and the removal of existing cemeteries from within the city walls.

The removal or concealment of death from the space of the city can thus be seen as a rather re-cent urban phenomenon, which has its

1 For example, the 2015 case of property buyers in a new residential project in Singapore organising a petition to have plans for the construction of a columbarium removed from plans for a new Chinese Buddhist temple. One buyer states: "I wouldn't mind living elsewhere, as long as it is not where, every day, I would walk past a place which in-

cludes a columbarium". See: Wee, Cheryl Faith. "Future Fernvale Lea Residents Mostly Relieved over No-Go for Commercial Columbarium." *The Straits Times*, 19 Jan. 2016, [www.straitstimes.com/singapore/future-fernvale-lea-residents-mostly-relieved-over-no-go-for-commercial-columbarium](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/future-fernvale-lea-residents-mostly-relieved-over-no-go-for-commercial-columbarium).

2 Cross-pollination is also understood to take place

in the consolidation of cemetery types across nations, as is evident between European countries and later between Metropolises and colonies. One interesting example is the Dutch funerary system and its heritage of colonialism. See: Breemer, Rosemarie van den. "Governing Cemeteries: State Responses to the New Diversity in The Netherlands, Norway

origins in both the progressive 'estrangement' of death and the scientific discoveries that began connecting death to insalubrity. Cemeteries then start being perceived as loci of insalubrity and disease, and death takes on a more fearful character to the public eye and the eye of the individual.



Cemetery of Holy Innocents as represent in the Plan Turgot of 1736 following a survey by Louis Bretez.

and France." *University of Oslo*, University of Oslo, 2019.

3 Etlin, Richard A. *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. MIT Press, 1984.

4 Ibid. p.14

## Fear

From the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, death was no longer tolerated in the urban environment. Its presence no longer represented the religious comfort of being buried close to the church's walls or to the tomb of a martyr or saint.<sup>5</sup> According to Richard Etlin, death no longer offered the shy fascination for the end of terrestrial life and the promise of rebirth. It now represented something far less desirable: the "fear issued from the spectre of the corpse as an insidious source of death foolishly harboured within the community of the living."<sup>6</sup> Death became a sanitary issue in the densifying city.

The presence of cemeteries in the city came to be seen by scholars as a genealogical mistake in the growth of the city, caused by the forgetting of ancient traditions of burying outside the walls as the Romans had practiced. Subsequent efforts in moving burial places to the outskirts were embedded with the rhetoric of returning to a higher, healthier form of city living such as the one represented by the literary and archaeological knowledge of Roman settlements. Hygienism may have been made possible by scientific knowledge unavailable to antiquity, but it was the aesthetic attachment to representations of antiquity as a better civic model which gave shape to the modern cemetery as a far-away place of tranquil reflection.

Death was pushed away from the city and towards the countryside, to what was and still is largely considered its rightful place.<sup>7</sup> This physical separation took different forms across Europe, with strong cultural seepage happening between European countries. Different models, such as the Campo Santo at Pisa, or the garden cemeteries of England shaped different traditions of where and how cemeteries are designed. Further analysis on the differences and origins of these models will be made necessary, but for the moment it suffices to say that, regardless of what model prevailed, cemeteries from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards were marked by the constant distancing from daily urban life.

The sending away of cemeteries to the limits of urbanity was one of the many processes of modernisation of cities that allowed the modern European urban centre to become what it is. It is a phenomenon no less important than the introduction of 'well-lit boulevards', or the closing of 'unsanitary canals' in that, together, they constitute a set of transformations that swept practically every sizeable European city throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Intensifying industrialisation and the by-products of its activities added to the pressing problem of over-crowding of cities and heightened preoccupations regarding the pollution of the urban atmosphere and disease transmission.<sup>8</sup> According to Reyner

Banham, the intensification of agrarian exodus and the mass migration from smaller settlements to the industrial city started exerting extreme pressure on the urban environment, with the "sheer size and human density of settlements [posing] problems of waste disposal, and threat of epidemic (a threat tragically often fulfilled) [...]"<sup>9</sup> Preservation of human life, alongside its economic value as workforce, was one of the main issues of modern city living. Overcrowded cemeteries and putrefying corpses, an issue dating back as early as the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in Paris, were now another problem in the growing list of polluting agents in the city.

Famous proposals of new organisational methods for the industrialising city at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began depicting the cemetery as a marginal and undesirable infrastructure. Ebenezer Howard's suggests one cemetery in the outermost ring of his 250.000 inhabitant green metropolis, beyond the railway and the canal, and next to stone quarries and water reservoirs. Also present on the most distant ring from the central city are hospitals (convalescent homes), schools for persons with disabilities, industrial housing, and brick factories. A hypothetical romantic desire in Howard to offer the dead and dying a place of rest among flowers and water features, a typical sentimentalism of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, is betrayed by

5 Ariès, Philippe. "Place of Burial", *The Hour of Our Death*. Vintage Books, 2008.

6 Etlin, Richard A. *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. MIT Press, 1984. p.16.

7 The shift was evidently not unitarian nor swift. Many

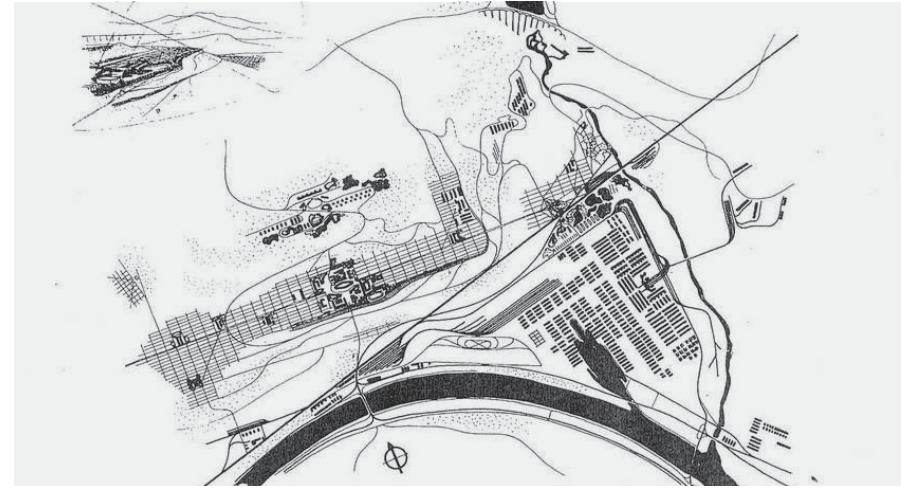
decades separate legislation and treaties from the actual application of laws and guidelines, and even more decades separate the capitals and big urban agglomerations from smaller towns and communities. For reasons of succinctness it is not pertinent to retell this process, covered in length by both Etlin and Ariès, Jean Didier Urbain, James Stevens Curl to cite but a few.

8 These examples can be seen in cities like Milan and its suppressed canals, Paris and its *rond-points* and immense avenues, Vienna and its Ringstraße. An entire argument could further be developed on how these transformations paved the way to the arrival of the individual passenger car which nowadays is generally seen as a sort of urban pathology on its own.



the functional grouping of production (bricks, stones, housing for workers) and rest (hospitals, cemeteries) in the same, outermost ring.

Similarly, in Tony Garnier's utopia of an egalitarian industrial city built on the idea of productivity, the hospital and the cemetery are nowhere to be seen in the aerial view drawings made by the Lyonnais architect. On the plan, they are found behind the city facing the valley, separated from it, and connected by a single road. The conscious choice to intertwine so much of the inhabitable city to industrial activity while shunning away the dead and invalids to the outer perimeter reflects an emerging tendency in the modernising world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which accepted with impressive openness the blurring of lines 'between leisure and labour'<sup>10</sup> while marginalising the unwanted side-effects: pollution, sickness and, sooner or later, death.



Tony Garnier, La Cité Industrielle, 1907.



Tony Garnier, detail of cemetery, La Cité Industrielle, 1907.

9 Banham, Reyner. "A dark satanic century", *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

10 Andreola, Florencia, and Riccardo M. Villa. "Free(d) Time: the Spatialisation of Leisure from the XIII Triennale until Today." 66, edited by Matteo Ghidoni, San Rocco, 2018, pp.31-39.

## Disease

Fear of disease and death is thus one of the main motors of change in the modernising European city of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cemeteries came under public scrutiny as cities started to grow at an accelerated rate and demand for burials started increasing accordingly. The issue of lack of sanitation of the cemetery was above all else an issue of overcrowding. In the Holy Innocents in Paris, communal graves would hold up to 1500 bodies at once and it was not uncommon for undecomposed graves to fall into their neighbouring grave or to be accidentally opened by gravediggers.<sup>11</sup>

With the overcrowding of cemeteries posing a threat to the urban environment, decongestion towards the outskirts appeared as the logical economical trade-off. Sanitation and beautification of the urban centre would come at the expense of relinquishing Christian traditions of being buried inside the church for the aristocracy or around it for the vast majority.

Speaking of the British funerary history, James Stevens Curl points out that the understanding of the church cemetery as a threat to public health helped erase the theological proximity of death which until then had shaped communities around the parish churchyard and the funerary activities it was responsible for and from which it profited.<sup>12</sup> Curl further suggests that early attempts at reform by notable figures, such

as London's post-1666 fire reconstruction architect Christopher Wren who proposed a centralised monumental cemetery in the outskirts of the city, were opposed by the Church which sought to protect its monopoly over funerary services.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that Wren found it pertinent to propose substantial modifications to funerary practices in the outset of a major catastrophe that ravaged the city and destroyed 87 churches including St. Paul's Cathedral, is indicative of the power of major catastrophes to act as a vector of change. The architect saw the unfortunate event as an opportunity to shift control away from the established Church and towards a centralised cemeterial space. Epidemics, too, were major vectors of change. Lisbon's *Cemitério dos Prazeres*, was created as a reaction to a cholera outbreak that took place in 1833 and, together with its twin *Cemitério do Alto de São João*, represents a shift in the Portuguese capital towards centralised cemeterial spaces.<sup>14</sup>

The suppression of *intra-muros* cemeteries in favour of larger and peripheral facilities was a general tendency both in Europe starting as early as the 1760s in France. The main factors investigated in the previous portion of this work were: an augmented understanding of disease transmission and the diminishing presence of death as 'familiar' element of Christendom. Another, non-negligible factor

is the political climate of European countries in the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The French Revolution and its traumatic rupture with the *Ancien Régime* in the final decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century set the precedent for the implementation of secularism in European nations which, simply put, revolved around the transferring of powers and properties from the ruling religious groups (generally the Catholic Church and its orders). Burials, traditionally under the exclusive control of the parish church, were removed from its jurisdiction and became a matter of public policy in the republican systems that started forming.

The decisive blow came with Napoleon's Saint-Cloud Edict of 1804 which forbade, amongst other things, the burying in communal graves, the adornment of tombs, and the presence of cemeteries within the city walls.<sup>15</sup> Because of the edict's vast impact on Europe and its colonies and former colonies, it is considered the historical marking of the birth of the modern Western cemetery. The French Revolution's adamant secular ideology deeply impacted the history of republicanism and state-sponsored laicity, key components to the creation of a cemeterial system separated from Church control. Furthermore, France's relatively vast cultural reach in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through colonialism, together with prolific lit-

11 Etlin, Richard A. *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. MIT Press, 1984. p.5

12 Curl, James Stevens. "The burial crisis; overcrowded churchyards; the first fruits of reform; and the first modern cemeteries", *Death and Architecture*. Sutton, 2002. pp.135-136.

13 Ibid. p.136.

14 Bazarraite, Egle, et al. "21st International Seminar on Urban Form in Porto." UTL & UnB, *Spatial Fabric of Urban Cemeteries: Two Cases in Lisbon.*, 2014.

erary and scientific production, acted as catalyst to the 'exporting' of the cemeterial model.

Over the course of the next two centuries the presence of the cemetery in the collective mind continued to diminish as the city densified and the territory of the cemetery was pushed to its edges. To this process, Paris' Père Lachaise cemetery of 1804, founded with the use of land formerly expropriated from the Jesuit Order, served as a guiding template to other cities and nations.<sup>16</sup> This was by no means a simple direct relationship wherein cemeteries being removed from the city caused death to become distanced. Shifts in religious sensibilities, caused in part by scientific revolution and the emancipation from an all-seeing, all-knowing God in the Nietzschean sense that allowed death to take on a less sacred and more unsettling role in society.<sup>17</sup> That the traditional cemetery, with its martyrs, relics and saints, would lose its sanctity and later be suppressed altogether comes as a consequence to the diminishing of death's religious role with reinforces the existence of a communal religious body, and the rise of Protestant ideals in which death represents the final act in an unequivocally individual journey towards ascension.<sup>18</sup> The cemetery's distancing from the city is then but the physical manifestation of a process of conceptual separation of death from modern life.

15 Etlin, Richard. p. 298.

16 Many peripheral cemeteries both in Europe and America were proposed following the example of Père Lachaise: Stockholm's Norra Begravningsplatsen (1827), Boston's Mount Auburn cemetery (1831), New York's Brooklyn Greenwood cemetery (1838), London's Highgate Cemetery (1839),...

Ultimately, what was under attack by hygienist planners and architects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not death itself, but the 'preventable death', followed by economic loss, caused by urban pollution and disease. Consumption, as tuberculosis was called, had become the main issue of public health in industrialising European cities and was dubbed *le mal du siècle*. The poor environmental conditions and overcrowding of dwellings of the typical industrial urban centre made it a perfect locus for TB (and other diseases) to spread. In the book *X-ray Architecture*, Beatriz Colomina suggests that it was precisely the fear of this airborne disease that prompted late-19<sup>th</sup> century urban and architectural theories to appear which would usher in the Modernist idea of a city of glass walls and spacious greenery.<sup>19</sup>

The reforms that took over Europe meant real change in burial practices and effectively paved the way to the affirmation of a proper funeral as one of the inalienable rights of individuals regardless of income or status. They further addressed the issues of hygiene in the densifying city by relocating burial spaces to more adequate areas, limiting the selling of permanent plots, and putting a stop to the widespread practice of piling hundreds of bodies in communal ditches.

17 Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Raids of an Untimely Man", section 5, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with the Hammer*. Translated by Richard F. H. Polt, Hackett, 1997. pp.53-54.

18 Caudwell, Christopher. "The Breath of Discontent A Study in Bourgeois Religion", *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture*. Monthly Review Press, 1972, [Marxists.org](http://Marxists.org), [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org).



Figure-ground plan of Lisbon with the outline of Prazeres and Alto de São João cemeteries on both sides of the city, on the edges of the dense urban centre.

[marxists.org/archive/caudwell/1949/further-studies/ch01.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/caudwell/1949/further-studies/ch01.htm).

19 Colomina, Beatriz. *X-Ray Architecture*. Lars Müller Publishers, 2019.







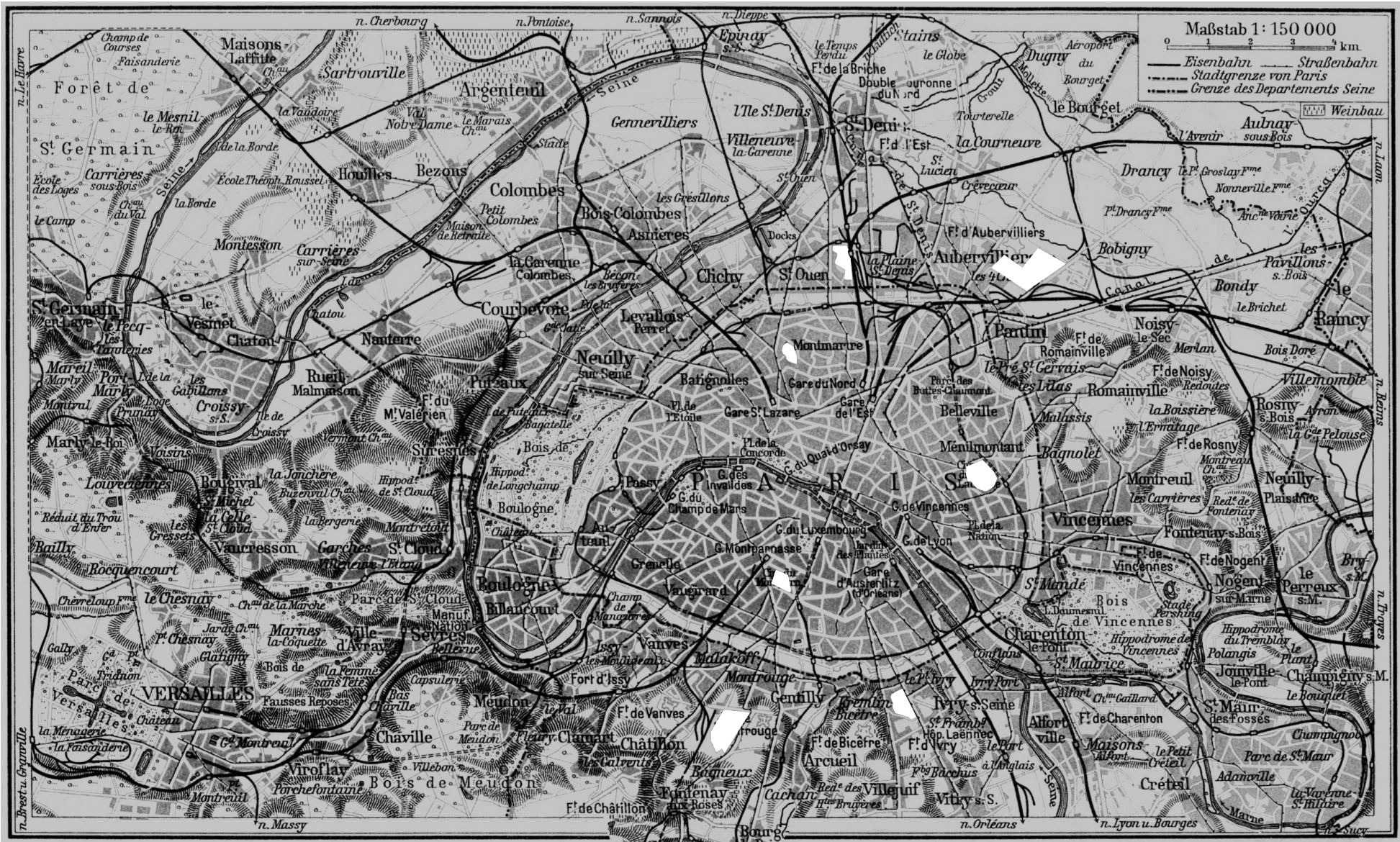


Fig. 3. Before the 2nd half of the 20th century, Paris' metropolitan cemeterial infrastructure was consolidated outside of the city and towards the countryside. The advent of mechanised public transportation and the popularisation of individual cars was directly connected to the bigger distances between spaces of life and death. Plan of Paris published by Verlag Brockhaus in Mannheim, Germany, 1937.



## Policies of displacement: Lisbon

Any sort of genealogy of urban systems in Lisbon must address the existence of two cities, before and after the 1755 earthquake catastrophe. Available cartography from before the event is scarcely available (Tinoco's plan of 1650 being one of the few survivors) and shows very little in terms of urban equipments.

A plan of 1785, drawn some decades after the reconstruction efforts directed by the Marquês de Pombal, gives very little indications as to which open spaces might have been cemeteries. It is relatively safe to assume that, much like in France at the time, cemeteries were adjacent to churches and parish complexes. Two hospitals are highlighted in the plan (B and r) which might indicate the presence of cemeteries on the premises given that hospitals were then considered places for the poor and incurable to go die. Convents and monasteries too, suggest the presence of cemeteries as burial within religious denominations was common. (Fig. 1)

In the next century and following events of pandemic breakouts in the city, two major cemeteries replace the diffuse network of parish graveyards and effectively remove death from the heart of Lisbon. (Fig. 2)



'Plano geral da cidade de Lisboa em 1785.' The reconstruction plans carried out in the previous decades following the earthquake and fire are visible. Plan by F. D. (Fran. D.) published in 1785. Source: Harvard Map Collection.





'Planta de Lisboa com todos os melhoramentos feitos e projectados na cidade'. The two main cemeteries of Prazeres and Alto de São João are visible on both sides of the city, which is now surrounded by railways. Map by José Vicente de Freitas, 1890. Source: Harvard Map Collection.



### Policies of displacement: London

Burials in the English capital during the 18<sup>th</sup> century often took place within parish walls and churches, following with the tradition of being buried close to the symbols of religious faith. Few cemeteries in the modern sense of the word can be found in maps from the period. Such cemeteries were typically the result of disease outbreaks or the destination of London's poorest citizens. In the successive century however, attitudes towards death would change rapidly and cemeteries conceived as fields of rest would start appearing. (Fig. 1)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, decongestion towards the outer edges of London came with the inception of the 'Magnificent Seven', a set of privately managed cemeteries with the scope to alleviate demand and overcrowding. By the early 1900s, however, London had already caught up. (Fig. 2)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, London's cemeteries main cemeteries in operation are located on even further away rings and towards the peripheral cities that compose the British megalopolis.



Fig. 1. Detail from 'A plan of the cities of London and Westminster'. Few recognizable cemeteries can be seen, namely: Bunhill Fields at North and Cross Bones cemetery in the South Banks. Burial in parish yards and within churches was still widespread then. Map elaborated by John Rocque, 1746.



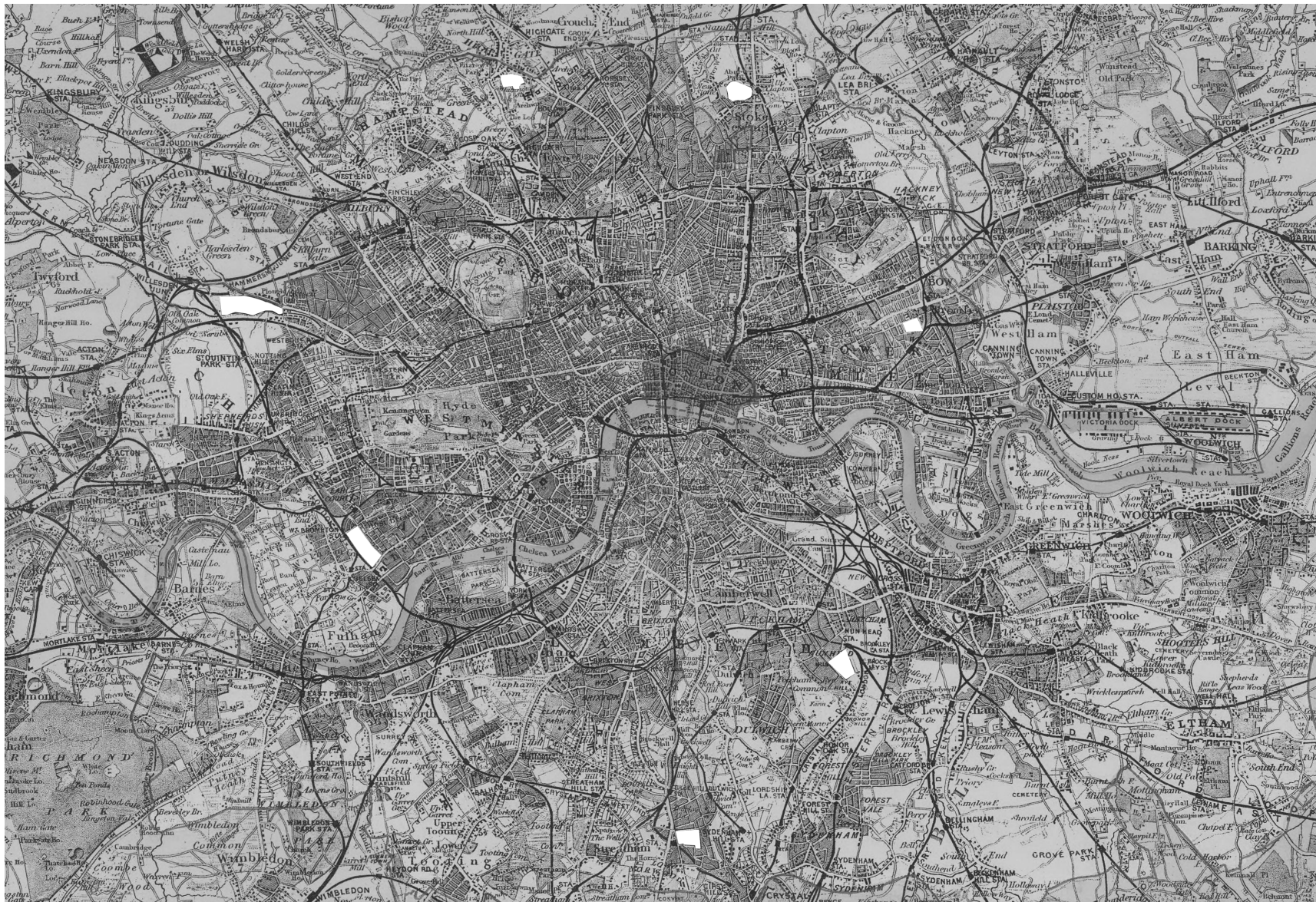


Fig. 2. Detail of 'Outer London. London atlas series. Stanford's Geogr. The 'Magnificent Seven', originally peripheric gardens of rest, are already being enveloped by the city. Elaborated by Edward Stanford, 1901. Source: David Rumsey Map Collection.



## Policies of displacement: Milan

Milanese cemeteries and their development are marked by changes in power in the Lombardian capital throughout centuries. *Fopponi*, the name given to the cemeteries built around the city during Austrian Rule, were insufficient and seen by the population as unsalutary and without dignity. (Fig. 1)

After Napoleonic occupation and the legislation brought upon by it, *fopponi* were progressively suppressed. At the same time, as national unity began rising in popularity, plans for a new, centralised cemetery which could house the Milanese with 'dignity and taste' in the shape of the Monumentale. It wasn't long until the Monumentale became insufficient, and so new cemeteries started being introduced, always further away than their predecessors. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1. Detail of the 'Carta di Manovra' from 1878 developed by the Istituto Geografico Militare where Milan's *fopponi* lie on the outside of the city walls. Source: IGMl.





Fig. 2. 'Town plan of Milan (Milano)' copied by the British War Office based on an Italian plan from 1937. In it, cemeteries are at the edge of the recognisable urban territory. 1942.



## Inertia

“In a world subject to change, the traditional attitude toward death is like a bulwark of inertia and continuity”

Philippe Ariès (1914-1984), *The Hour of Our Death*, 1980.

Emerging political rifts between religion and state in the late 18th century, coupled with growing concerns with sanitation and disease prevention, enabled the advent of the modern public cemetery as canonised by Père Lachaise in Paris and its multiple ramifications in Europe and overseas. In the process of urban distancing and emancipation from strict religious control (albeit not from religion itself), the cemetery took on a new but familiar form as an organised territory dissociated from the space of the city. Familiar because the decongested cemetery of the 19th century started resembling the roomy and geometrically ordered space of the Roman garden as represented by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau in his 1584 *Livre des édifices antiques romains*, or the ‘informal’ romantic English garden inspired by the 17th century paintings of Nicolas Poussin and canonised in

John Milton’s 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost*.<sup>1</sup> Symbolically, the reformation of the cemetery represented a ‘looking back’ to an idealised past. Against the gruesome image of the mediaeval charnel house and putrid overcrowded ditches, the orderly cypress field or sinuous sculpture garden appeared as most desirable alternatives. The self-monumentalising quality of these historicist templates, or types, served as an anchoring point for new cemeteries, granting them a ‘metaphorical connection’ to the past. In speaking of the concept of types in Quatremère de Quincy’s theory, Rafael Moneo states:

[...] the type explained the reason behind architecture, which remained constant throughout history, reinforcing through its continuity the permanence of the first moment in which the connection between the form and the nature of the object was understood and the type was formulated. The type was thus intimately related with “needs and nature”.<sup>2</sup>

With an image reformulated via a formal lexicon of ancient architecture and landscape, the modern cemetery establishes itself through a repertoire of historical symbolism which sets it apart from the developing city of the 19th century. Whereas the city grows through the historical

accretion and succession of transformations which cannot be placed under a single unifying narrative and which are often conflicting and contradictory, the planned cemetery of the 19th century originates as an intentional and totalising monument. Its historicity is self-determined and voluntarily sought after *a priori*.<sup>3</sup>

The cemetery is an island more than just by virtue of it being separated from the city and walled off from its surroundings. Its ontological connection to death and religion, together with the reaffirming in the 19th century of aesthetic sensibilities towards an ancient *style* define its development as a self-monumentalising public infrastructure. The fascination for antiquity as a referential basis and the use of historicist templates as symbolic devices take part in the search for meaning in death as a historical fate, and not simply chance. Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s etchings of ancient tombs and Hubert Robert’s paintings of Egyptian funerary landscapes are but one of the many architectural *fantasies* that established an aesthetic appreciation for the ancient in the 19th century.

These compelling and sublime depictions of gigantic funerary monuments helped establish antiquity as a shared imaginary of death as a monumentalising historical event in a century marked by the popularisation of archaeological sites like Pompeii as a

1 Borgmeier, Raimund. “Der Englische Garten - Eine Frühe Manifestation Der Romantik.” *Abschiedsvorlesung* am 3. 7. 2008. *Abschiedsvorlesung* am 3. 7. 2008.

2 Moneo, Rafael. “On Typology.” *Typology: Paris, Delhi, São Paulo, Athens*, by Emanuel Christ et al., ETH Zürich, 2015, pp. 9–26.

3 “The Meaning of Monuments and Their Historical Development.” *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*, by Alois Riegl, MIT Press, 1982, pp. 21–51.



traveling destination among the educated.

What is most surprising about the historicist monumentality of the cemetery is that it is still very much in operation in today's cemeteries. Whereas the contemporary city has mostly eradicated historicist symbolism from new transformations and additions, the cemetery is still largely being built according to the written laws and unwritten sensibilities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such is the inertia of the cemetery and one of the main reasons it stands in contrast to the contemporary city. The reasons behind this phenomenon will be investigated through the establishing of a 'genealogy' of models of control within the cemeterial space and through the testing of the theory of 'Permanence of the Plan' according to Rossi on the cemetery.

Although the cemetery is organised through similar economical rules which govern the city, first and foremost land-availability, it by no means changes like the space of the city. The space of the cemetery is defined by the consolidation of architectural form through the erecting of personal monuments that, given their tendency to be preserved as works of art, partially escape the economics of transformation operating in the urban space. Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms eliminated most aristocratic privileges and opportunities for permanent concessions in public cemeteries, it

did not remove the possibility of tombs becoming virtually perpetual so long as the lease renewal costs are paid for. Furthermore, the affirming of a historicist tradition in funerary architecture, as discussed above, paved the way for a self-monumentalising tradition of tombs as bearing age-value, or appearing to bear it at least. The historicist tomb and cemetery have the power to become a monument simply by emulating the aesthetic 'virtues' that came to represent Beauty in the Western world.

Beauty as an institutionalised ideal, made official by the schools that teach it and the laws that protect it, takes on a political role in the space of the cemetery. The erecting of buildings bearing great quality and uniqueness is a characteristic of the urban artefact as a work of art, according to Aldo Rossi. To him, what the urban monument has in common with the work of art is that 'they are born in unconscious [communal] life'.<sup>4</sup>

Adolf Loos too, in his allegory of the mound in the forest, places the funerary monument on the utmost ranks of architecture and states "only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument."<sup>5</sup> Loos' quote, widely cited in academic circles when speaking of death and architecture, deliberately removes the funerary monument from its historico-political foundations and posits the tomb

as a pure work of art. Rossi does not discuss the funerary monument in *The Architecture of the City*, but it is safe to assume that he considers the cemetery and mausoleum as another type of monument that is rooted in collective history and a shared communality; both, to him, valid criteria to consider monuments public works of art. Roughly 50 years apart, both writer-architects, one by self-interested and the other by too broad a thesis, fail to address the funerary monument as both symbol and bearer of political power *vis-à-vis* society.

4 Rossi, Aldo. "The Urban Artefact as a Work of Art" *The Architecture of the City*. MIT Press, 2007. pp.32-35.

5 Loos, Adolf. "Architecture", *Escritos*. Edited by Adolf Opel and Josep Quetglas, El Croquis, 2004.

## Death and power

If the tomb is erected to perpetuate the image of the individual, and if their aesthetic value serves as guarantor of permanence for the object of art, can the funerary monument be reduced to just another urban monument? Or must it be understood as a device with meaning beyond the spiritual, operating between society and the individual, and which is subjected to its own instrumentalisation in favour of private and political interests?

We have seen that the modernising city brought with it problems of overcrowding and hygiene that had to be addressed through both the managing of communal life (urban reforms, legislation on housing, medical developments, ...) and communal death (decongestion, relocation, legislation on grave-digging, ...). The consolidation of public policies increasingly concerned with the life of its citizens coincides with the industrial revolutions of coal and oil and the emergence of new forms of state control based on the management of the individual and communal body.<sup>6</sup> With the social and productive body of a population under control by mechanisms of regulation and surveillance, death too becomes a political decision with multiple social ramifications and architectural manifestations.

To elucidate the argument: it is enough to look at the series of events following the 2020

COVID-19 global outbreak and the deep impact it had on the political field; the disease itself becoming a political weapon by rivalling parties. The pandemic made clear structural inequalities that dictate which social strata will contract and die more often from diseases<sup>7</sup>, who has access to emergency treatment<sup>8</sup> and who gets buried when cemetery and health services are overwhelmed.<sup>9</sup> Although public campaigns against transmission tended to focus on the responsibility of the individual, the decision of when, where, and how to deploy preventive and palliative actions remains a political one.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics becomes useful in illustrating how death and politics are intimately connected. To the French scholar, control of a population's fertility, morbidity and health became an increasingly present mechanism of government starting with the Industrial Revolution and the society of production it created. If up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century morbidity was mostly accessed through epidemics and the immediate risk they posed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the morbidity caused by the chronic and recurring diseases within the population which became the object of surveillance and control. Morbidity was now understood as an obstacle to productivity since it "shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money [...]"<sup>10</sup> In other words, death opposes itself to the nev-

er-ending motion of modern capitalistic cities and sets an end to the reach of political power.<sup>11</sup>

What remains available to be determined is the imagery of death: the tomb, and with it, the cemetery. Through the controlling and organisation of the cemetery, biopolitics re-establishes it as a political device. Under the mantle of holiness, beauty and 'natural order', the cemetery has been the rhetoric terrain for political skirmishes where traditionally conservative forces have had the upper hand. The expulsion and rejection of individuals from cemeteries, clearly visible in the example of South African and US cases of funerary segregation, is another means of separating, classifying, and imposing control over individuals. Stripped of funerary rights and separated from the population in order 'to protect' it, individuals can suffer political death before biological death comes.

The use of death as a final 'separator' is not a new phenomenon and it certainly is not restricted to State racism, war, and colonialism as described by Foucault. In the paper *Necropolitics*, Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe discusses the role of camp-forms like the refugee camp, the prison, the banlieue and the *favela* as a spatial separator that enables the controlling and possible suppression of unwanted populations.<sup>12 13</sup> Over centuries, the space of the cemetery understood as a camp-

6 Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance De La Prison*. Gallimard, 2019.

7 King, Noel, et al. "Why COVID-19 Disproportionately Impacts Latino Communities." *NPR*, 1 July 2020, [www.npr.org/2020/07/01/885878571/why-covid-19-disproportionately-impacts-latino-communities?t=1600321023984](http://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/885878571/why-covid-19-disproportionately-impacts-latino-communities?t=1600321023984)

8 Lupion, Bruno. "Como o Novo Coronavírus Acentua as Desigualdades No Brasil." *DW.COM*, 27 Apr. 2020, [www.dw.com/pt-br/como-o-novo-coronav%C3%ADrus-acentua-as-desigualdades-no-brasil/a-53256164](http://www.dw.com/pt-br/como-o-novo-coronav%C3%ADrus-acentua-as-desigualdades-no-brasil/a-53256164).

9 Méheut, Constant. "French Muslims Face a Cruel Coronavirus Shortage: Burial Grounds." *The New York Times*, The

*New York Times*, 2 May 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/europe/france-muslims-burials-coronavirus.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/europe/france-muslims-burials-coronavirus.html).

10 Foucault, Michel. "Chapter 11", *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey, Picador, 2003. p.244

form has served as a classifying device where the individual is decisively and ultimately 'ordered' into their place in (or out of) society. Ordering comes into many shapes and forms: it can be religious, aristocratic, racial, economic... Whichever the ideology, the tendency for the cemetery to replicate and consolidate social segmentation produced within the city is an intrinsic part of its role as a political device.

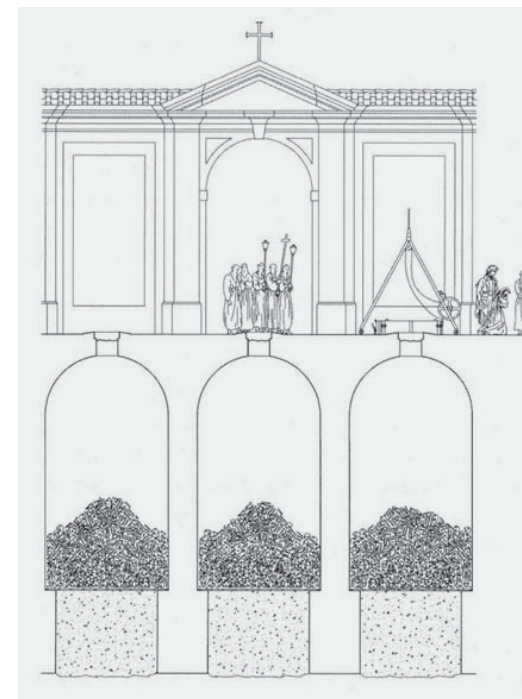
Transformations and attempts at revolutions have remained mostly constrained to the theoretical field of humanities, while the classifying function remained and was incorporated into evolving mechanisms of control as new forms as political and social structures developed. Two Italian examples, one of striking architectural innovation and the other of despotic reform, provide an interesting historical precedent to the many projects of social transformation that marked the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century designs for cemeteries across Europe.

In 1762, Ferdinando Fuga, the Florentine architect behind designs such as the façade of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, was commissioned by the King of Naples, Ferdinand IV, to design a new cemetery 'for the poor'. It is worth noting that the 'poor' meant simply the totality of the population that had no right to an aristocratic burial nor the means for a 'dignified' one in the fashion of the growing bourgeoisie; it is

the historical precedent and equivalent to the contemporary public cemetery. For the new cemetery, Ferdinando Fuga envisaged a rectangular matrix composed of 366 pits (one for each day of the year including bissextiles) enclosed by a wall and accessed by one single gate. On the entrance side, a vaulted structure doubling as the cemetery wall provided the technical spaces necessary. The quadrangular field is an artificial one: underneath the stone paving, 366 vaulted fossae separated by walls and soil coincide with the 366 stone hatches facing the sky. On any given day, all bodies coming from the hospitals would be placed in the fossa coinciding with the day of the year. Bodies would be brought down with the help of a mechanical device which lowered a coffin with an openable bottom to avoid the insensible 'throwing of bodies' into the pit. The cemetery stopped operating in 1890, with a population of ca. 700.000 bodies. It stayed closed to visitation until 2012, when it went through significant repair and conservation works.<sup>14</sup>

Fuga's project had no social ambitions beyond the supplying of hygienic and organised burial spaces for the poor; the aristocracy and bourgeoisie had admittedly no place there. It remains however a remarkable effort on behalf of sovereign power to separate and equalize its least-powerful subjects in the organised space

of a cemetery. It is significant in that it constitutes one of the first and few realised instances of a cartesian, asymbolic (insofar as it had practically no iconography in its architecture), and mechanised necropolis.



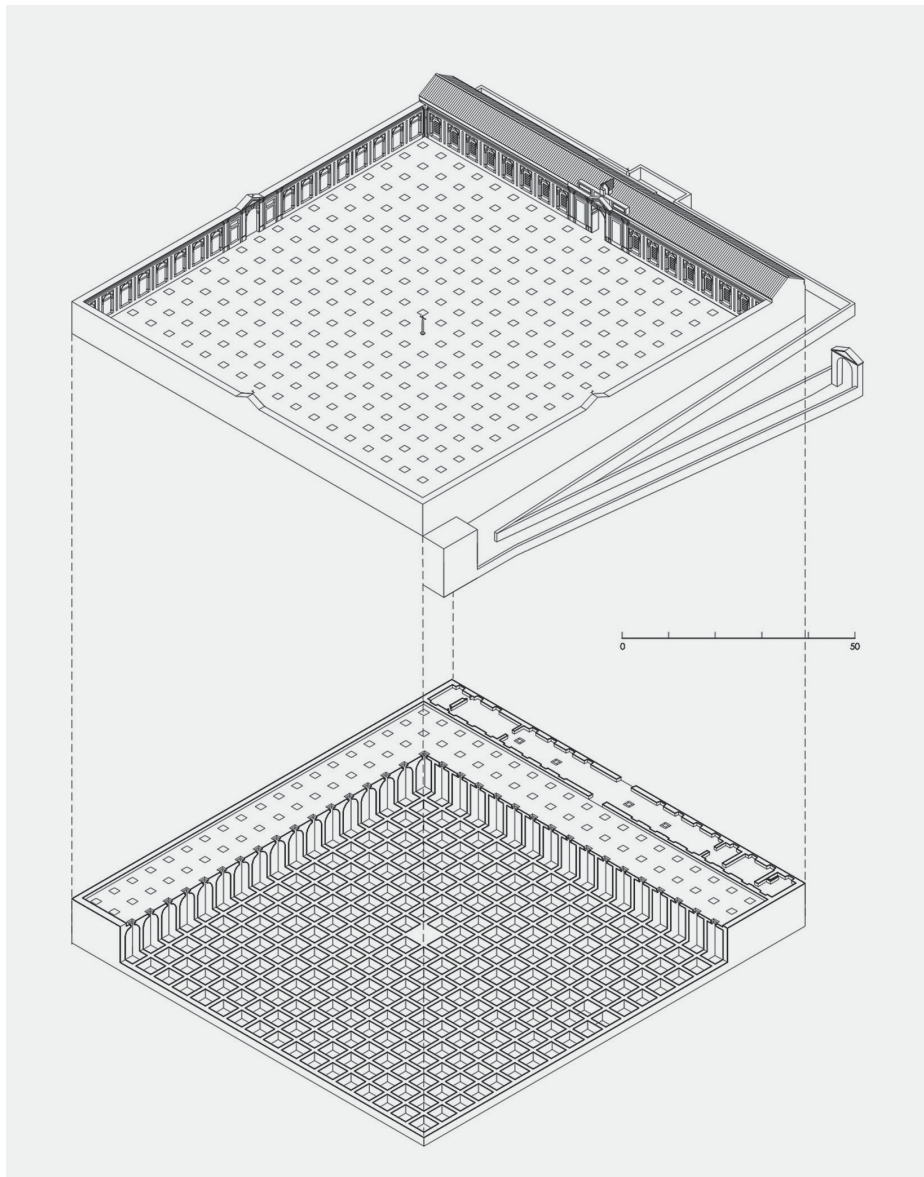
Section of Naples' cemetery of the 366 fossae. Courtesy of Paolo Giordano, architetto.

11 Ibid. p.248.

12 Mbembe, A., and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40., doi:10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.

13 Pele, Antonio. "Achille Mbembe: Necropolitics." *Critical Legal Thinking*, 2 Mar. 2020, [criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/02/achille-mbembe-necropolitics/](https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/02/achille-mbembe-necropolitics/).

14 Giordano, Paolo. *Ferdinando Fuga a Napoli: L'Albergo Dei Poveri, Il Cimitero Delle 366 Fosse, i Granili*. Edizioni Del Grifo, 1997.



Exploded axonometric of Naples' cemetery of the 366 fossae.  
Courtesy of Paolo Giordano, architetto.



Some years after the 366 fossae, in the Italian city of Modena under the reign of Duke Francis III d'Este (1698-1780), construction of the cemetery of San Cataldo began in 1771. Burials within the walls of the city were prohibited, as was the construction of new chapels for funerary purposes and all future burials were to take place in the new cemetery. Aside from three special fields for noblemen, the clergy, and worthy individuals, no form of architectural distinction would be allowed for the individual grave.<sup>15</sup> This equalisation of the citizens of Modena through death sparked heated debates between the Duke and the governing body of noblemen, with a series of pamphlets defending both sides' interests in what may consist a form of prototypical propaganda war. In the end, the aristocratic class won the right to bury outside of the cemetery, in their private estates. The cemetery of San Cataldo operated for 7 years as an egalitarian cemetery for the poor until 1778 when private monuments, a chapel and a hierarchical social order were implemented. English historian Hannah Malone suggests that the political intentions behind such a project may have been guided by a centralising wish for power, achieved by removing the privilege of funerary representation from the noblemen, more than by a humanistic ideal of making all individuals equal in death.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the ruler's in-

tentions, the episode of Modena's San Cataldo foundation is indicative of how the organisation of the cemetery resists change in favour of class privilege.



Original portion of San Cataldo cemetery, Modena, Italy. 2014.  
Photograph by Benedetta Corradi, distributed under a CC-BY-SA 4.0 license.

<sup>15</sup> Malone, Hannah. *Architecture, Death and Nationhood: Monumental Cemeteries of Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. p.18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.20.

## Unbuilt hierarchies

Theoretical projects offer significantly more diverse images of the cemetery. Whereas the body of existing cemeteries in Europe offers the image of a largely homogenous tradition, unrealised projects show attempts at transforming funerary practices and posit a new social order *post-mortem*. Looking at funerary projects proposed by the French school before the Edict of Saint-Cloud, it is possible to see the creative implementation of novel organisational methods such as the concentric arraying of rings of tombs organised by class of social importance, as seen in Delafosse's 1776 cemetery design, where clergy and public officials are buried in the smaller rings closer to the central chapel.

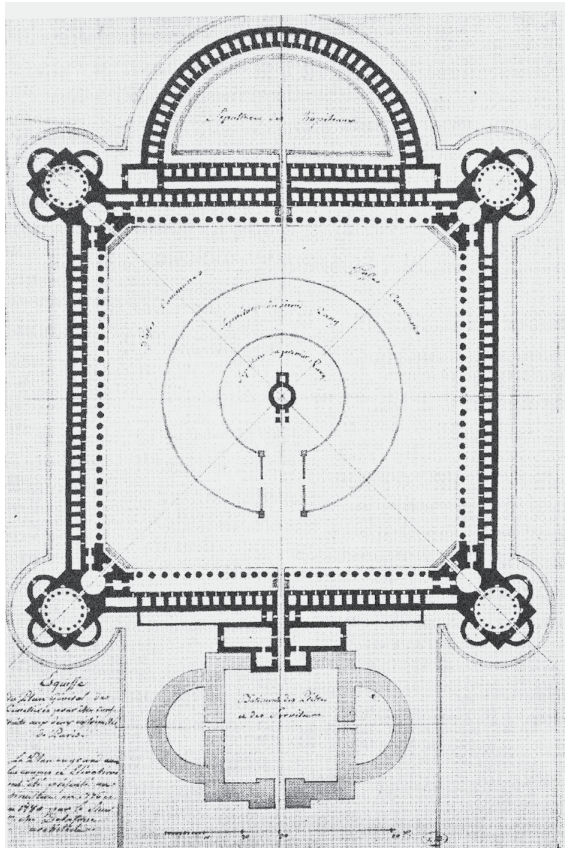
Others creatively explore the geometric possibilities of implementing folding in the perimeter wall to increase the number of 'premium' tombs in the style of the Campo Santo at Pisa while keeping central fields open for lesser and communal graves, such as in the design for a cemetery by Neufforge in 1778. Some projects proposed special spaces for the brave and notable men who had achieved national glory, following the Roman Pantheon example.

Many more examples of ingenious articulation of geometric composition with traditional or meritocratic social stratification can be found in the French school in the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

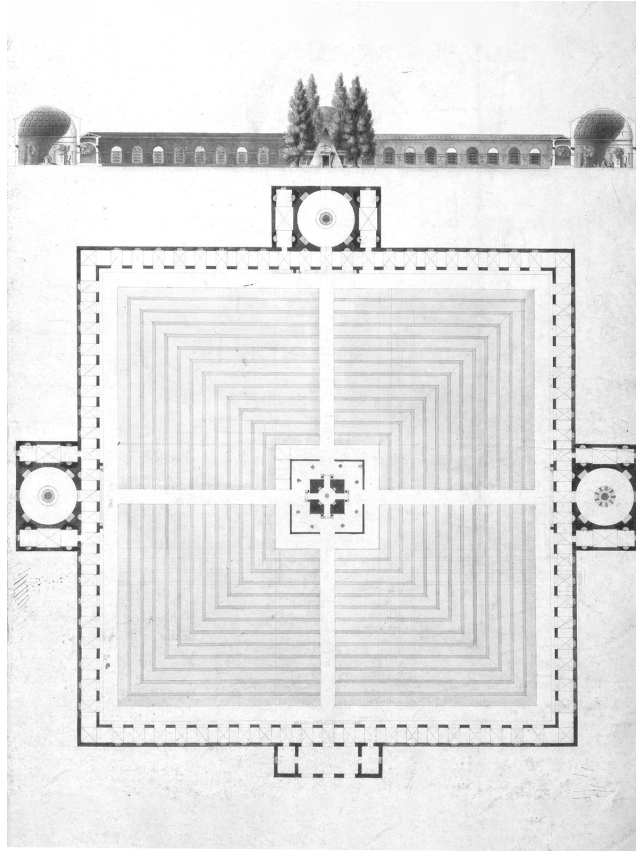
such as Capron's design for a circular cemetery encircled by a vaulted gallery and subdivided into radial charters with a chapel in the centre.

Italian academies, similarly, put forth many exercises in symbolic and functional organisation of cemeteries. The close ties between French and Italian schools, a result of Napoleonic occupation and the strong cultural exchange between Rome and Paris, is evident in such designs. Luigi Trezza's designs for a circular cemetery in Verona of 1804 and 1820, for example, echoes Capron's design quite literally. Giovanni Campana's entry for the Concorso Clementino in 1795 clearly shares the aesthetic choices made by Étienne-Louis Boullée in his 1781-82 design for *pour une Métropole*, or his 1796 *Projet de cénotaphe de style égyptien*.

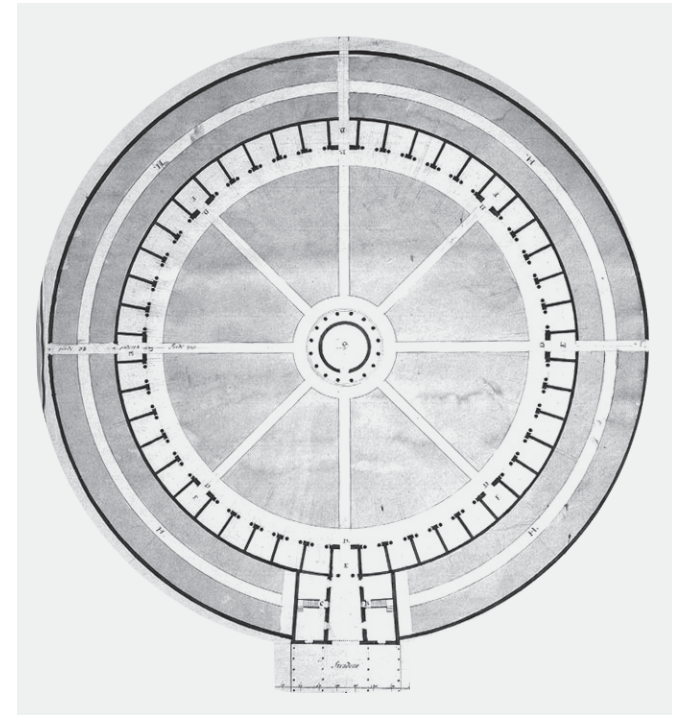
The point here is evidently not to denounce a string of referencing and copying amongst architects (the very concept of copy and authorship still under construction at that point) but to show a clear set of aesthetic principles based on Antiquity being followed by a vast number of architects across different European nations in the decades preceding the great reforms.



Jean-Charles Delafosse, plan for a cemetery in Paris, 1776.

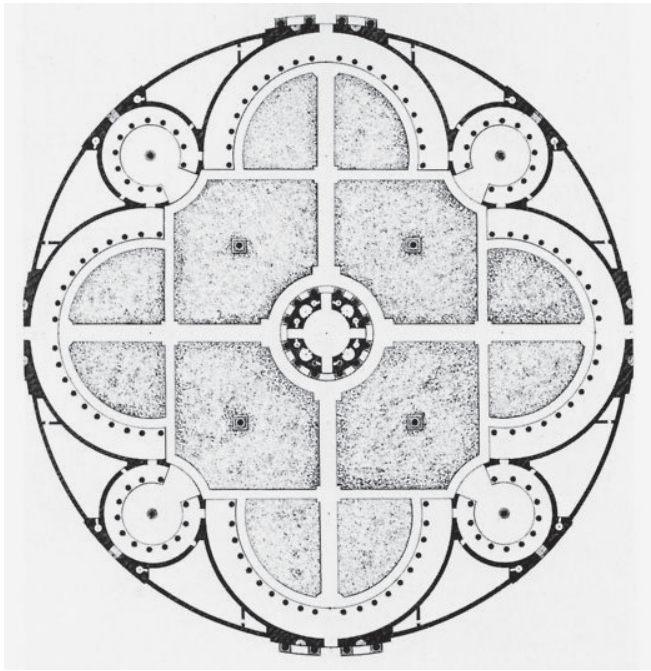


Mario Asprucci, plan and elevation for the Napoleonic Cemetery in the Pineta Sachetti, ca. 1800.

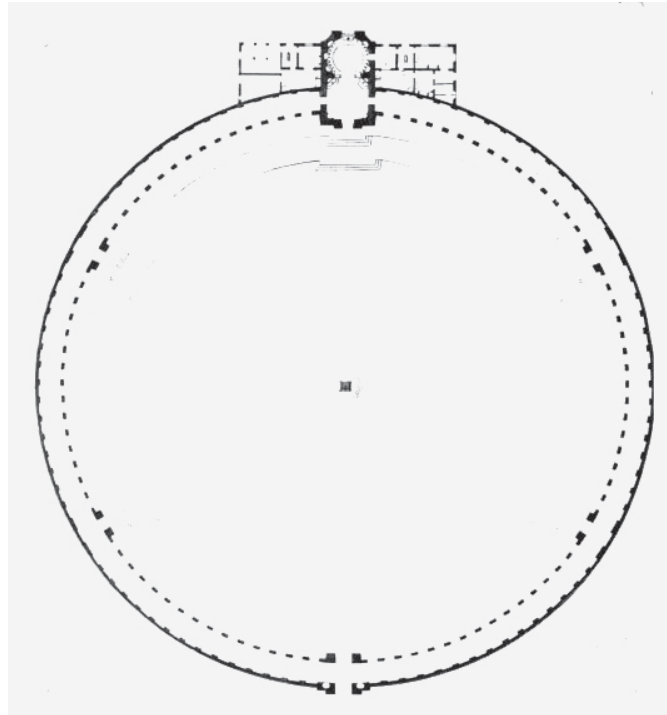


Luigi Trezza, plan for a cemetery in Verona, 1820.

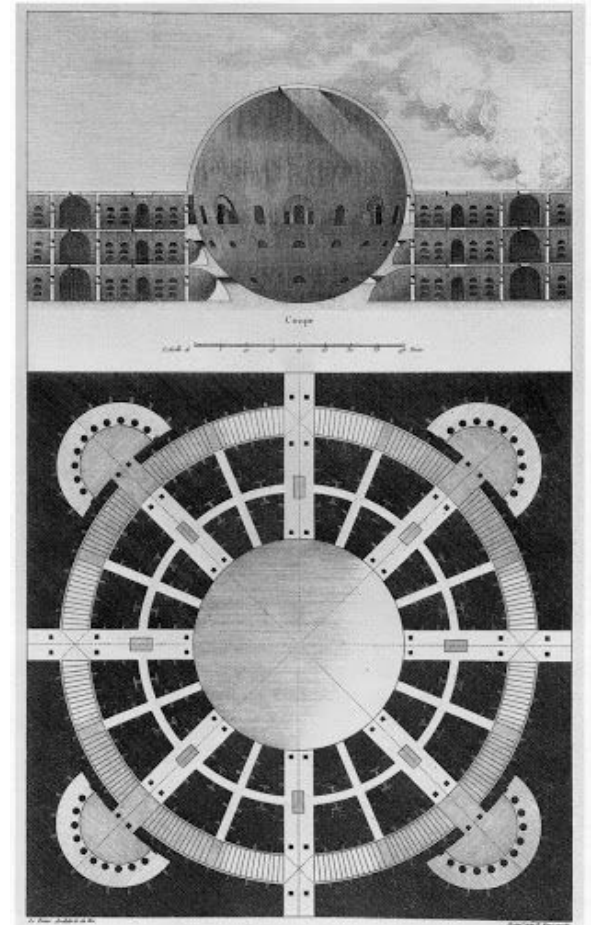




Jean-François de Neufforge, plan for a cemetery, 1778.



Capron, plan for a cemetery, 1782.



Claude Ledoux, cemetery for Chauvigny, 1785.



An interesting and somewhat little-known proposal for the city of London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century deserves mentioning due to its striking novelty and symbolic extrapolation of the pyramid type. In 1829, architect Thomas Wilson attracted the attention of some cemetery reformers with his proposal for 90-storey pyramid north of Regent's Park. The architectural behemoth would have towered over London's skyline and housed 5 million coffins.<sup>17</sup> Wilson's proposal came at a time when London struggled significantly with insufficient cemeterial spaces within the city and when the garden cemetery movement was reaching full speed.

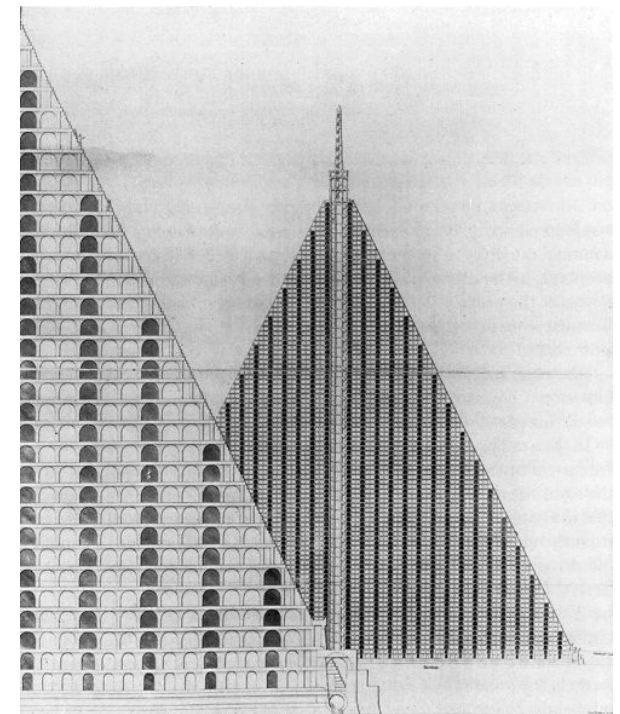
The pyramid, although mimicking the Pharaonic Giza originals, was conceived as a utilitarian solution to overcrowding in a moment where Egyptian architecture was extremely popular in Britain following the discoveries of Giovanni Battista Caviglia in Egypt. Its serial stacking of homogenous floors with no clear hierarchical distinction was an uncommon gesture and an involuntary precursor to the symbolically indistinct architecture of the skyscraper. The literal *scaling* of the pyramid type also sheds some light into a trend starting with the grandiose architectures of the French Beaux-Art architects in the funerary type. The trend of enlarging historicist types such as the pyramid or rotunda was an aesthetic response to the pressing socio-po-

litical issue of 'scalar organisation of society'.

Foreshadowing the 20<sup>th</sup> discussions around the problem of housing in a growing urban society, Wilson's pyramid was a direct attempt at addressing the need for proper burials in the emerging 'society of the average man'.<sup>18</sup>

Practically no proposals of such kind were ever built, regardless of how classist or meritocratic they were. Academies and individual architects' visions for a better organised or more just city of the dead found little fertile soil in the legislative powers and society at large.

Change did come, but always as diluted and compromised versions of the architectural *fantaisies* students and scholars ardently posited. The traditions of burial distinction and class separation through monument erecting persisted, defended by dominant classes and protected by compromising legislators. Even Père Lachaise, inaugurated in 1804 (the same year of the Edict of Saint-Cloud) and after the French Revolution, would not have received funding without guaranteeing the privilege of the wealthy family to buy themselves a permanent plot and build a monument.<sup>19</sup>



Thomas Wilson, design for a pyramidal cemetery in Central London, 1829.

17 Capps, Kriston. "Now More Than Ever, London Needs a 'Death Pyramid.'" *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 9 Mar. 2015, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-09/now-more-than-ever-london-needs-a-death-pyramid](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-09/now-more-than-ever-london-needs-a-death-pyramid).

18 Stanek, Łukasz. "Biopolitics of Scale: Architecture, Urbanism, the Welfare State and After." *Foucault, Biopolitics, and*

*Governmentality*, edited by Jakob Nilsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Södertörn University, 2013, pp. 105–122.

19 Etlin, Richard A. *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. MIT Press, 1984. p.340

## Permanences

Not only physically separated but particularly reactionary relative to the city, the cemetery can be read twice as an island. Inertia affects the cemetery like any other monument in that they are imbued with more than just practical meaning. Throughout history, they have held religious, monarchic, civic, and national values not unlike the cathedral, the palace, the theatre, or the civic temple. Like these structures, the cemetery constitutes itself as a 'permanent' urban element that comes to be identified as a major component of the city and which participates in its transformations in an almost permanent way.<sup>20</sup>

Permanence is for Aldo Rossi a condition for a primary element to be considered as such. In the book *Architecture of the City*, Rossi states that an urban permanence does not need to maintain its original function to act as a primary element and draws from Marcel Poëte's theory to assert that the street and the plan provide the most meaningful historical points of reference.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of the cemetery, the permanence of the form is indeed what makes it separate from the city, its borders consolidating it as an island. The impossibility for a change in program without loss of meaning, on the other hand, gives it permanence in time. Composed by the accretion of micro-monuments over time, the cemetery's very function is to monumen-

talise the memory of a city into a discernible and somewhat permanent architectural form. The 'ideal' cemetery does not change, it welcomes new graves until it reaches its limit and replaces old tombs for new ones over certain periods of time; the sum of all gravestones and mausoleums amounting to an architectural totality that remains however constantly available.

Continuing with Rossi's theory, urban permanences can be of two kinds: either propelling elements connected to a past that is still experienced, or pathologies appearing as a series of isolated elements. Contrary to the Palazzo della Ragione, used by Rossi as an example of a permanence that can exist despite changes in program, the cemetery cannot forego its original function as a place of memory and still be a cemetery. When that happens, such as in the transformation of Basel's Kannenfeld graveyard into a park, its genealogy as a place of burial becomes a mere historiographical fact and its essence as a cemetery is scarcely available.

A cemetery can also remain extremely faithful to its original function and aspect and still become an urban pathology. In this case, history and architecture become so connected to the image of it that it can no longer be modified. The potential for cemeteries to behave as 'propelling elements' is then connected to their capacity to maintain constant function while

accepting incremental change. But "function alone is insufficient to explain continuity"<sup>22</sup> as seen for example in the continued existence of inactive cemeteries in historic centres such as London's Bunhill Fields. Their quality and permanence as monuments reside in their ability to provide a testimony to the history of the city besides the archaeological. Like the roads and buildings that give 'direction and meaning' to the growth of cities, cemeteries, too, can contribute to the continuous development of the city through the permanence of their form.

The issue, or limitation, of this sort of analysis lies in the definition applied to the word 'development'. Rossi accepts the presence of heterogenous urban forces operating in the space of the city and acknowledges the possible co-existence of oftentimes conflicting or mutually exclusive ideologies. His analysis of the city remains however an intrinsically European-centred and nostalgic one. It is not by chance that *The Architecture of the City*, written in 1966, contains no real case study outside of Europe and Classic Antiquity. Rossi's gaze, like that of his European contemporaries living in the aftermath of WWII and uncertain about the coming decades, cannot escape an instinctive tug back to the certainty offered by what preceded the massive death and destruction of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The deep societal transformations

20 Rossi, Aldo. "Primary Elements", *The Architecture of the City*. MIT Press, 2007. p.86.

21 Ibid. p.59

22 Ibid. p.60

caused by globalisation, the information revolution, and the dissolution of national borders could not be encompassed or predicted by an urban study interested mostly in the deduction of the city's future based on an idealised past.

The Theory of Permanences remains valid for the cemetery, but must be expanded outside of the classicizing framework used by Rossi before the issues of secularism, immigration, religion, and the dissolution of unitarian monumentality in the contemporary city can be addressed.

The following chapter will reach into other sources to provide an expanded reading of the cemetery within the city.



## **Part II: death and the city**



## Islands

In 1977, Oswald Mathias Ungers, then a professor at Cornell University, publishes alongside his student and assistant Rem Koolhaas a small, pamphlet-like, work called *Die Stadt in der Stadt: Berlin das grüne Stadtarchipel* (The city in the city: Berlin the green archipelago). In it, Ungers establishes what would become a paradigmatic reading of Berlin as a multi-polar and heterogeneous grouping of villages (*Dörfer*) connected by a somewhat undefined urban mass. The starting point for the subsequent development on the future of such a multi-polar urbanity is the assumption that the European city was headed towards socio-economic shrinking and condensing, in opposition to periods marked by intense urban expansion and industrialisation up until the post-war reconstruction era.<sup>1</sup>

Ungers, like Rossi, believed that cities are “characterised by an overlapping of many mutually exclusive and divergent conceptions”. The ‘study area’ in Rossi can be understood as the ‘urban island’ in Ungers in that both are described as being readily identifiable bits of city that carry their own history, social structure, and environmental characteristics. Both

authors are also far away from a functionalist reading of the city such as the one defended by the modernist school. A substantial difference arises however in the authors’ interpretation of scale in the dynamics of the city.

Whereas Rossi briefly dismisses scale as not having a significant impact on the quality and meaning of the urban artefact<sup>2</sup>, Ungers stresses multiple times how, in his view, “we suffer from a sense of universal respect for gigantism, perhaps because we think that what is bigger must be better.”<sup>3</sup> Ungers’ understanding of scale as a determining factor in the quality of urban artefacts connects his urban theory to the problem of scalar organisation of society and hence to the vaster socio-political problem of the city as a device of management for human life.

The ‘Urban Villas’ proposed by Ungers and his students in the many seminars held at Cornell are a valuable exercise in determining scalar relationships between the single object and the city. The villa in Ungers theory is no longer only an architectural object but a territoriality which interacts with the more or less defined territories around it. The connection between object, territory, and city acquires geographic, political, and economical depth proper to the problematic of contemporary cities. Ungers understanding of the city as an assemblage of historico-economic entities with

their own specificity, scale and development is of particular usefulness to the analysis of the cemetery as a differentiated territory in the city.

Cemeteries share a common trait with the Villas of O.M. Ungers in that they contain an entire system of architectural ordering and meaning within a recognisable element. Unlike the hyper-dense block of Unger’s Berlin and its totalising architectural form, the cemetery achieves such territorial singularity through the vast juxtaposition of relatively low-density elements in heterogeneous fashion. Cemeteries are then comparable in urban function and behaviour to the Urban Villa, but their nature is intrinsically connected to landscape, understood here as the vast sea of *context* connecting individual elements. As such, the cemetery can be compared to an island: a territory cut off from the rest by a sea of urbanity which connects it to other recognisable entities.

Once the cemetery is understood as an independent but intertwined territory in the city, akin to the residential district or the primary element and not as a simple externality or anti-city, then it is possible to start investigating its inner workings, its spatial-politics and its ultimate significance in the development of the city.

1 Hertweck, Florian. “Berlin Influences and Ramifications.” *The City in the City: Berlin: a Green Archipelago: a Manifesto (1977)* by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska, by Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot, Lars Muller Publishers, 2013. pp. 56–69.

2 Rossi, Aldo. “Problems of Classification” *The Architecture of the City*. MIT Press, 2007. p.49

3 Ungers, O.M. “Thesis 4: The differentiated Urban Structure of Berlin.” *The City in the City: Berlin: a Green Archipelago: a Manifesto (1977)* by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska, by Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot, Lars Muller Publishers, 2013. p.92



## Crystallising entities

Without appropriate control mechanisms, a cemetery crystallises a time-specific value system in the form of socio-spatial ordering and the designing of tombs in an architectural ensemble. The result is historicization, with its architecture representing values and norms proper to its epoch. With the passing of time and the changing of funerary practices, a cemetery may cease to bear the symbolic meaning it once had to its citizens. In Milan, the Cimitero Monumentale, designed by Carlo Maciachini in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may serve as an indicator of such a process which can affect any cemetery.

The commission for a new cemetery in Milan came as a reaction to the growing scarcity of graves in the existing urban cemeteries. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Milan had many scattered cemeteries (*fopponi* in the Milanese dialect) that were by then largely insufficient to the burgeoning Lombardian capital.<sup>4</sup> Before the creation of the Monumentale came into consideration, the municipality decided to decongestion its cemeterial system by creating a new space for burials beyond Porta Tosa (today Porta Vittoria) in 1827. Given the common practices of the time, especially perpetual concessions and the piling of bodies in communal graves, the cemetery ceased to welcome new remains in 1896, only 69 years after opening.<sup>5</sup>

In 1829, according to the precepts of *Della Polizia Medica* of 1806<sup>6</sup> which established new planning and hygienic regulations on cemeteries, the city of Milan decided on the creation of a new centralised cemetery to replace the scattered infrastructure belonging to an age of Austrian rule.<sup>7</sup> The design process and inauguration of the cemetery in 1866 coincided with the period known as *Risorgimento*, when Italian unification started gaining political traction and from which appeared a quest for a new aesthetic movement that could represent the identity of both national and regional values.

The Monumentale in Milan was conceived under the direct influence of the nationalist sentiments that filled political and social movements at the time. At the heart of its architectural conception was the idea that its large open field organised into blocks would be populated by splendid monuments for Italian families and individuals which together would create an architectural composition attesting to the grandeur of Lombardian and Italian cultural values. The monumental tradition did, in fact, precede and lay the foundations for what would later become the Fascist myth of *romanità*. According to researcher Flavia Marcello:

“This typology of image was used to overlay the heroic and monumental patina of a privi-

leged past over the present regime to validate the present through its connection to great moments in history that could be relived both now and in the future. By the late-1930s, *Romanità* shifted from element of cultural policy to active and operational ideology fuelled by the invasion of Ethiopia, the declaration of the fascist Empire and the alliance with Nazi Germany.”<sup>8</sup>

Maciachini did design some mausoleums at Monumentale, but his design was mostly a framework for other architects to operate on. As noted by Gavin Stamp, monumental cemeteries like the one in Milan were “expressions of competitive civic pride, which demanded architecture and sculpture of the highest quality”.<sup>9</sup> With an architectural plan based so heavily on the selling of perpetual concessions and the construction of towering family monuments, the cemetery was fated from the outset to become a museum.

Over the following decades the Monumentale was indeed built on so feverishly that before its 30<sup>th</sup> year anniversary its insufficiency had already been decried by the city, and a new and bigger cemetery was planned further away at Musocco.

4 Ubertazzi, Alessandra. *Il Monumentale : centocinquanta anni di storia di Milano*. Milano Comune di Milano, 2005

5 Colussi, Paolo, and Mariagrazia Tolfo. “I Cimiteri Milanesi.” *Storia Di Milano: I Cimiteri Milanesi*, 2012, [www.storiadimilano.it/citta/cimiteri/cimiteri\\_milanesi.htm](http://www.storiadimilano.it/citta/cimiteri/cimiteri_milanesi.htm).

6 *Della Polizia Medica* was in fact the Italian equivalent

of the Edict of Saint-Cloud. It was promulgated, like the former, in Saint-Cloud and imposed on the Italian territory occupied by Napoleonic forces. The *Regno d'Italia* had its capital in Milan and lasted from 1805 to 1814.

7 H. Malone. Pg.176

8 Marcello, Flavia. “The Idea of Rome in Fascist Art and

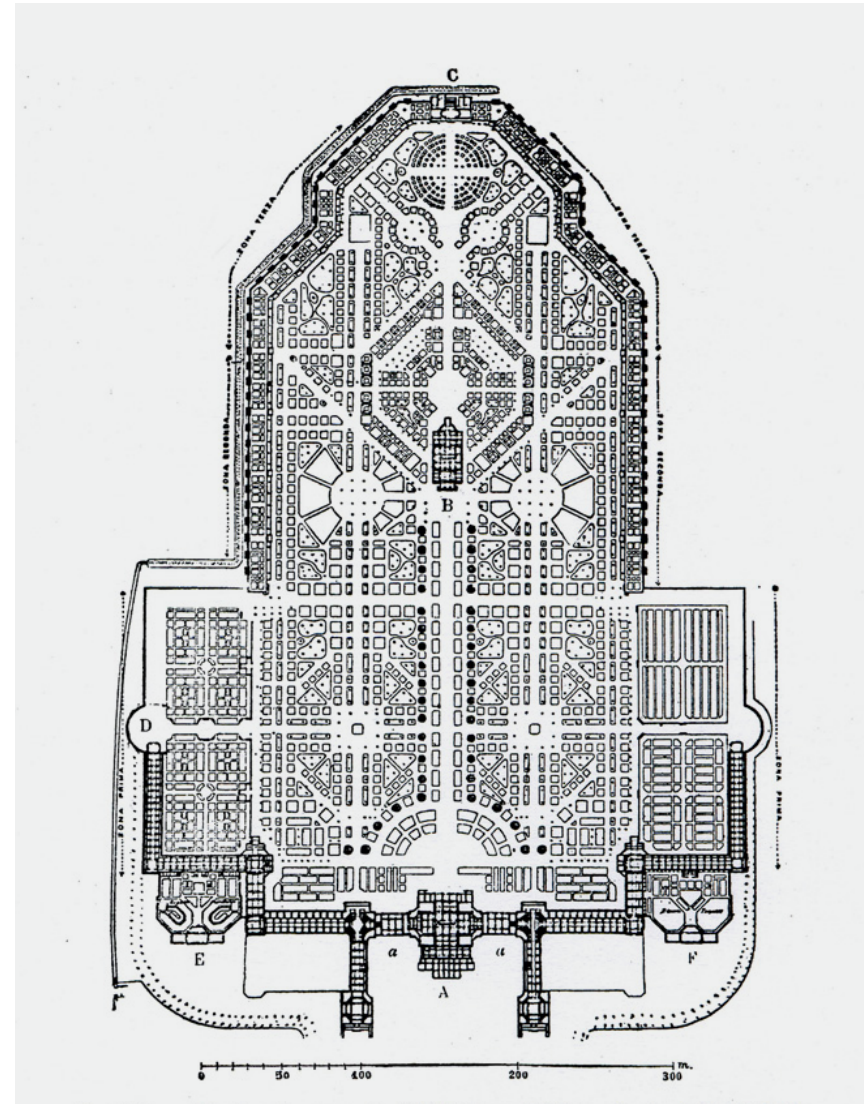
Architecture: The Decorative Program of the Palazzo Dei Congressi in EUR, Rome.” *Interspaces: Art + Architectural Exchanges from East to West Conference*, 2010.

9 Stamp, Gavin. “Picnicking on tombstones: Gavin Stamp on the monumental cemeteries of Italy.” *The Free Library*. 01 September 2017.





'Plan for the extension of the new Via Alessandro Volta for the direct connection to the streets Solferino, Palermo and Montebello [...] on the axis towards Cimitero Monumentale.' Published by A. Vallardi ca. 1850-90.



Plan of Cimitero Monumentale in its most advanced occupation form, late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Being buried at the Monumentale is still possible, making it not *functionally* dead. Its architecture, based on the monumental accretion of stylistically rich family mausoleums against the backdrop of a totalising *hall of fame*, is a perfect representation of the project for a National-Lombardian identity that was implemented over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main structure and entrance, with its vaulted halls of columbaria and the central *famedio*, recalls the model of Campo Santo at Pisa. Its ordering system and façade articulation is a hybrid of byzantine and Lombardian Romanesque, referencing the perceived *grandeur* of vanished empires. Individual monuments vary according to the decade they were erected, but generally mimic the Romanesque features of the main structure or otherwise reference gothic or renaissance styles. Drawing heavily from Roman antiquity, nationhood, and catholic values, the architecture of the Monumentale offers a narrow, and necessarily historicised reading of its architecture. As a sense-making enclave, it is limited.



View of left wing of the main building at Cimitero Monumentale, Milano, with burial grounds in the foreground. Photo by the author.

## Sense-making

It has been discussed before how reforms introduced a historicist 'looking-back' as a conceptual justification for the modern cemetery type. In the face of the dissolution of Christian attitude towards death as a humbling moment of reckoning, reformists, architects, and artists sought in the image of antiquity the rhetoric power necessary to give death a *new* meaning compatible with industrial society.

With wealth re-conceptualized as a symbol of divine blessing in Protestant ethics as described by Max Weber, and with ancient art and architecture acquiring mythical status as the most ennobling of arts according to Alois Riegl, funerary architecture became extremely referential. Coupled with the consolidation of bourgeois society and the rapid growth of cities, the modern cemetery became the unprecedented stage of religious, social, and political representation.

The intention here is not to suggest that the cemetery was once a pure form of architecture that was consumed by religious symbolism and social distinctions. The space of the cemetery has always been one of representation. Religious protection, monarchic rule, civic emulation, social distinction... there isn't such a thing as a tomb without meaning; even the lonely epitaph with nothing more than a name

and a date still represents something *else*.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of symbolism in the modernising cemetery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century arises from the moment meaning becomes an institutional device of social-religious distinction and indissociable from the architecture of the cemetery which, according to the precepts of secularism, should remain symbolically undefined. In the traditional cemetery, religious tradition becomes mixed with social distinction which in turn serve political rhetoric to the point that only a single, unitarian ideology can justify its existence.

Such an entanglement of religion and social identity is one of the core concepts of nationalism as manifested in Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the complicated politics of countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and subtly but much more pervasively in contemporary Europe and North-America as the assertion of an identity founded on Christianity appears as a reaction to globalising trends.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary globalising societies are marked by the dissolution of any hegemonic ideal or consensus and it is one of the tasks of architecture to provide a basis for human living that allows multiple identities and meanings to coexist. It is the capacity for architecture to provide a basis for human experience which is not externally determined by a system of values (religious, social, racial...) that is in ques-

tion at a place like the Monumentale in Milan. Its symbolism can be culturally appreciated as a piece of history proper to its epoch, but it offers little opportunity for new meaning to be attributed by users. The design of the Monumentale is referential in the sense that the spatial experiences it proposes are all determined by pre-established historical quotations and nostalgia. And although being referential does not make a building a bad one, a building that is conceived as such "tends to lack a general validity beyond the particular references made".<sup>12</sup>

It is the limited scope of signification offered by the Monumentale that renders it a problematic island in Milan. Its image is unavoidable, and the city has decisively been shaped by it, from the new directional growth it spurred to the consolidation of its image as one of the Milanese 'must-see' attractions. It is a primary element in the Rossian sense but its capacity to generate meaning is largely restricted to the historic-touristic realm, thus severing it from the transformations that the city continuously undergoes. We are able to see it, visit it and use it as a facility, but are unable to reconcile its aesthetics with those of contemporary urban identities which are increasingly diverse and non-conforming to hegemonic concepts of religion and nation.

Sense-making in the cemetery enclave must remain symbolic; without symbolism the

10 Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008, pp. 143–212.

11 Modood, Tariq. "Post-Immigration 'Difference' and 'Integration.'" *New Paradigms in Public Policy*, 2013, [www.tariqmodood.com/uploads/1/2/3/9/12392325/post-immigration\\_difference.pdf](http://www.tariqmodood.com/uploads/1/2/3/9/12392325/post-immigration_difference.pdf).

12 Olgiati, Valerio, and Markus Breitschmid. *Non-Referential Architecture: Ideated by Valerio Olgiati*. Park Books, 2019.

cemetery becomes a *machine à faire enterrer*. In the cemetery, as in the temple, symbolism is paramount to the development of emotional bonds amongst individuals, and between individuals and society. But contrary to the temple, which normally represents a fraction of society, the cemetery is intended to represent and be represented by everyone. Despite the presumed open-endedness of meaning in cemeteries in secular societies such as the Italian, the reality is that more often than not the narrative of death excludes the non-Christian. The Monumentale in Milan, again, serves as an example: within its limits but outside its walls are two fields, one for non-catholics and one for the Jewish community. In these spaces, statues of Mary, Jesus and Francis are replaced by David stars, protestant symbols and poems; their narrative is accepted but clearly set apart from the *main* one taking place within the walls.

Sense-making in such a context of differentiation gives rise to enclaves within the cemetery space and further fragments the narrative of death. Granted, religions share the fact that their gods differ in nature and character, and often so does the death that awaits them. To the non-believer, death awaiting them is ontologically different to the religious one, and even they might not want to share it in a religious manner – that is their prerogative. Death cannot reach

a common denominator, and the cemetery's destiny is not to become a spiritual equaliser. Sense-making refers then to the possibility of an architecture that welcomes a plurality of meanings without imposing a common underlying narrative of religion, nation and identity.

Contemporary attempts at such open-endedness of meaning have been particularly directed at the crematorium type, the preferred typology for expressing secular attitudes. In Chiasso, Switzerland, the crematorium by Andreani architetti, under operation since 2017 represents such an attempt at sense-making. The building is composed of two pavilion-like blocks joined by a concrete canopy which serves as a main hall and passage. The design employs the ornamental punching of holes onto its sleek concrete façade and roof to confer it a less industrial aesthetic and create a game of light faintly recalling Boullée's Newton Cenotaph. The starred surface of the concrete pergola with its colonnades that direct the gaze to the chapel at the end of the complex confer it striking conformity to the classical composition of Chiasso cemetery.

In the end, the aesthetic treatment of the volumes and facades is successful in addressing the symbolism of the place it is in without making direct quotations; but the ultimate compositional gesture of the building, that

of hollowing itself to let the main axis of the cemetery and the gaze towards the chapel proceed unimpeded, is a compromise which removes agency from the architectural object and turns it into a reflection of the pre-existing norms that structure the cemetery.



View from the crematorium at Chiasso towards the chapel.  
Taken from <https://www.tio.ch/ticino/attualita/1149712/chiasso-ha-il-suo-nuovo-crematorio>



## Contextuality

Cemeteries can offer great inertia to urban transformations, acting as a repository of traditions and symbolisms, without necessarily participating in the constant transformations of the urban psychology. It may, by sheer size, offer a psycho-geographic limit onto which *some* new meaning is attached without modifying its inner essence. But not all cemeteries are fated to lose their significance in the city. New meaning can be ascribed to the cemetery even if it does not necessarily grow or change, and even if it no longer represents contemporary attitudes towards death and mourning.

Père Lachaise in Paris has deeply changed in meaning and acquired a significant role as the most visited necropolis in the world with 3.5 million visitors yearly. New graves there are extremely rare and costly, and it functions mostly as an open-air museum and green pocket. Nonetheless, it is a major urban artefact that influences the development of the city and immediate area since its opening in 1804 as a picturesque garden, then considered a good choice for a Sunday stroll by the Parisian bourgeoisie.

Père Lachaise and the Monumentale in Milan are separated by 60 years, national borders, and a myriad of historical-cultural differences that make comparisons on their success as urban entities tricky at least. One

methodological approach is possible: it consists of looking at their urban presence today. Both cemeteries were erected outside of the city walls in areas defined mostly by agricultural activities. Both were reactions to the pressing issue of grave scarcity and lack of sanitation caused by the overcrowding of *intra-muros* cemeteries. Both house the tombs of famous persons (Manzoni in Milan, Molière in Paris...) whose remains came to represent the spirit of an entire national feeling. As places of representation and memory they are quite similar, so is their inception as grandiose structures to provide relief to the cemeterial system; as resulting urban elements, they differ brusquely.

Looking at the map of the urban area of Père Lachaise, it is possible to see how the city eventually surrounded what once was a garden belonging to the Jesuit order, enveloping the cemetery with an increasingly densified fabric of dwelling blocks. The boulevard of Ménilmontant, which stretches well over the entire entrance front, connects the cemetery to the idea of a green infrastructure extending over the entire city. There are no portions of the cemetery's edges that do not face the somehow homogenous city.

Looking at the Monumentale in Milan, one faces a much more heterogenous context. The edge of Via Ceresio, reaching the cemetery

at its central axis and connecting it to the inner city, marks the end of the continuous historical centre. Behind the cemetery and extending towards its west side is the railway area of Scalo Farini. This immense walled space physically and psychologically severs the Monumentale from the other side of the city and the historical neighbourhood of Isola. Its east side is marked by a large high-speed avenue and opaque industrial blocks. The Monumentale is cut from the city on all sides by a series of infrastructural barriers. Its presence seems to mark the end of the dense city and the beginning of the vague Milanese periphery as described by Stefano Boeri in the book *L'Anticittà*.<sup>13</sup>

13 *L'Anticittà* gives an insightful take on the nature of this expanding periphery in the Lombardian capital, which is marked by weak urban structures and general absence of meaning. See Boeri, Stefano. *L'anticittà*. Laterza, 2011.



Figure-ground map of Père Lachaise and the Parisian context.



Figure-ground map of Monumentale and the Milanese context.



The way in which both cemeteries' edges have established an interaction with the city around it vastly impacts their image as monuments. The urban transformations that occur around them are a result of the interactions that take place between object and context; of the interaction between two territorialities, one that is defined and self-contained (that of the cemetery) and the other which envelops the former and extends seemingly indefinitely (that of the city). Within the constant exchange between city and monument, the cemetery can participate in the creation of a sense of place or reinforce a lack of formal structure and vitality that typically characterises urban voids.

The edges of a cemetery make manifest the relationship between death and society; they make tangible the laws and policies that organise death in a concrete sense, such as the providing of protection zones around burial sites, but also the norms and practices that have a less solidifying nature and which are instead represented by the transitory or unplanned uses that a cemetery's edges can harbour.

An etching from ca. 1550 depicting Paris' Holy-Innocents Cemetery shows its walls, built to keep market activities from happening within the cemetery, completely lined by small sheds with counters and workbenches. Its edges had been completely taken up by commercial ac-

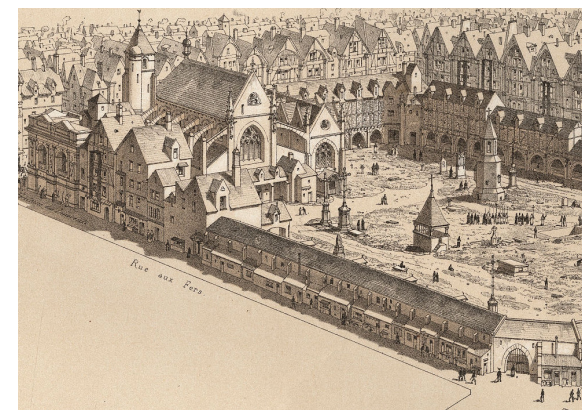
tivities and it was not uncommon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as pointed out by Etlin, to find traders under the charnels *in* the cemetery.<sup>14</sup> Such an image of the Holy-Innocents suggests the informal occupation (without going into the meaning of formality in such a period) of its edges by local populations who saw no issue in performing their trading in such a location.

The thought of allowing vulgar occupation and trading around the cemetery was abhorrent to the 19<sup>th</sup> century spirit. Cemeteries had become places of pious respect and emulation in European societies. In Italy, the convivial Sunday stroll in the cemetery was accepted only insofar as it loosely represented the respectful admiration for the men and women who rested there.<sup>15</sup> As places of memory connected to artistic values, civic virtue, and common history, cemeteries in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe started operating like the museum and the public *piazza*, according them an importance in urban society it had ceased to have in the past centuries.

The civic tradition of cemeteries which appeared in Europe endured and consolidated itself so universally that today it is hard to conceive of cemeteries beyond elegiac institutions that preserve the image of a people and their nation. Hannah Malone suggests a strong symmetry between the cemetery and other civic institutions in the city when she states

that “the monumental cemetery and the museum shared the same cultural space”; that the cemetery may be compared to the “other components of the parent city such as the opera house and café” and “the piazza as major urban spaces that accommodated a marked degree of social interaction, or which forwarded the shared meanings, memories and identities that bound society together within the city.”<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the monumental cemetery had become intertwined with the idea of the ‘city as a mirror of the nation’; as part of a collection of monuments that represent the splendour and achievements of a people. Its presence was a distant one that remained nonetheless necessary to the symbolic *ensemble* of great cities.



Etching depicting the surrounding constructions of the Holy Innocents cemetery in Paris ca. 1550, 1875.

14 Etlin, Richard A. *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. MIT Press, 1984. p.14

15 Malone, Hannah. “The Monumental Cemetery” *Architecture, Death and Nationhood: Monumental Cemeteries of Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. pp.83-84

16 *Ibid.* p.85-86

Outside (but not completely free from) the European tradition, some urban cemeteries appear as an almost antithetical example to the monumentalised and distant relationship between city and cemetery - between object, edge, and surrounding. Take for example, the relatively unknown case of Joenji Cemetery in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The temple is located a few blocks away from the Shinjuku train station and the office towers that characterise that part of the city and which have defined the international image of Tokyo as a city of skyscrapers. It is in operation since the 15<sup>th</sup> century and, like most Buddhist temples in Japan, has continuously carried out burial activities from which it draws financial resources.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas most cemeteries in China and South Korea were removed from the urban centres, Japan's cemeteries have remarkably survived in the densifying cities, becoming particularly discernible islands. Small Buddhist cemeteries, measuring no more than a couple blocks, can still be found in the densest portion of the city as a result of sacred spaces' "resistance and flexibility".<sup>18</sup> Joenji is one such cemetery. Measuring roughly 120 by 75 meters and separated in two by one street, it can be easily grasped as a single entity from all its corners. Compared to Shinjuku's small city blocks, Joenji is slightly bigger than the usual unit that com-

poses the city's fabric. It remains nonetheless a small cemetery (and possibly the smallest mentioned in this study) whose presence can be immediately measured by the naked eye. Such quality, that of being immediately perceivable and measurable by individuals without the assistance of a map, gives Joenji a familiarity that typically belongs to the object, and not to the territory.

The scale between city and cemetery in the case of Tokyo's decentralised funerary system fundamentally changes the relationship between monument and individual. In other words, the more recognisable scale of such micro-territories greatly diminishes their potential to form barriers and disrupt city living. Joenji's walls do separate it from the street, but they are not enough to create an urban void in the immediacy. The result is an urban equipment that coexists with local businesses and activities which benefit from the cemetery's existence as place-maker and vertical space reserve.

In Najaf, Iraq, another example outside Christianity shows a different relationship between city and cemetery. Wadi al-Salaam is the world's biggest cemetery, stretching over 10km along the valley and housing an estimate of 5 million bodies. Next to Najaf's population of around 1.4 million, the cemetery, if not the densest of both, is clearly the vaster and most populous.<sup>19</sup> It is one of Iraq's most important pil-

grimage places and home to Imam Ali's (601-661 CE) tomb, cousin of Muhammad and an important figure in Shia Islam. Not unlike the burial close to the saint in medieval Christian tradition, burial close to the Imam's tomb was considered to bring honour and peace to the deceased and their family; around the 12<sup>th</sup> century burials around the tomb were already commonplace as the village continued to attract those looking for a final place of rest and those hoping to profit from it.<sup>20</sup> City and cemetery continued to grow in a pattern unusual to the European context. Najaf's character has been deeply shaped by the presence of Wadi al-Salam; it drew and still draws urban vitality from the presence of such an important funerary monument and its corresponding mosque, Ali's Holy Shrine.

Together with the neighbouring city of Kufa, the Najaf of the living seems to take on a symmetric role with the Najaf of the dead. The borders of Wadi al-Salam are clearly visible but do not stand out as a break from the urban fabric. Rather, the cemetery appears as a form-generating urban entity with deep connections to the history of Najaf, the valley landscape of central Iraq and to Islam.

The fact that Wadi al-Salam never suffered the fate of the church graveyard in Europe is due to multiple factors. Religion, first and foremost – but it has already been shown that reli-

17 "Cemetery of Joenji Temple", 2020, [www.joenji.jp/sp/grave/?id=hasu](http://www.joenji.jp/sp/grave/?id=hasu)

18 Aveline, Natacha. "Taking Care of the Dead in Japan, a Personal View from an European Perspective." *Chiiki Kaihatsu*, 2013, pp. 1–5.

19 Drum, Kevin. "How Big Is Wadi-Us-Salaam Ceme-

tery?" *Washington Monthly*, 14 Aug. 2004, [washingtonmonthly.com/2004/08/14/how-big-is-wadi-us-salaam-cemetery/](http://washingtonmonthly.com/2004/08/14/how-big-is-wadi-us-salaam-cemetery/)

20 Marelli, Vittoria. "Wadi Al-Salam." *Politesi, Politecnico di Milano*, Politecnico Di Milano, 23 July 2014, [www.politesi.polimi.it/handle/10589/94173](http://www.politesi.polimi.it/handle/10589/94173).



Figure-ground plan of Shinjuku with the JR station and line crossing from North to South, the National Government building at the Northwest corner, and Joenji cemetery highlighted in black outline.



Joenji temple cemetery at Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan.  
© Google Maps



gious practices bend over time to matters of policy-making and hygiene. There is no reason to believe the Muslim world would react differently than Christendom to problems of epidemics and soil pollution had the problem arose. From that point arises another, equally important cause to the permanence of Wadi al-Salam: climate. In the arid environment of the Persian Gulf, human remains will decompose without posing the same risks they do in the rich hydrographic regions of Europe and the United Kingdom.

Circumstances outside of religion are, as previously shown, equally important in the development and funerary practices and the permanence of cemeteries. Without remaining too attached to the geographic argument, it is interesting to note how the nature of urban entities and the endurance of symbols such as the cemetery are connected to an economy of space and resources that necessarily passes through the climatic, biologic and geologic.<sup>21</sup>

An alternative history of death, the body and the tomb in the Muslim world necessarily entails a different architectural 'result' in the form of cemeteries. It also requires an entire new research process too vast to be covered here. What remains constant and available to the field of architecture and the topic of this research are the formal laws and the essence of form. According to O.M. Ungers "this essence is independent of

all functional determination and exists on the strength of its own compositional force as a permanent principle in all epochs and cultures."<sup>22</sup>

Borders are the physical mediators of a relationship between cemetery and city that is routinely being redetermined and reassessed. As an actual *enabler* of behaviours, the cemetery must be understood not as a passive entity that suffers transformations despite itself, but as an active one which participates in the construction of meaning. Its propensity to do so, as mentioned before, is connected to the capacity to house ever-changing meanings for life, death, and their intertwined existence.

Architecture alone cannot and should not establish new norms and behaviours; that is far beyond its capacity. But it can provide an interface with which the relationship between individual and society, building and city, object and context can be positively determined and enjoyed. How cemetery borders are designed, and an interface between necropolis and city posited, is wholly in control of the designer and the planner.

21 Dent, B. B., et al. "Review of Human Decomposition Processes in Soil." *Environmental Geology*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2004, pp. 576–585., doi:10.1007/s00254-003-0913-z.

22 Cepl, Jasper, et al. "Grünzug Süd: An Urban Design Manifesto." 66, edited by Matteo Ghidoni, San Rocco, 2018, pp. 133–143.



Satellite image of Najaf, Iraq with the current extension of Wadi al-Salam highlighted.  
© Google Earth



Image of Wadi al-Salam as seen from within the limits.  
Photo courtesy of Vittoria Marelli.





## Borders

“The very condition of architectural form is to separate and to be separated.”

Pier Vittorio Aureli (1973-), *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*

The nature of cemeteries as primary elements is continuously changing. Memory and tradition play a significant role in its development, as does the economic life of a city. Inertia is the conservative force that ensures a cemetery's continuity in time, granting it enduring meaning and ensuring common memory finds a nesting point. Urban economy, on the contrary, tends to be a vector of change. Without the need for an economy of space and hygiene in the densifying city, the cemetery would not have been the object of so many transformations in the past centuries and this research would have little to do with cities. Burying becomes an urban issue the moment there is no concrete way to address the death of an ageing population without resorting to some degree of territorial control and land management. James Stevens Curl provides an interesting 'summary' when speaking of the development of cemeteries outside of England and Europe:

The early settlers in the American colonies had no problems with burial until the development of towns. Traditional European attitudes prevailed, and interment took place in churches or in churchyards. A familiar pattern followed when the towns expanded, and the original churchyards proved too small for burials. Scandalous, unhealthy, and horrific conditions were common, and it became necessary to build cemeteries outside the towns. [...] <sup>1</sup>

Such is the historical tendency of the cemetery space, but it is only in the unprecedented modern issue brought by urban amassing, increased longevity, and decreased mortality that burial becomes an undeniable issue of scale. Like housing, education, transportation, employment, and leisure, death too is seen in the first half of the 20th century as fundamental right to be provided for an entire population of “great numbers” in the welfare state or socialist utopias. <sup>2</sup>

The internal geography of the necropolis offers a reduced image of the socio-economic handling of land occupation which is proper to the history of the city. The organisation and hierarchical stratification of the cemetery, as discussed beforehand, is a mirror to the real or aspiring social structures of the society which builds it. In Wadi al-Salam, those graves closer to

the temple are qualitatively distinct from those further from it, the former being considered holier. Other cemeteries may allow distinctions based on meritocratic aspects of individuals or corporations, such as the many American war cemeteries that surfaced around the world in the wake of WWII. Distinction can also be occupational: Okunoin near Osaka is Japan's biggest cemetery and has fields reserved for former employees of companies such as Panasonic and Nissan. <sup>3</sup> Different religions may prefer separation for reasons of creed, or it can be imposed by a religious majority upon minorities. <sup>4</sup>

Separation is thus not only ennobling or positive, but can also be discriminating. Countries that suffered the atrocities of institutionalized racial and ethnic segregation still struggle with its funerary heritage, manifest in the form of fences separating different groups or entirely separated cemeteries. <sup>5</sup>

The internal borders and divisions in the cemetery are indicative of the existence of similar divisions in the city; materialised and imposed in the former, vague and implied in the latter. Because the territory of the cemetery is condensed and constant in comparison to that of the city, it offers a much clearer reading of the spatial mechanisms of social differentiation that permeate urban dynamics. By virtue of their inertia, they also serve as clear

1 Curl, p. 269

2 Stanek, p. 106

3 Jackson, Nicholas. “Okunoin Cemetery.” *Atlas Obscura*, *Atlas Obscura*, 22 Feb. 2011, [www.atlasobscura.com/places/okunoin-cemetery](http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/okunoin-cemetery).

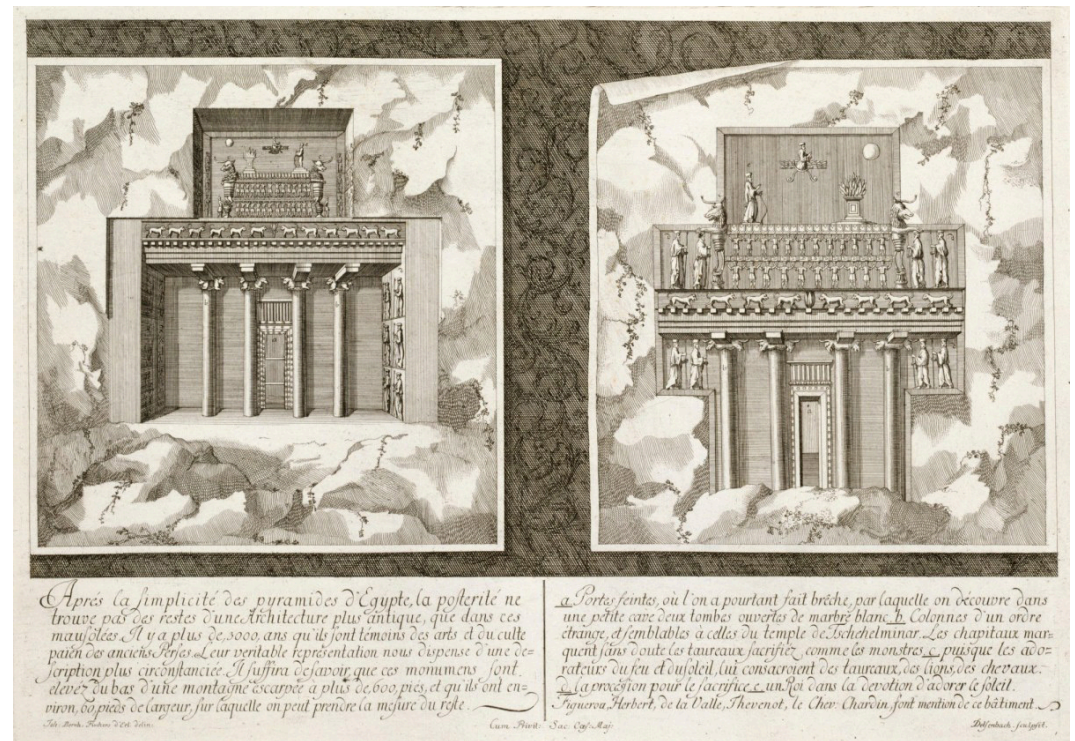
4 Cardoso, Tainá. “Religiosidade e Discriminação a Partir Da Análise Dos Terreiros De Umbanda e Candomblé No Município De Rio Das Ostras (RJ).” *UFF, Universidade Federal Fluminense (BR)*, 2015, [www.app.uff.br](http://www.app.uff.br)

5 Take the 2015 case of the late removal of a fence separating black and white sites within the cemetery of Greenwood

in Waco, Texas. Young, Jennifer. “The Persistent Racism of America's Cemeteries.” *Atlas Obscura*, 16 Jan. 2017, [www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-persistent-racism-of-americas-cemeteries](http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-persistent-racism-of-americas-cemeteries).

testimony of past practices and hierarchies.

The limits that determine a cemetery's shape can be understood as liminal spaces between two distinct geographies: the space of the living and the space of the dead. If the gravestone represents the individual passing from one realm to another, then the cemetery border encompasses the totality of these individual transitions and can be understood in architectural terms as the collective threshold between the two states. It comes as no surprise that so many artists and architects have put so much emphasis to entrances and gates as the main element of a narrative of transition between two worlds. Borders modulate the exchange of meaning between two sides. It is through the conscious design of borders that the architect and the planner set the rules of behaviour between the cemetery and the city, and what sort of relationship both territories share.



Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, Tombs At Persepolis, 1721.





Arnold Böcklin, Die Toteninsel, 1883



Henry Austen, Entrance To New Haven Cemetery, 1845

## Soft edges

Within the garden cemetery tradition of England and Northern Europe, a strong precedent for the desire to merge cemetery and green landscape (a general trend today, in light of environmentalism) is set as early as 1718 with Stephen Switzer's treaty *Ichnographia Rustica*.<sup>6</sup> In it, the English author describes landscape solutions for the beautification and management of the countryside and prescribes design solutions for the confinement of a site from the terrain around it.

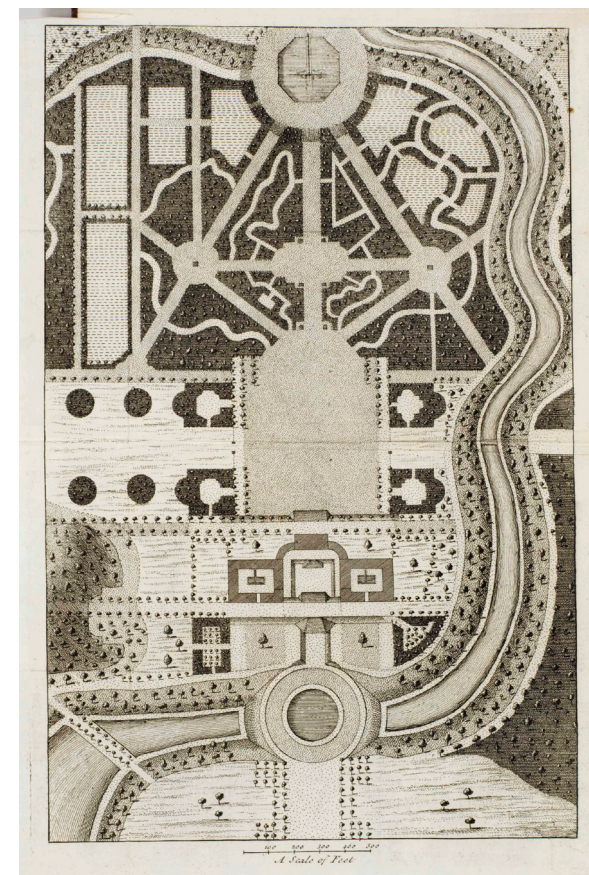
The objective is the dissolution of hard borders and the sustaining of the fantasy that the aristocrat's property extends indefinitely. In the treaty, one can find the first iterations of what would become a common landscape trope in garden design across England and Europe: the concealing of property walls through land movements which hide it from the view, amusingly called a *ha-ha*. Another solution stemming from garden designs of English aristocracy is to conceal the hard edges of walls with the introduction of lush vegetation that gives the impression that nature goes on uninterrupted. These techniques are well expressed in the project by Switzer for a rural garden in 1718 or Alexander Pope's garden outside of London dedicated to the memory of his mother and turned into a historical monument after his death in 1744.<sup>7</sup>

These examples offer a landscape alternative to the brick wall that defines the limits of many urban cemeteries. These techniques will be developed through the centuries and across different cultures, yielding different shapes and taking different roles according to their surroundings.

At Mount Auburn Cemetery (1831) in Cambridge, USA, for example, the park-like territory originally inspired by Père Lachaise and one of the United States' first cemeteries, takes on today the role of a dense green pocket against the backdrop of suburban houses.

At Stockholm's *Skogskyrkogården* (1920), designed by architects Asplund and Lewerentz, the cemetery seems to represent but one part of the vast forest that surrounds Stockholm's southern districts. Even in the garden type, context is largely responsible for the meaning a cemetery takes regarding the territory.

Despite efforts in mitigating the psychological impact of the wall with the deployment of soft landscape techniques, the barrier remains. The garden cemetery may seem as though it is an extension of the landscape, but for all functional and symbolic purposes, it remains a separate entity. Soft edges still configure separations between territorialities, transposable only through specific thresholds expressed as entrances and gates.

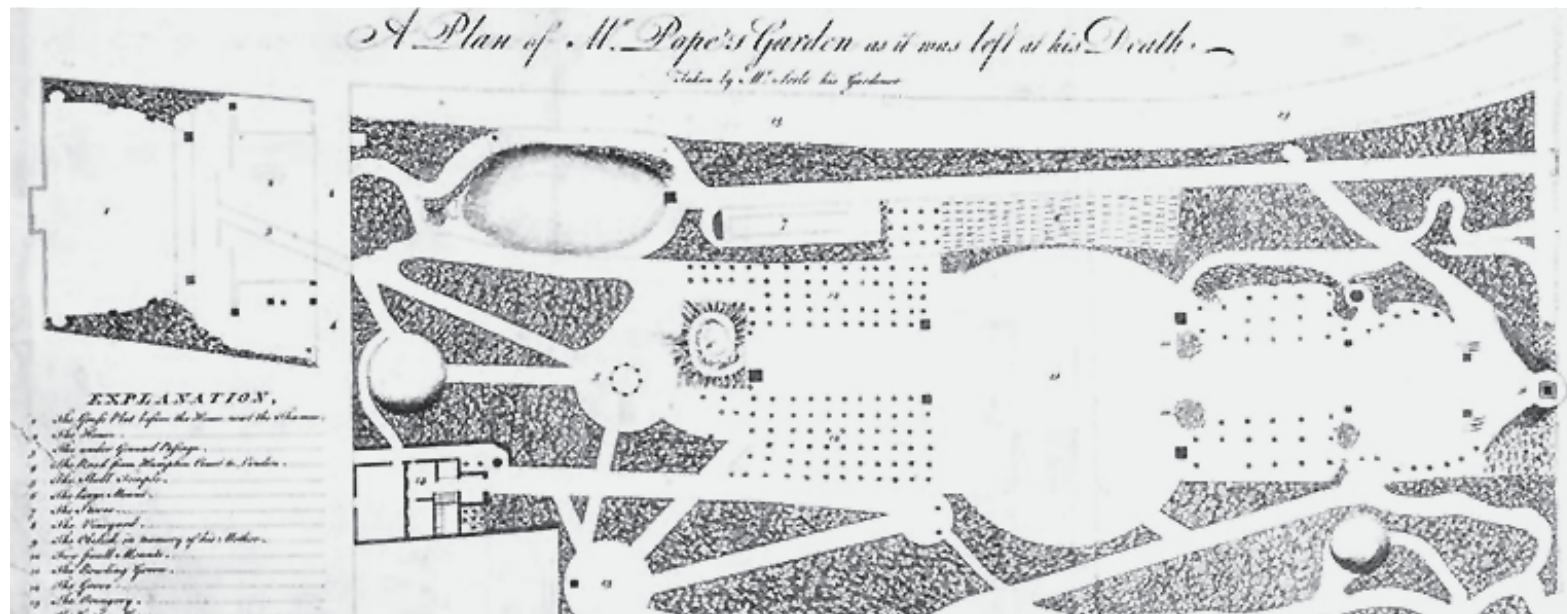


Stephen Switzer, *Ichnographia Rustica: or, the Nobleman, Gentleman, and Gardener's Recreation*, 1718.

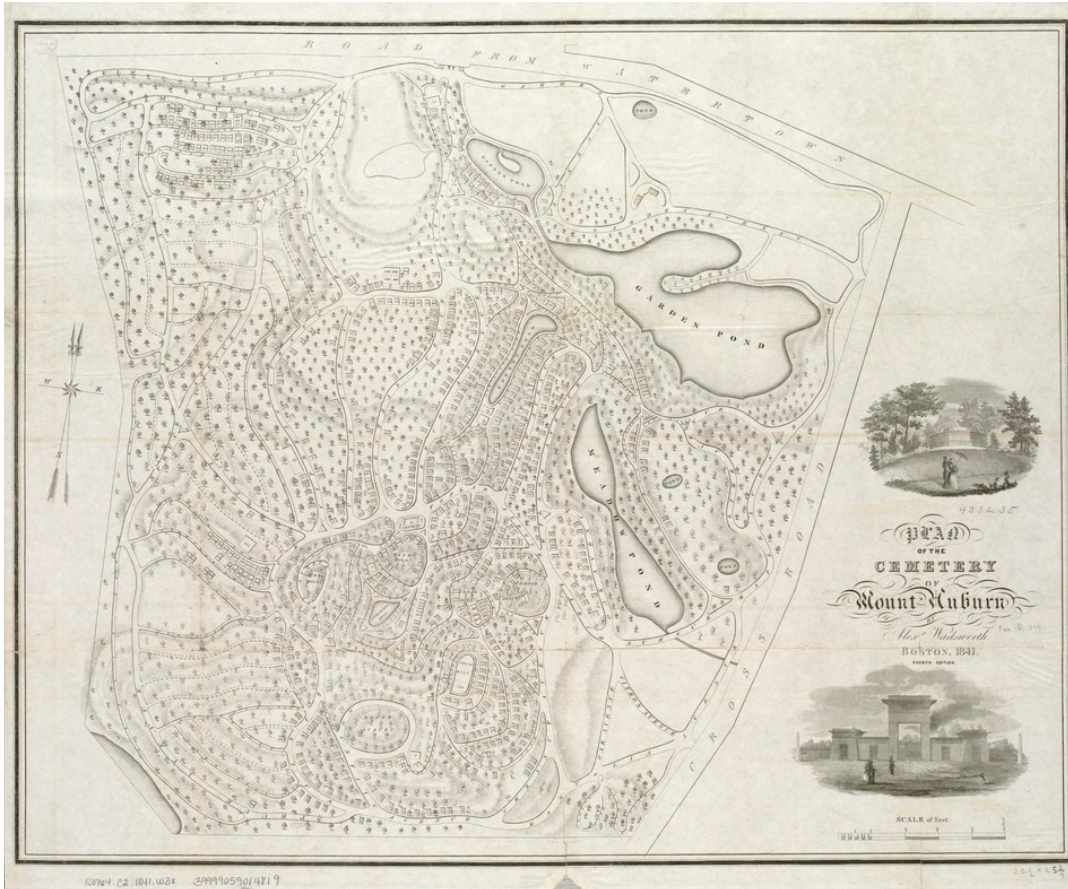
6 Switzer, Stephen. *Ichnographia Rustica: or the Nobleman, Gentleman, and Gardener's Recreation*. [...]. Printed for D. Browne, B. Barker and C. King, W Mears, and R. Gosling, 1718, Internet Archive, [archive.org/details/ichnographiarust01swit](https://archive.org/details/ichnographiarust01swit)

7 Etlin. p.163-198





John Serle, plan of Alexander Pope's garden following his death, London, 1745.

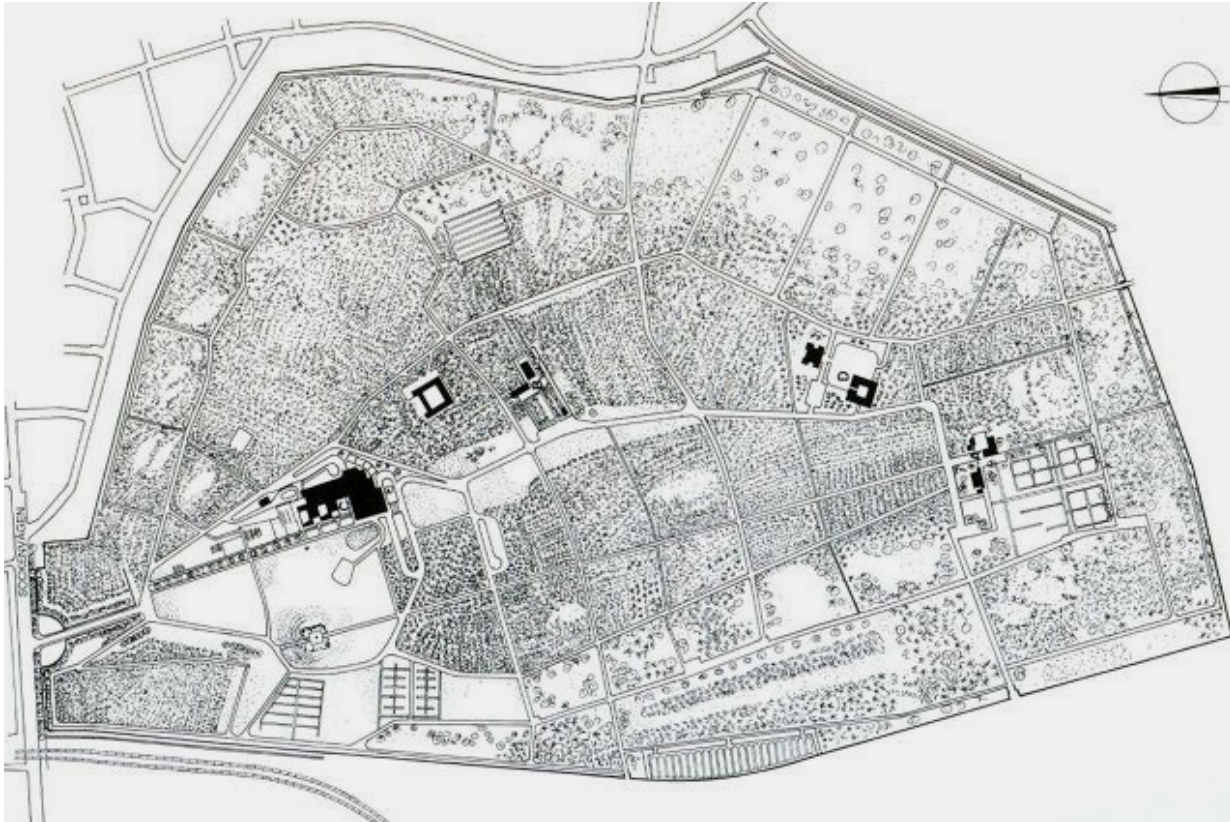


Alexander Wadsworth, map of Mount Auburn cemetery, 1841.



Suburban road adjacent to Mount Auburn cemetery, Cambridge, US.  
© Google Maps





Plan of Skogskyrkogården, Stockholm.  
From Editorial GG, Barcelona, 1988.



North entry of Skogskyrkogården, Stockholm. Photograph by Håkan Svensson,  
distributed under a CC-BY-SA 4.0 license.



## Thin walls

Moving away from the peripheral-rural cemetery and shifting focus towards cemeteries that openly admit their separateness from the city, the next portion addresses the case of the walled urban cemetery. Contrary to the garden cemetery, its border is openly manifest and few or no artifices are employed to smooth and conceal its edges.

At the heart of the northern district of Nørrebro in Copenhagen, a part of the city increasingly identified as a diverse and multicultural neighbourhood, lies an island of rectangular green lawns. Assistens Cemetery was conceived as an auxiliary cemetery for the sick and poor in 1760, when the plague caused significant overcrowding of existing facilities.

Like in most European societies at the time, Danish aristocracy still enjoyed the privilege of being buried at churches within the city, while the poor were buried outside of the walls. It was the deliberate choice of a famous chancellor and astronomer to have his tomb dug at Assistens that prompted a sudden change of taste in the capital's ruling classes. Famous Danish writers and scientists were subsequently buried there, and the place became a leisurely hotspot to the extent that in the early 19th century legislation had to be passed to ban activities like picnicking from happening there.

Today, certain parts of the cemetery have become museified and the old chapel has been turned into a cultural centre. Assistens still welcomes new tombs, but at a smaller rate than before. Like Père Lachaise in Paris, it has been surrounded by the city and its image transformed from a peripheral cemetery to an urban one. Its role in the city has changed as the northern neighbourhoods densified around it.

Originally a suburban destination for the 19th century Sunday stroll, it is today an urban park of around 20 hectares, crossed daily by hundreds of persons on their way to the city centre or looking for a leisurely spot. Assistens doubles as cemetery and as accessible green oasis for the city. Its walls have not disappeared, but they now represent something different. Barely three meters in height, painted yellow and lined with tiles protecting the masonry against rain, Assistens' walls stand as a benign, if not inviting, element. Crowned by trees extending outwards, the walls of Assistens can easily be mistaken for those of an enclosed park.

The realm of the dead and of the living are still separated, but the wall also represents the possibility for a voluntary and agreeable urban detour. In the same manner as people prefer shaded streets lined with trees when choosing their path across the city, so do Copenhageners prefer to take the cemetery paths

as opposed to the faster road adjacent to it.

Such a description might seem to exalt the cemetery park type and to suggest that the blurring of lines between cemetery and city is somehow a model to be followed indiscriminately. That is not the case; what is under analysis is not the potential for a specific cemetery type to house diverse civic uses, as that pertains mostly to the topics of sense-making and inertia, and to specific design choices. Rather, it is the potential for borders to engage both sides of the territories they divide, and their potential to become associated to the positive making of the city which is of interest here. That is the sense-making potential of borders as mediators made transposable through the introduction of thresholds in the form of entrances, and through the calculated seepage between the fabric of the city and that of the cemetery.



## Mass & Gigantism

The role of the border is to establish a recognisable threshold between a here and a there. When a certain critical mass is surpassed, borders can hold meaning as more than simple thresholds between two territories. There are no fixed dimensions and prescriptions to be followed which will yield a positive border. It has been pointed out that the relationship between the edges of the cemetery and the city are too contextual to be reduced to a geometric or typological constant. The issue is instead a matter of proportion – between a cemetery's size and the city and between a cemetery's size and the size of its borders. Scale, the relational geometry between objects, is the main analytical tool that can offer a reading of cemeteries and borders that tends towards the strictly architectural.

The constant expansion in size of the cemetery in the growing metropolis offers a significant challenge to the sense-making potential of borders. As the city continues to grow, the cemetery is forced to expand, densify, or transform itself to keep up with a pressing demand for space. As a cemetery expands and densifies, so does its borders. When a certain critical mass is surpassed, borders acquire their own territoriality. Much like a schism occurs between interior program and façade when the skyscraper achieves a certain mass, so does the

cemetery border acquire independence from its field when its size exceeds the limits of architectural scale. Rem Koolhaas' definition of the auto-monument, based on his reading of the skyscraper, can be easily transcribed to the metropolitan cemetery:

This category of monument presents a radical, morally traumatic break with the conventions of symbolism: its physical manifestation does not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial; it merely is itself and through sheer volume cannot avoid being a symbol. [...] <sup>8</sup>

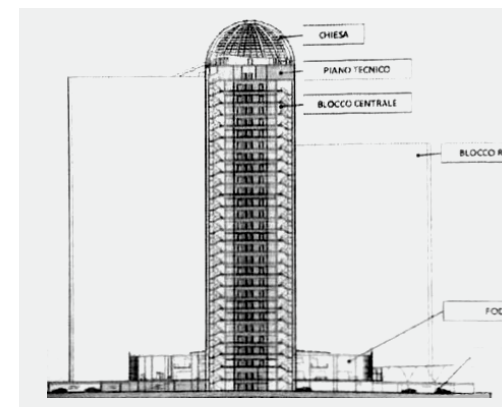
The growth of the contemporary metropolis, a result of unparalleled resource accumulation and populational concentration in the form of architecture, implies the existence of structures capable of housing said population both in life and death. From the small early Christian church cemetery to the inception of modern mega-cemeteries, the agents of transformation have remained the same: densification, congestion, and subsequent efforts in decongestion. The search for more dignified and hygienic burial spaces led to the widespread acceptance of individual tombs, while concerns

of efficiency forbid the selling of perpetual graves and imposed a standard lease period of around 20 years in many countries. Notwithstanding the implementation of more efficient land management, populational growth and concentration in urban centres made the expansion of the cemetery an absolute necessity to the modernising ethos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the behaviour of densification in cities as an economic response to space availability and land value, the contemporary cemetery is particularly receptive to densification. Traditional below ground inhumation persists in most Western and Oriental religions, but it is increasingly yielding cemetery space to practices that allow for denser stacking of tombs. Decongestion implies the amassing of program into a smaller perimeter and a bigger object. We are reminded of Wilson's 1829 project for a Pyramid cemetery in London, or of Verona's 2010s scrapped plans for a vertical cemetery.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. The Monacelli Press, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> "Verona. Stop Definitivo Al Cimitero Verticale, Esulta Il Centrodestra Veronese." *VeronaSera*, 18 July 2016, [www.veronasera.it/politica/stop-cimitero-verticale-esulta-centrodestra-18-luglio-2016.html](http://www.veronasera.it/politica/stop-cimitero-verticale-esulta-centrodestra-18-luglio-2016.html).



Section of the unrealised vertical cemetery in Verona by architect Riccardo Manfrin, Italy, ca. 2014.



Gigantic cemeteries populate the common imaginary of architects and artists since the 'rediscovery' of the pyramids, as seen in Fischer von Erlach's or Hubert Robert pyramidal drawings. Fascination with oversized entities permeates mythology, religion, and pop culture. The biblical monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, Swift's Gulliver at Lilliput, Voltaire's *Micromégas*, King Kong... Buildings of extraordinary size are as equally present in myth: Mausolus's tomb, the Babel Tower, the giant of Rhodes, and the Egyptian pyramids themselves. "Gigantism is not merely largesse; it is the property of something being bigger than it should [...]"<sup>10</sup> Fascination for scale historically favours gigantism over its scalar opposite, given its propensity towards architectural thought relative to the human body.<sup>11</sup>

Today, instead of the pyramid, the gigantic cemetery finds an aesthetic nesting point in the popular image of the skyscraper. But outside architectural *capricci* both old and new, and one lonely built specimen in Santos, Brazil, the tower necropolis remains mostly paper architecture. Verticality, a form of distortion more than gigantism, finds a limiting factor in the architecture of the cemetery: the permanence of the plan protects the existing cemetery's borders from erasure and favours instead the reaffirming of the perimeter by its very densification. The consequence is, con-

trary to the skyscraper-enthusiast's expectations, not the proliferation of towering structures in manhattanite fashion but the thickening of the cemetery's existing morphology. While skyscrapers accept and celebrate the economical optimisation of planning and the city block, cemeteries "confront the forces of urbanization by opposing to urbanisation's ubiquitous power their explicitness as forms, as punctual, circumscribed facts, as stoppages."<sup>12</sup>

The cemetery thus resists the building upwards that has come to define the image of the contemporary capitalistic metropolis and which has dominated in the past years the typological repertoire of architecture when death is the program. A 2013 student proposal for a high rise takes Koolhaas' term 'reproduction of the world' quite literally and proposes the stacking of fields for different religions as a tower for Copenhagen. The conceptual project proposed by then student Martin McSherry received significant media coverage, which focused mostly on its straightforward solution to the problem of space scarcity for burials.<sup>13</sup> It ignored, perhaps by negligence or by recklessness, the underlying social separation that stacked floors for different religions implies.

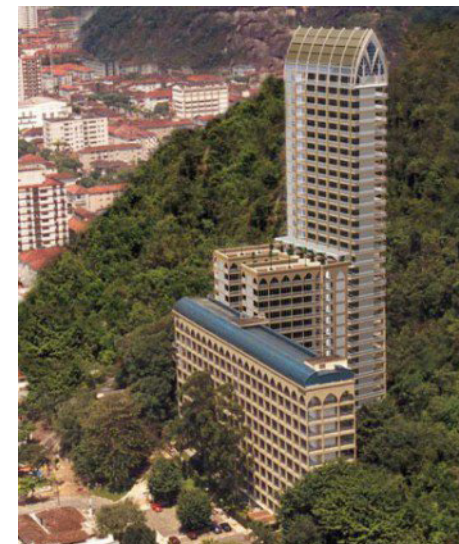
10 Comaroff, Joshua, and Ker-Shing Ong. "Homunculism & Gigantism" *Horror in Architecture*. ORO Editions, 2018. p.169

11 Collodi's Pinocchio 'inhabiting' the belly of the whale is an exercise of architecture made possible through gigantism, for example. Gigantism's narrative overrepresentation can also be linked to a rather recent 'discovery' of the microscopic scale.

Until then, the human body was thought to be at the lower end of a somewhat finite scale tending towards a *positive infinite*.

12 Aureli, Pier Vittorio. *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. MIT Press, 2011. p.13

13 See for example: McDonald-Gibson, Charlotte. "Norway's Vertical Cemetery Idea Destined to Die." *The Independent*,



Memorial Necrópole Ecumênica, Santos, Brazil. The world's tallest cemetery as of 2020.



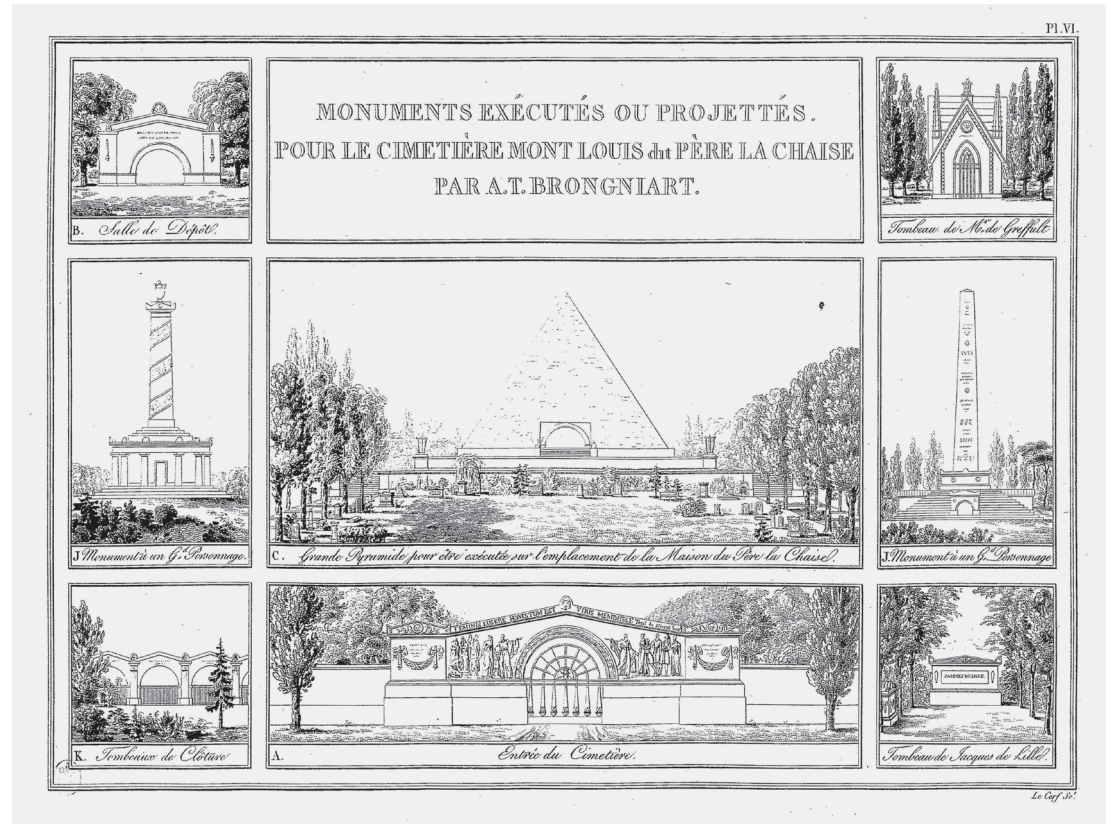
Martin McSherry's, digital visualisation of "The Vertical Graveyards" design in Copenhagen, 2014.

Independent Digital News and Media, 29 Nov. 2013, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/norway-s-vertical-cemetery-idea-destined-to-die-8973873.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/norway-s-vertical-cemetery-idea-destined-to-die-8973873.html).

In comparison to the verticalised space of the city, which is composed of many definable architectural objects, the cemetery remains markedly horizontal and refuses an encompassing architectural form. Rather, as cemeteries become progressively vast urban entities, a unitarian architectural language becomes difficult to ensure. Faced with the task of managing the entire territory of the metropolitan necropolis in compositional terms, architects have historically doubled down on the monumentality of the determined types a cemetery must contain: the gate, the chapel, the ecumenical centre, the crematorium... Recognisable architectural objects deployed in a more or less defined landscape is the conceptual framework for designs in practically all traditions.

Let us return briefly to the case of Père Lachaise: A-T. Brongniart's many design iterations for the 1804 Parisian cemetery all present a same, clear concept for spatial experience: a promenade across winding paths that always lead to a marker expressed as an architectural object – an obelisk, a pyramid, a gothic chapel. The gate for Père Lachaise is one of the most striking and visible elements of the design, and it must be understood not as a continuation of the walls but as an imposing object conceived around the elliptical piazza that marks the entrance and which, from a compositional point of

view, happens to coincide with the cemetery's borders. Against the homogenous green and burial spaces, these architectures appear as the structuring elements of the territory.



Brongniart, "Executed or designed projects for Père Lachaise", 1813.



### Thickening walls

In Zagreb's Mirogoj Cemetery, the heterogeneous and undefined fabric of burial fields is contrasted and articulated by an incredibly bold architectural gesture: architect Hermann Bollé's 1876 design of a 700-meter arcade and monumental wall. It is punctuated at the midpoint by a domed chapel and a slightly elliptical entrance that resembles Père Lachaise's. The architectural gesture is powerful but unusual; instead of facing the city, the immense linear building housing burial vaults is oriented perpendicularly to it and faces instead a small valley of residential buildings. From above it resembles an incredibly long train headed in or out of the city centre. The cemetery is clearly structured around (or behind) a grid system matching the linearity of the arcade. An undefined patch of hilly paths has been added with subsequent expansions, but do they do not diminish the main building's role as the pivotal compositional element. In conceptual and symbolic terms, the Wall is what defines Mirogoj's image both from the street level and above.

But it is in the monumental funerary tradition of Italian cemeteries that the relationship between object, territory and borders becomes most clear. Italy's body of monumental cemeteries, a result of centuries of development, accretions, and lasting traditions, of-

fers an incredibly large and consistent basis of analysis. Since the canonical 13<sup>th</sup> century Pisan Campo Santo, Italian graveyards have been characterised by the amassing of private graves and public monuments within a "large and axial layout" encompassed by thick borders that double as walls and galleries.<sup>14</sup>

Brescia's 1864 Cimitero Vantiniano, the first specimen of the monumentale type, designed by architect Rodolfo Vantini (1791-1856), is defined by a symmetric plan composed of two main axes and a linear sequence of archetypes: the Greek colonnade, the Roman rotunda, the Arabesque minaret-obelisk, the Egyptian pyramid, and concluded by a baroque semi-circular colonnade in the style of Bernini's Saint Peter's square. This extraordinarily quotational suite is surrounded by inhumation fields and enclosed by two rows of columbaria buildings with more fields between them. Admitting some flexibility and variation, this geometric operation can describe most Italian cemeteries belonging to the monumental type where iconographic objects either private or public are deployed within a rigid landscape and encircled by another monumental element in the form of thick walls that define the cemetery's shape and which house a significant percentage of its dead.



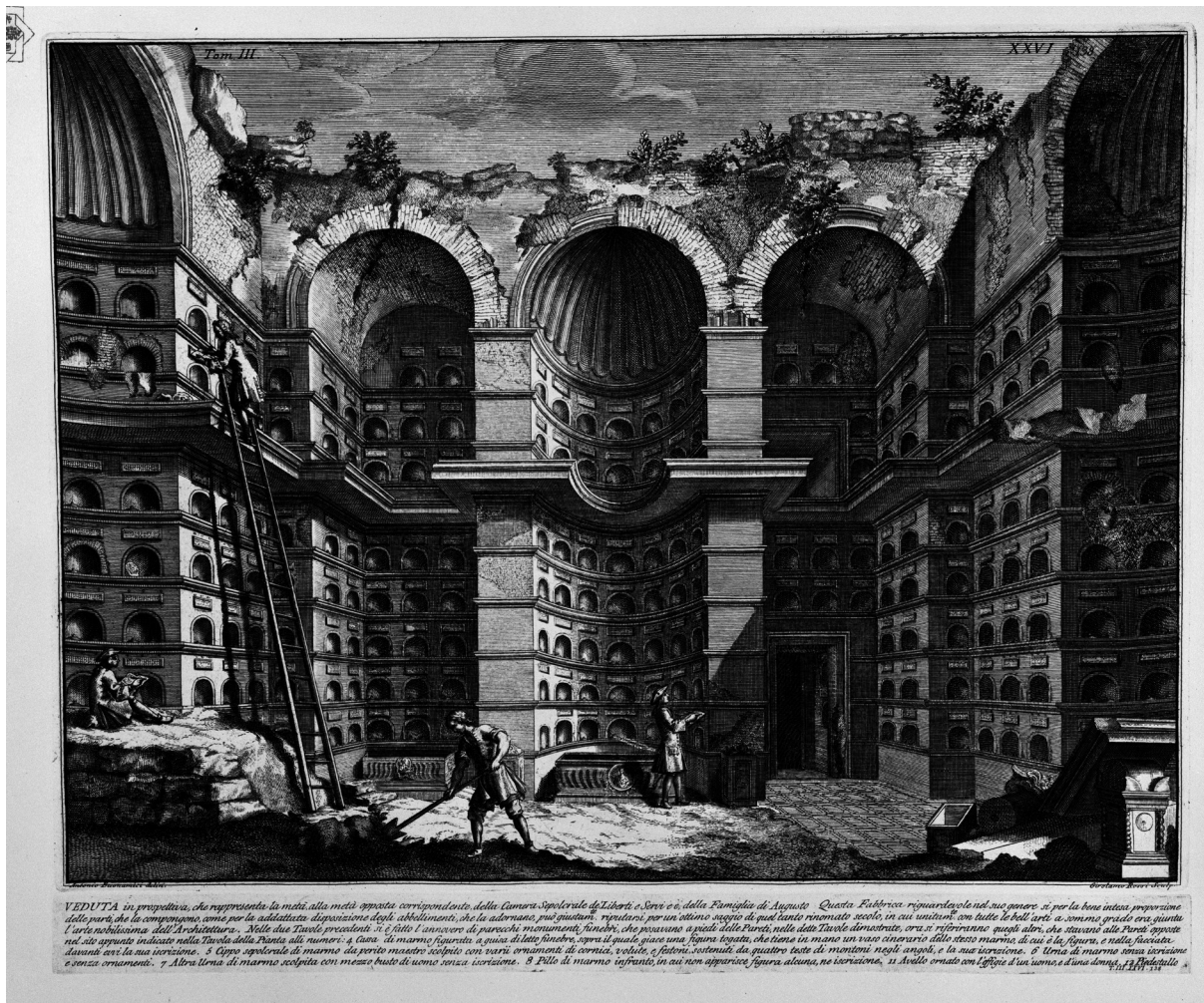
Mirogoj cemetery designed by Hermann Bollé in 1876. Zagreb, Croatia.



Vantiniano cemetery at Brescia designed by Rodolfo Vantini and inaugurated in 1864, Italy. Photograph by DonauDanube, distributed under a CC-BY-SA 3.0 license.

<sup>14</sup> Malone, Hannah. "The Monumental Cemetery" *Architecture, Death and Nationhood: Monumental Cemeteries of Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. p.36





Giovanni Battista Piranesi, etching representing a columbaria structure, 1756.



Columbaria building at Greco cemetery, Milan, Italy. Architect unknown. ca. 1960-90. Photo by the author.

The vault building type is defined by long rows, simple or double, of rectangular shelves with an equally long corridor allowing access to the entire surface of the wall. The choice of situation, or planning within the cemetery, usually falls within two categories: that analogous to the dense courtyard block which houses functions on all sides, and that referring to the modernist strip building. The former is usually positioned within the inner subdivisions of the cemetery and read as full block; the latter is typically aligned to the edges of the cemetery, conveniently freeing up the central space of the cemetery while replacing the simple outside walls with a composite, functional, and profitable wall spanning a few meters in width.

Trends in funerary practices in Italy have been marked by the constant increase in the number of individuals who opt for cremation and above-ground burial in columbaria, the latter a traditionally accepted choice in Italy.<sup>15</sup> The rise in popularity of cremation in the past century has further increased the need for a specific funerary type consisting of walls thick enough to receive entire coffins, mineralised remains and cinerary urns. Hannah Malone points out the social-economic factor behind the re-emergence of this architectural device in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian society:

Through the revival of an ancient tradition, loculi generally catered for those who could not afford a family monument, but who wished to avoid burial in the central [communal] field. In 1843, an unnamed architect, who submitted a project in response to a competition related to the San Michele cemetery in Venice, hailed the emergence of loculi as a victory for a large portion of the population that had traditionally been excluded from the ownership of a private plot.<sup>16</sup>

The burial within loculi and columbaria meant a somewhat dignified burial to the vast majority who could not afford a permanent grave or fashionable mausoleums and who did not wish for their remains or those of their family to be moved around and eventually 'lost' into a communal pile of bones.

The linear properties of the columbaria type separate it from the other primary elements of a cemetery in that their scalable nature allow for virtually limitless expansion and articulation which other more classic funerary types cannot so easily achieve. The compact nature of columbaria make it the horizontal equivalent of the skyscraper; space is easily multiplied by the juxtaposition of cells at the expense of a unitarian body for its architecture. It is a high efficiency stacking device which admits the ceme-

tery's horizontal nature and, instead of opposing it, exploits it by stretching as far as possible.

This process of horizontal densification, similarly to the spurring of towers in the city, occurs in a seemingly non-orchestrated and random manner; space is multiplied where it can be found, as a reaction to pressing needs or expected growth, and with no unifying architectural intention. Unified, grand, and recognisable architectural gestures are indeed virtually impossible to achieve in the homogenised and linear space of columbaria. Throughout the 20th century, Italian cemeteries would be constantly expanded and densified with the use of columbaria, their original ordering principles becoming increasingly overshadowed by the imponence of these thick walls. Columbaria are not exclusive to the Italian context, but only in it can they be found with such pervasiveness and constancy and for that reason the Italian funerary landscape offers significant keys to the history of cemeterial densification and modernisation.

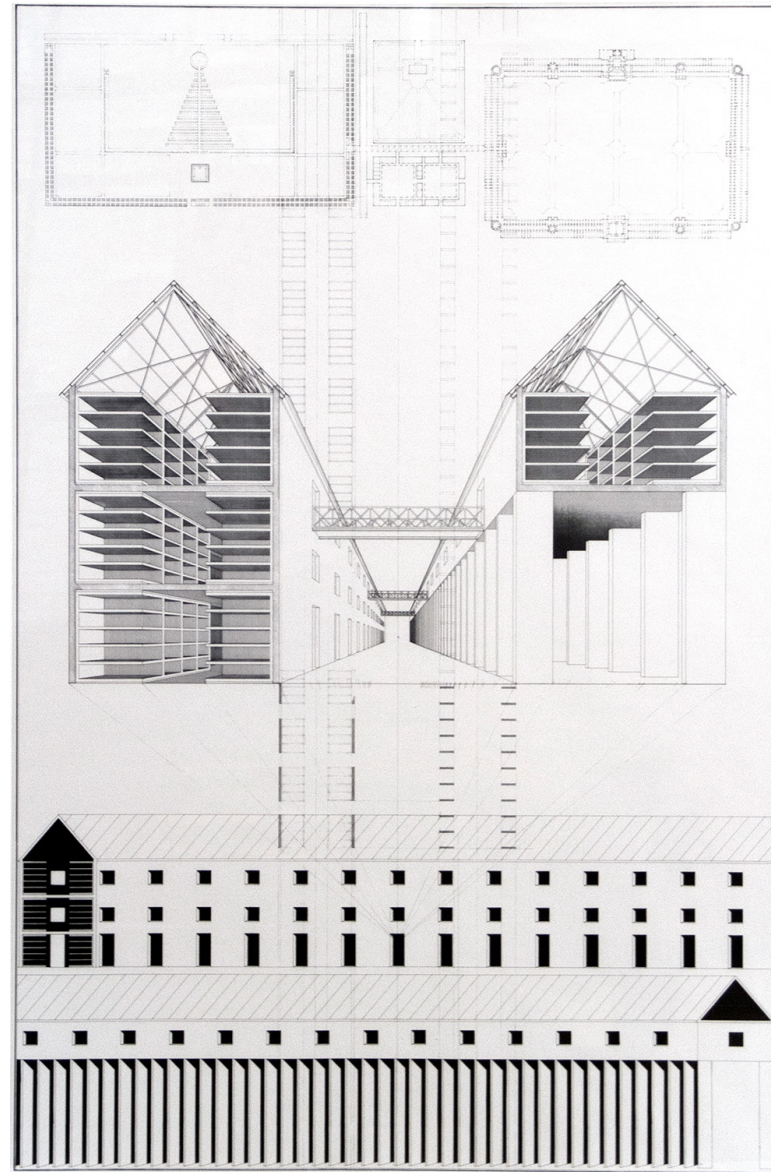
15 The columbaria type, present in the ancient roman tradition of loculi and columbaria, was reintroduced into Italian traditions in the early 19th century by projects such as Angelo Venturoli's 1816 Salla della Pietà in Bologna's Certosa and has since multiplied all over Italian cemeteries as more and more individuals choose to be cremated or put to rest inside walls.

16 Malone, p.61





Aldo Rossi, collage representing suite of elements at San Cataldo, Modena, Italy, ca. 1971-78.



Aldo Rossi & Gianni Braghieri, section of columbaria building at San Cataldo, Modena, Italy, ca. 1971-78.



In 1971 the commission for the extension of San Cataldo cemetery in Modena is handed to Aldo Rossi in collaboration with Gianni Braghieri. Rossi had in the previous months suffered a car accident and spent a significant amount of time in the hospital. In Rossi's *Scientific Biography* there are continuous references to the relationship between his accident and the time spent in bed to his rapprochement to the cemetery theme. Furthermore, the commission for a tabula rasa project adjacent to the original 18th century cemetery offered the opportunity to test out the theory that had been laid out in his 1966's book *L'Architettura della Città*.

The design is composed of a symmetric axis stretching across a perfectly rectangular field. Along the main and facing entrances on two sides, is a suite of monumental elements: a red cuboid, a trapezoidal suite of bars resembling the plan of Danish row houses, and a truncated cone resembling a chimney. Of these elements, only the red cuboid was built. The composition, as depicted in Rossi's sketches, was based on the sequence of elements from a large and stable basis towards a narrow and vertiginous summit. In the sketches, the architect insistently chose an aerial point of view from which these shapes seemed stacked, creating the impression of a 'exquisite corpse' composition joining Christian iconography with the pyr-

amid and ziggurat type. To encompass this linear suite, the architects envisioned a double barrier stretching around the entire site. In its thick walls, most of the cemetery's population would find a resting place; the fields between the borders and the monuments would remain empty.

The presence of this extremely wide barrier completely enveloping the composition is indicative of Rossi's cultural understanding of death and of urban composition. Given the task to design an extension to a peripheral cemetery devoid of urban context, the architect chooses to create a gigantic threshold of urban-like forms that become the scenographic backdrop to the theatre of primary shapes happening in the middle. One possible analogy is the Piazza Navona in Rome, where a continuous backdrop of urban forms sets the stage for the dialectic interaction between Bernini's Four river fountains and Borromini's Sant'Agnes church.

To Rossi, the columbaria building typology can be directly interpreted as dwelling, as a homogenous and semi-anonymous form which frames events taking place in-between. It is a traditional reading of monumentality which sees the city as a vast and indeterminate form serving and being served by the primary elements of the city (e.g. the church, the palace, the museum). At San Cataldo, the church and palace are the cuboid, the strip and the conic

pyramid while the indeterminate dwelling space is the columbaria wall. The cemetery extension at Modena is significant to us because it represents one of the few [semi] realised attempts at providing a full architectural reading to the dense and vast columbaria wall. It also offers a didactic illustration of the compositional themes present in classic and modernising cemeteries, and presents them in an identifiable, albeit completely artificial, urban ensemble.

Although San Cataldo is an incredibly concise and unitarian funerary ensemble, it is also an exception to the modern rule. Most Italian cemeteries characterised by the widespread presence of columbaria buildings have become so through incremental and disjointed interventions in the 20th century. In most cemeteries, columbaria buildings have been erected as a reaction to immediate needs and not as part of a comprehensive development plan. Two examples stand out for their remarkable size and complexity in urban form: the Campo Verano in Rome and Poggioreale in Naples.

The Verano in Rome was founded in 1812, shortly after Napoleon's Edict of Saint-Cloud and according to new restrictions on intra-muros burial. It soon became Rome's main funerary equipment. It was expanded multiple times with the acquisition of land around it and continued to grow until the first half of the 20th century, when a second mega-cemetery, the Flaminio, was inaugurated further away in the northern parts of the city. In the late-20th century, Verano underwent significant densification, with its perimeter walls becoming multi-storey terraced columbaria, and many of its inner blocks being entirely occupied by three-to-four-storey columbaria blocks. Seen from above, the Verano appears as the juxtaposition of self-sufficient *palazzi* containing their own fields in the middle. A *mise-en-abîme* of borders containing fields containing borders where the smallest decomposable unit is the ash vault or the coffin.

In Naples, the Poggioreale offers a slightly different example of densification in the form of columbaria. The original portion of the cemetery, commonly referred to as Monumentale, was inaugurated in 1837. Two subsequent expansions, in 1889 and 1930, are separated from the original perimeter by a public road. In total, the cemetery is roughly 4.5km<sup>2</sup> in size. In addition to its impressive size, Poggioreale has the remarkable characteristic of being incredibly dense. Practically

every square meter of surface has been occupied and the presence of 5-storey columbaria buildings is so vast that from afar it appears as a hyper-dense dwelling neighbourhood. Indeed, given that most of the façades in the cemetery are blind and that the inhabitants have little need for sunlight and air, the regulations that usually impose offsets between buildings have been considerably relaxed at Poggioreale.

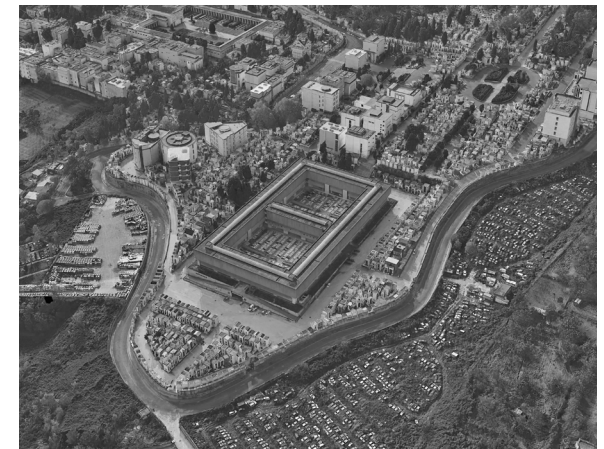
Densification via the stacking of columbaria gave rise to a type of cemetery occupation which is widespread and still well under way across Italy. With a demographic pyramid in continuous inversion for the foreseeable future and a steady rise in population decline, the current mode of occupation of Italian cemeteries is likely to continue.

If continuous densification is the most likely socio-economic future for Italian cemeteries, how can such growth be reconciled with the needs both practical and symbolic of a population in the midst of change? In a context such as the Milanese, significantly different in culture from Rome or Naples but with similar trajectories in cemeterial development, how can densification be thought of in a symbolically inclusive manner? Or will the Thick Wall, its efficiency, flexibility, and implicit void, "always win a context with presence" ?<sup>17</sup>

17 Koolhaas, Rem, and Bruce Mau. "Field Trip: A (A) Memoir. *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*. Monacelli, 1998. p.228



Plan of Rome's Campo Verano, inaugurated in 1812, with its many columbaria. Designed by Giuseppe Valadier, Virginio Vespignani and many other uncited architects.



View of columbaria building at Poggioreale cemetery in Naples, Italy. © Google Earth



### **Part III: the Milanese case**





## Hopeful monster

In July 2019, the Milanese municipality published, in partnership with Politecnico di Milano's DASTU research centre, a new planning strategy for the Lombardian capital's cemeteries, named Piano Regolatore Cimiteriale (henceforth called PRC). In this document, a comprehensive survey of the existing facilities, green spaces and occupation rates is conducted for the eight cemeteries of Milan. A second, propositional part establishes projections for demand in burials for the next 20 years alongside strategies to be implemented on planning and preliminary architectural levels. Expansions and new additions to the growing body of columbaria as well as new spaces for the disposal of ashes.

In the study, a growing accent can be seen on the planting of trees and the reinforcing of green landscapes as a strategy for 'healthier' spaces. Indeed, projects for planting of trees and expansion of green spaces is a general Milanese tendency in the past years, with discussions over the city's increasing air-pollution and un-liveability constantly taking place in media<sup>1</sup> and academic circles, spearheaded by political-archistar figures such as Stefano

Boeri.<sup>2</sup> Boeri's rise to stardom as the architect of the *Bosco Verticale* residential tower, together with his deep political reach within Politecnico di Milano and the municipality, can be seen as one of the major forces for the 'greenification' of urban projects in Milan. Without discrediting the scientifically proven and publicly supported impact of planting more trees as a tool to mitigate the impacts of heat islands and climate change, some caveats must be made regarding the use of such tool in the development of policies for the Milanese cemetery.

The relatively recent inception of cremation in a still largely Catholic Italy has sprung the need for cemeteries to provide ash-disposal fields and 'remembrance meadows' where trees replace the bodily role of the grave. Lambrate Cemetery in Milan was the first in the Lombardian capital to receive a *boschetto del ricordo* and the PRC envisages the introduction of such facilities in every Milanese cemetery except for Chiaravalle.<sup>3</sup> These ash-disposal fields and gardens of memory are a significant step towards the diversification of burial methods, but their usage may be limited.<sup>4</sup> In fact, according to data from the Italian National Statistics agency (ISTAT), in 2016 cremation represented still roughly 23% of burials. Lombardy is ahead of the curve, with roughly 26% and Milan is the 2nd city with most cremations

(10.776) after Rome (12.376). Furthermore, the emphasis on their implementation of cremation centres as a 'novel' and secular feature for the future of the cemetery may be a deviation from the priorities that the municipality should focus on; namely, on the provision of burial spaces for its growing multi-confessional population.

According to data both on the general Italian population and immigrant populations, Christianity (and its sub-categories) is followed by Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism as the most present religions in Italy. Christianity still dominates at ca. 80%, but Islam is increasing, especially in the Northern regions of Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of fields for different confessions is encompassed by the proposal. At Musocco, where the Jewish cemetery was built in post-war era outside the official cemetery walls, new fields are now proposed within – representing a major break with traditions which, in history, separated Jewish tombs from Catholic ones with walls. At Bruzzano, one of the 'big four'<sup>6</sup>, the Muslim field existing since 1995 and expanded in 2005 will receive another expansion. The proposal sees the conversion of regular fields above the existing reserved area into extra Muslim fields. The result will be the consolidation of a bigger, more imposing Muslim block defined by three major road axes

1 "Milano, 5 Cartoline Dal Futuro: Fiume Verde, Moschea e Laghi Urbani Nei Progetti per Gli Scali." Repubblica.it, 3 Apr. 2017, milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/04/03/news/milano\_scali\_ferroviani\_progetti-162115791/

2 "World Forum on Urban Forests - Milan Calling 2019." Stefano Boeri Architetti, 22 Nov. 2019, stefano-boeri-architetti.net/

en/news/world-forum-on-urban-forests-milan-calling-2019/.

3 Pasqui, Gabriele, and Laura Pogliani. Comune Di Milano, 2019, *Piano Regolatore Cimiteriale Del Comune Di Milano*. p.35-50.

4 "Sarò Cenere", in Italia è Boom Di Cremazioni." Adnkronos, 20 Sept. 2017, adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2017/09/20/

saro-cenere-italia-boom-cremazioni\_gcOd3nmfGS98Oib-7d6kWhK.html

5 Bombardieri, Maria. "Immigrati Musulmani", *Moschee D'Italia: Il Diritto Al Luogo Di Culto: Il Dibattito Sociale e Politico*. EMI, 2011. p.23-24 and "The Global Religious Landscape" Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2012)

and a cemetery wall on the West border. No other religion outside of Christianity is contemplated in the field expansions, partially because they are statistically very few (under 1%).

What is visible in the recent update to Milan's policies for cemeterial management is that the historical religious segregation in Italy is still very much in operation. Of the expansions made for Muslims and Hebrews, none take place outside their already informally designated cemeteries, namely Bruzzano and Maggiore. The Jewish community received its cemetery at Musocco only after the fall of Fascism, and the Muslim community has only recently been awarded the expanded fields at Bruzzano after much political debate and conservative reactions from the Italian far-right.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that Islam does not yet enjoy an *intesa* with the Italian State, despite its position as 2nd largest religion. The fact becomes even more curious when we learn that confessions representing less than 0.2% of the population, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, have established *intesas* since 2007. Such a legislative agreement ensures full legal recognition of a religious confession and grants it access to Italian funds for religion, namely the *8 per mille*.<sup>8</sup> The lack of an agreement with a religious community statistically relevant since the 1970s, and which represented in 2016 a

population of over 1.5 million<sup>9</sup>, cannot be read as something other than the selective denial of the right of cult by the Italian State towards a severely stigmatised religious community in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>10</sup>

By consolidating fields for religions outside Christianity exclusively on specific cemeteries, the PRC risks reinforcing the idea that difference may be tolerated but belongs to specific, pre-assigned places. It is at best a techno-pragmatic choice that seeks to contain programmatic variations to specific sites and hence increase efficiency. But knowing how problematic the inclusion of different confessions in Italian cemeteries has been and how much political polemic it generates today in a political battlefield increasingly open towards xenophobia, it is not far-fetched to imagine the choice reflects the State's tendency to placate political unrest by siding with the more conservative forces involved in spatial planning.<sup>11</sup>

With a clear understanding of the problematic history of post-mortem representation in Italian society, and of the task of inclusiveness which the cemetery must take on, the question shifts towards how a critical stance might be translated into architecture.

The hopeful monster hypothesis posits that evolution takes place not through progressive micro-mutations but rather through

large leaps occurring in punctual periods of time. The term 'hopeful monster' was coined by Richard Goldschmidt in an attempt to explain how new species come to be. In the history of the cemetery there are a few possible hopeful monster, some of which have already been mentioned beforehand: the 15th century Camposanto in Pisa, the 18th century San Cataldo at Modena, 1804's Père Lachaise... these specimens stand out as dramatically novel and exceptional types which are a result of accumulated history but which nonetheless mark a definite shift in evolutionary direction.

The monumental tradition in Italy, coming to fruition in the mid-19th century, can be seen as a period of prolific production of hopeful monsters. Cemeteries founded at that time diverged significantly from past traditions, mostly through the novel articulation of historicist types and ornamentation expressed via gigantism. Indeed, scale is perhaps the crucial mutation taking place in cemeteries over the 19th century. Such a transformation was not restricted to cemeteries, as the entire modernising city and its institutions go through a period of intense growth from the 19th century onwards. Transportation, housing, industry... all those types grow remarkably and become megastructures in the city, acquiring mass and territoriality previously unknown.

6 Maggiore, Monumentale, Lambrate and Bruzzano. These four cemeteries encompass 90% of tombs in Milan.

7 "Cimiteri in Lombardia, La Lega: 'Stop Agli Spazi per Le Tombe Dei Musulmani.'" *MilanoToday*, 19 Feb. 2019, [www.milanotoday.it/politica/cimiteri-islamici-lombardia.html](http://www.milanotoday.it/politica/cimiteri-islamici-lombardia.html)

8 Bombardieri, Maria. "Passi verso un'intesa con lo Stato

italiano", *Moschee D'Italia: Il Diritto Al Luogo Di Culto: Il Dibattito Sociale e Politico*. EMI, 2011. p.107-115

9 "Immigrati e Religioni in Italia – Comunicato Stampa 16.9.2020." *Fondazione ISMU*, 16 Sept. 2020, [www.ismu.org/immigrati-e-religioni-in-italia-comunicato-stampa-14-9-2020/](http://www.ismu.org/immigrati-e-religioni-in-italia-comunicato-stampa-14-9-2020/)

10 Paul, Crystal, and Sarah Becker. "People Are Enemies

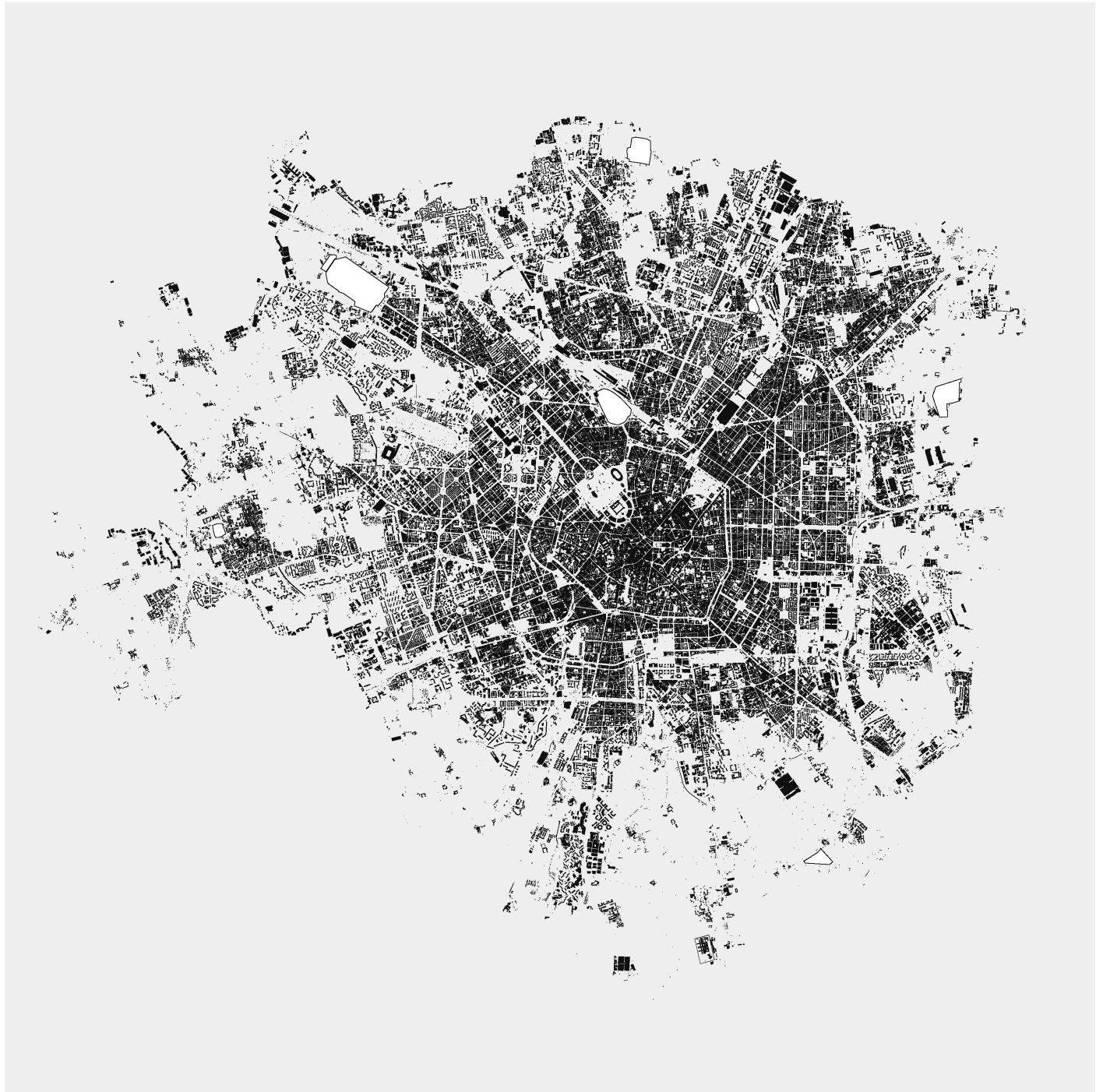
to What They Don't Know' Managing Stigma and Anti-Muslim Stereotypes in a Turkish Community Center." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2016, pp. 135–172.

11 Caglioni, Linda. "La Battaglia Più Feroce Dei Sovranisti: Impedire Ai Musulmani Di Avere Una Tomba." *L'Espresso*, 27 Aug.

The current political and social transformations in Europe and Italy pose significant challenges to the existing structures, both physical and institutional. Cemeteries, like other institutions, begin to show the limitations of the systems on which they were founded. Cities are transforming; they welcome new diverse sources of wealth, labour and urbanity. Alongside urban transformations come new values and identities, carried on beyond notions of national borders and nation. Such a prolific moment of change might offer a window of opportunity for new hopeful monsters to appear. In the cemetery, that could mean structures that shed traditional forms of representation and welcome new meanings.

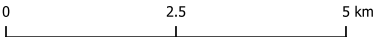
The following section is an essay in the possibility for Milanese funerary structures to be loci of change and to mirror the plurality of identities that the Italian metropolis fosters.

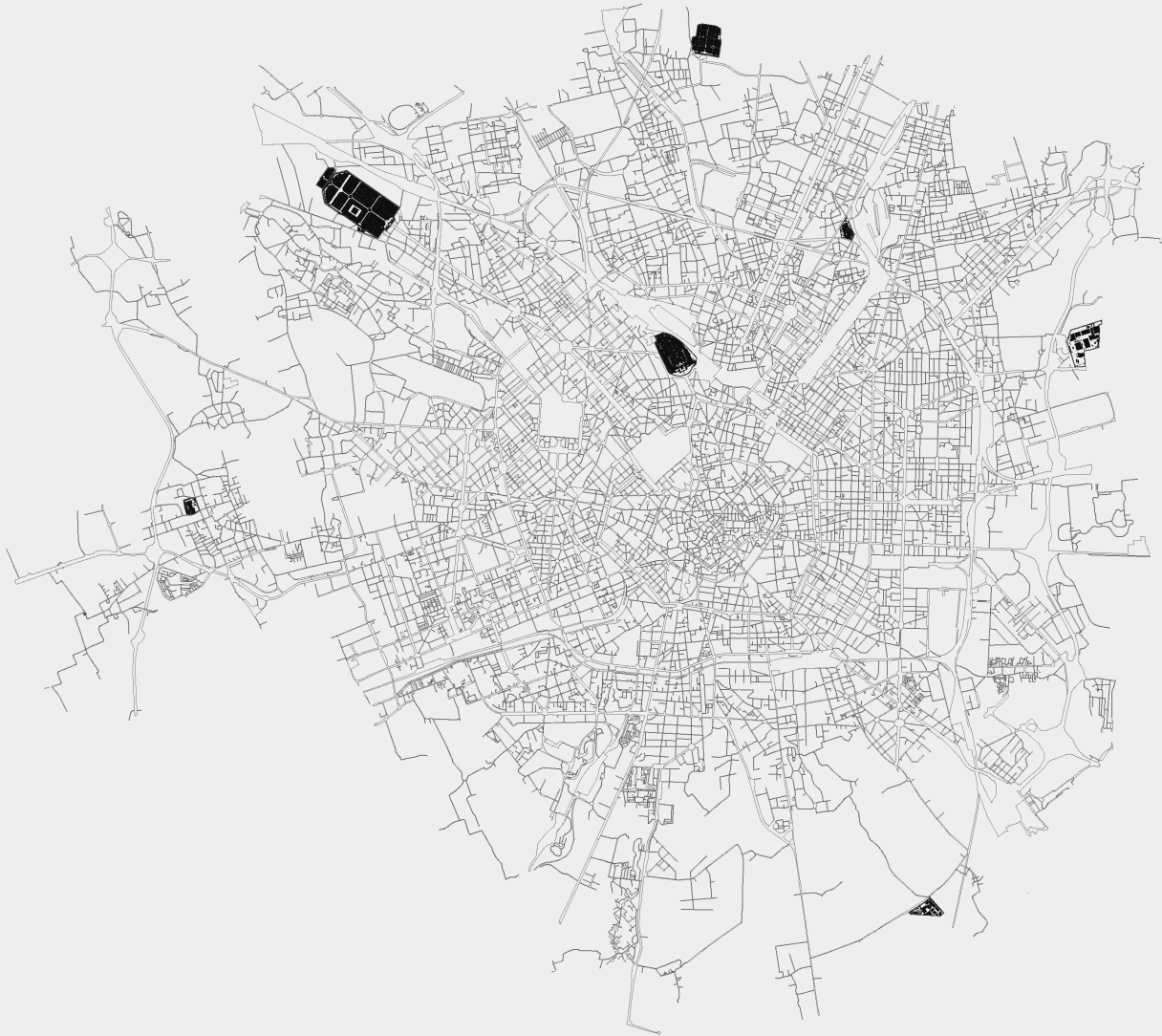




**Cemeteries as voids**

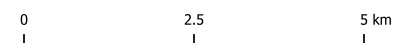
Against the Milanese urban fabric, cemeteries appear as distinct territories that allow no continuity with the city.





**Cemeteries as islands**

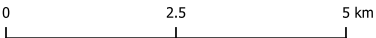
Together these cemeteries form a vague archipelago for the 'Milan of the dead' and its visitors.



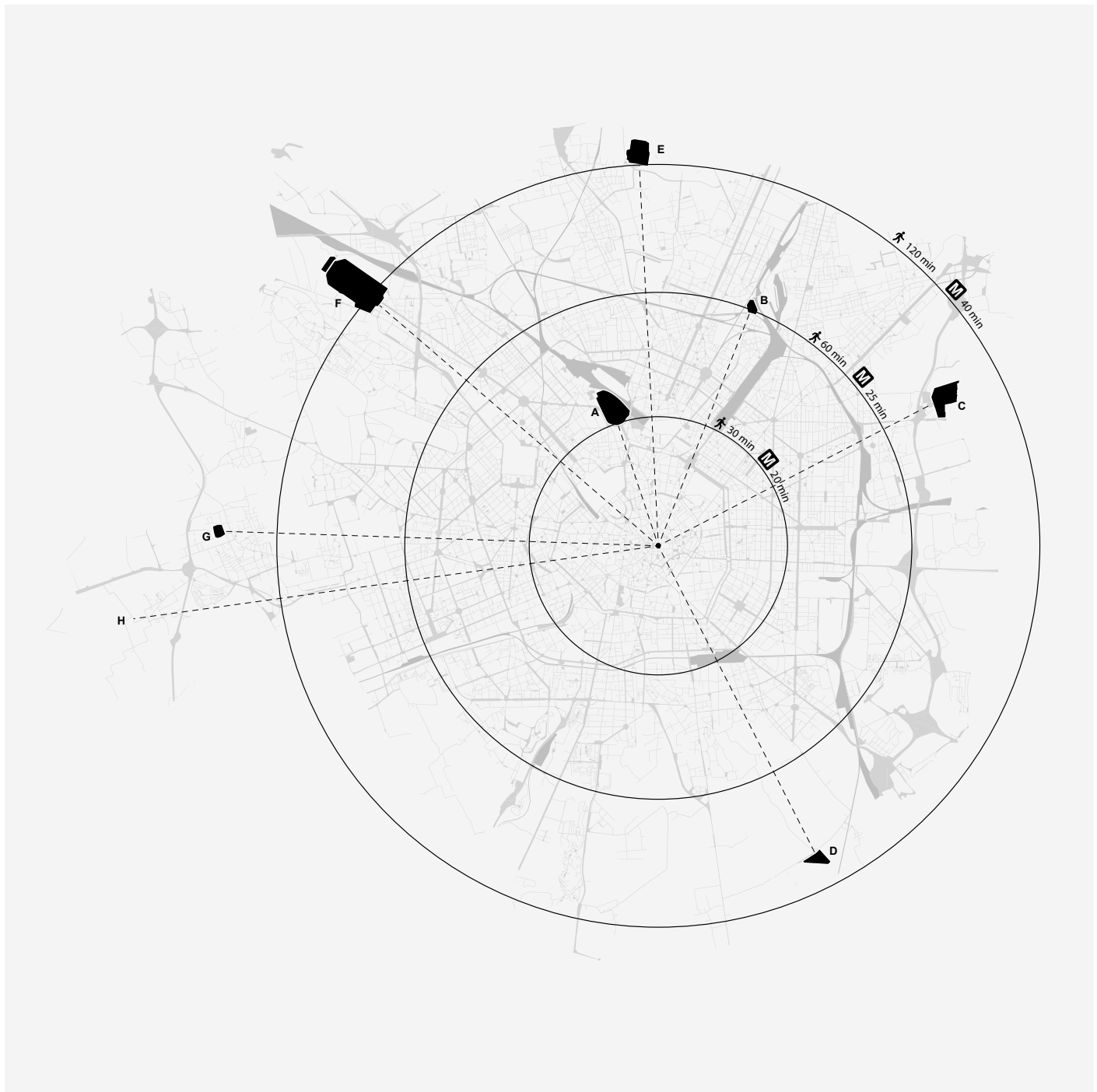


**Cemeteries as green public spaces**

The Milanese funerary system is a variant form of the Milanese park or piazza. As such, it could become the focus of renewed interest beyond mourning.

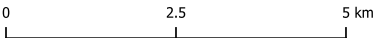






**Cemeteries as landmarks**

The Milanese case follows the trend described in previous sections; cemeteries now occupy the outer rings of the city and as such can be understood as entrance landmarks for the city.



## A megastructure for Milan

Looking at Milan's cemeteries, one particular entity stands out by its sheer size relative to the city. On the north-west limits of the city, next to the site of 2015's Expo at Rho-Fiera, sits *Cimitero Maggiore*, the biggest cemetery of Milan and Lombardy. Its cartesian array of fields, stretching over 1 kilometre on the longest side, make it geometrically akin to the Spanish or American settlement and clearly sets it apart from the Milanese urban fabric, typically defined by geometric asymmetries and non-orthogonality.

Maggiore is a gigantic exception to the Milanese urbanisation pattern and a sharply separated territory. As an example of bigness in architecture, it is out of context with everything around; it is "no longer part of any tissue".<sup>12</sup> Outside the field of semiotics, Maggiore is as much, if not more, a symbol of the 'city of the dead' as the Monumentale, albeit an intentionally distanced one. Contrary to Monumentale's admittedly bourgeois theatricalities of power and unity in the turn of the 20th century, Maggiore served since its creation as the de facto burial infrastructure for the Milanese masses alongside other smaller peripheral cemeteries, dispensing with symbolism in favour of sheer size. It is a monument outside of traditional monumentality; its dimensions too big to provide any unifying architectural meaning.

Designed by Enrico Brotti and Luigi Mazzocchi and inaugurated in 1895, the cemetery at Musocco was a reaction to the pressing need to provide Milan with a hygienic and centralised burial space which could welcome the majority of the population not contemplated by the Monumentale's restricted number of regular fields. The construction of the cemetery at Musocco did indeed legitimise Monumentale's public vocation as a cemetery of perpetual (and necessarily wealthier) tombs. In fact, the selling of perpetual tombs in Italian cemeteries remained a legal possibility until the presidential decree of 1975, which implemented the maximum lease period of 99 years.<sup>13</sup> Maggiore, on the other hand, was designed with the low-income Milanese majority in mind and its occupation mode was based on periods of 10 and 20 years, after which crystallised remains may be moved to *celette funerarie* (funerary 'cells', similar to columbaria) or added to the common graves if no lease renewal is paid for.<sup>14</sup>

Maggiore's location, some 7 kilometres away from the city centre in an area mostly characterised by agriculture and *cascine* (farmhouses) throughout the 1800s, falls in line with hygienist policies of the 19th century preconised by the Napoleonic reforms. It is an 'exterior' urban entity which has as function to receive death and seal it away from the city. The

creation of the distant cemetery entailed the creation of a connecting line between city and necropolis; a road traditionally leading to the Certosa di Bregnano (today Viale Certosa) received tram tracks and became the main access point. Starting on Porta Romana's *Stazione Funebre* and equipped to carry coffins all the way to Musocco in a sort of mechanistic procession, the tram line was an important component to the functioning of the cemetery. Without it, the disconnection from the city would become too conspicuous and its public image faulty.

<sup>12</sup> Koolhaas, Rem, and Bruce Mau. *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*. Monacelli, 1998. p.260

<sup>13</sup> Decreto del presidente della Repubblica 21 ottobre 1975, n.803.

<sup>14</sup> Decreto del presidente della Repubblica 10 settembre 1990, n. 285.



PIANTA DELLA CITTÀ DI MILANO



ISTITUTO GEOGRAFICO MILITARE  
Aprile 1937 - XV

Scala di 1:25,000

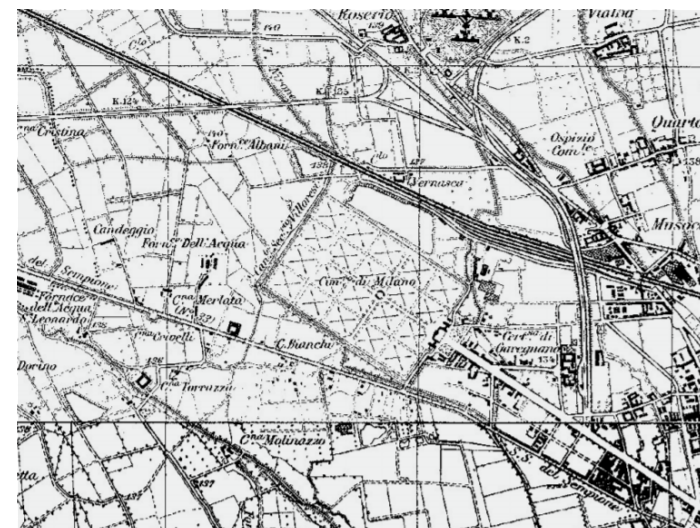
Eseguita col metodo aeroplanimetrico

Tutti i diritti di riproduzione riservati

Edizione  
1937



Plan of Milan executed by the *Istituto Geografico Militare*, with Cimitero Maggiore visible outside of the frame on the north-west corner, 1937.



Plan of Cimitero Maggiore before subsequent expansions, Istituto Geografico Militare, 1936.



A photograph from the 1950s shows the entrance to the cemetery crowded with visitors hoping on and off a procession of trams. One can imagine the image was taken on a holiday like *Festa di Tutti i Santi* (All Saint's Day), which would explain the great affluence of people. Another picture from the early 20th century shows the striking one-point perspective view formed between the tram path and the main entrance building of Maggiore.

Upon its completion, the cemetery at Musocco had 64 main fields crossed by two main perpendicular axes articulated around a circular piazza. Where the trams arrived from Monumentale at Viale Certosa a monumental building and main gate was erected. It housed offices, ceremony rooms and mortuary facilities; on the top floors were the living quarters for personnel and on the underground level, the ossuary.<sup>15</sup> The architectural style is a hybrid of neo-classicism and eclecticism, but the exaggerated proportions of elements and the coarseness of ornamentation is beginning to resemble the modernised classicism that would be canonised some 20 years later in the design of Milan's Central Station by Ulisse Stacchini.

The cemetery was expanded twice in the early 20th century, reaching a total of 94 blocks and an area of 678.000 m<sup>2</sup> (roughly 150% the original size). In 1933 a second os-

suary is built in the original roundabout in the middle of the cemetery, and the columbaria that would come to enclose the entire territory start being built. After the fall of Fascism, the Milanese Jewish community was given its own walled annex at the north-west edge. The field at Musocco is the second Jewish cemetery in Milan after the one in Monumentale and the first to be founded after the horrors of Fascism and the Italian Holocaust under German rule.

Maggiore remains significantly vacant and many fields have not yet been occupied; with 36 out of 94 fields still empty, there is a considerable amount of land reserve within Maggiore awaiting future use. Whereas Monumentale's image has been consolidated and crystallised into a museified unity, Maggiore's final image is still to be determined.



Photograph of the main gates of Cimitero Maggiore, taken ca. 1950.



Photograph of Viale Certosa and the tram lines leading to Monumentale and Porta Romana, taken from the entrance to Maggiore, ca. 1940.

15 Massimo Ferrari. *Il Cimitero a Milano*, Ordine Degli Architetti, Pianificatori, Paesaggisti e Conservatori Della Provincia Di Milano, 2014.

As a monument to bigness, its architectural shape has developed in two distinct but non-exclusive patterns. First, by the accretion of iconographic architectural objects in the monumental style as canonised in the Brescia's 1864 Vantiniano and made pop by Milan's Monumentale. From the stern neo-classicist gates, to the circular columbaria buildings and the many family mausoleums that were built before permanent concessions were forbidden in 1975, Maggiore's initial growth was faithful to the Italian monumental tradition and heavily based on the individual object.

With the erecting of perimetral columbaria spaces from the 1930s and the progressive replacing of the original walls, the growth of Maggiore undergoes an evolutionary split. As small familial monuments continued to be built and replaced every 20 years or so, the thick walls of columbaria began growing around the perimeter of the cemetery. By the end of the 20th century, Maggiore had become a veritable citadel of thick and impenetrable walls. With a population ratio of 1 to 7 between hypogean graves and above-ground vaults, the Maggiore is effectively a dense peripheral citadel enveloping a mostly unoccupied green territory.<sup>16</sup> From a 'theory of archipelagos' perspective, the cemetery at Musocco is an island encircling another island; its thick inhabit-

able walls representing one single continuous entity of incredible density leading onto another low-density entity, that of the inner field.

What takes place at Maggiore is a general tendency of gigantism in modern architecture and of most cemeteries faced with the task of housing a population of hundreds of thousands. In the Italian funerary context, particularly susceptible to the deployment of columbaria as barrier defining elements, "the distance between core and envelope increases to the point where the facade can no longer reveal what happens inside".<sup>17</sup>

Over the course of the 20th century, transformations at Maggiore have progressively introduced architectural elements that are highly efficient in terms of housing. These transformations share a typological characteristic; regardless of form or style, they have expanded the cemetery's capacity by the stacking of vaults either upwards, downwards or along the walls.

Three variations of the columbaria type, each one determined by a specific directionality, are thus expressed at Maggiore: the courtyard type, as seen on the northernmost edge facing the Jewish cemetery; the hypogean crypt, present at main crossroads between axis and underneath the main buildings; and the strip buildings lining the perimeter and replacing the walls. Together, these three variations make up

the formal lexicon of densification of most contemporary cemeteries worldwide.

In Maggiore, the deployment of these three types has been incremental and tending towards the anonymous. Densification had until the early 2000s limited itself to the edges of the cemetery, likely in an effort to protect its original image of a peaceful 'field of rest'. In the 21st century however, the growth pattern of Maggiore took a turn towards the monumental which finds historical precedents in the Italian funerary tradition and in the metropolitan examples of Poggioreale in Naples and the Verano in Rome.



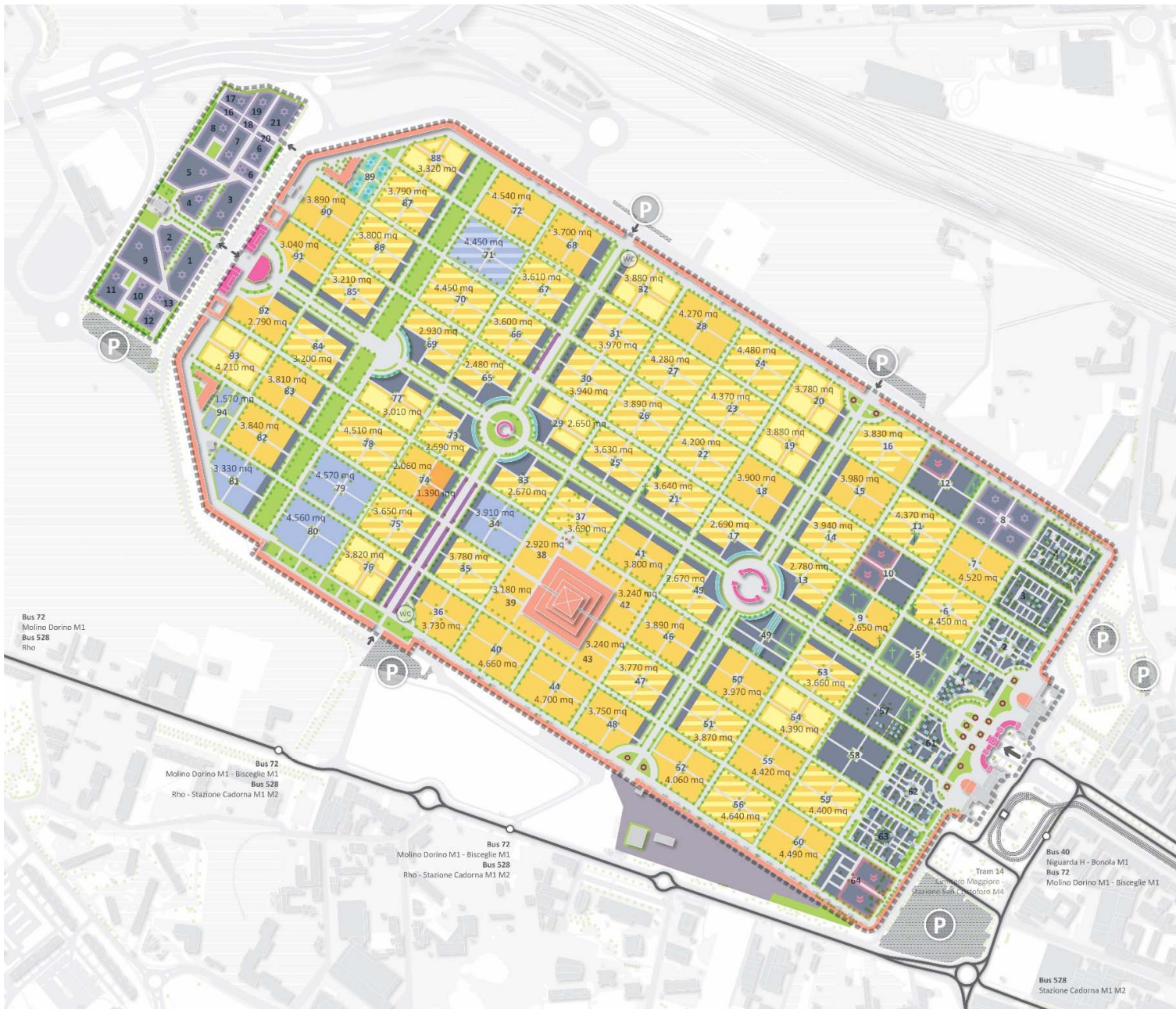
View of Cimitero Maggiore towards Cascina Merlata real estate developments in the background.

Photo courtesy of Anton Schwingen and Diba Oncel.

16 Pasqui and Pogliani, p.6

17 Koolhaas and Mau, p.259

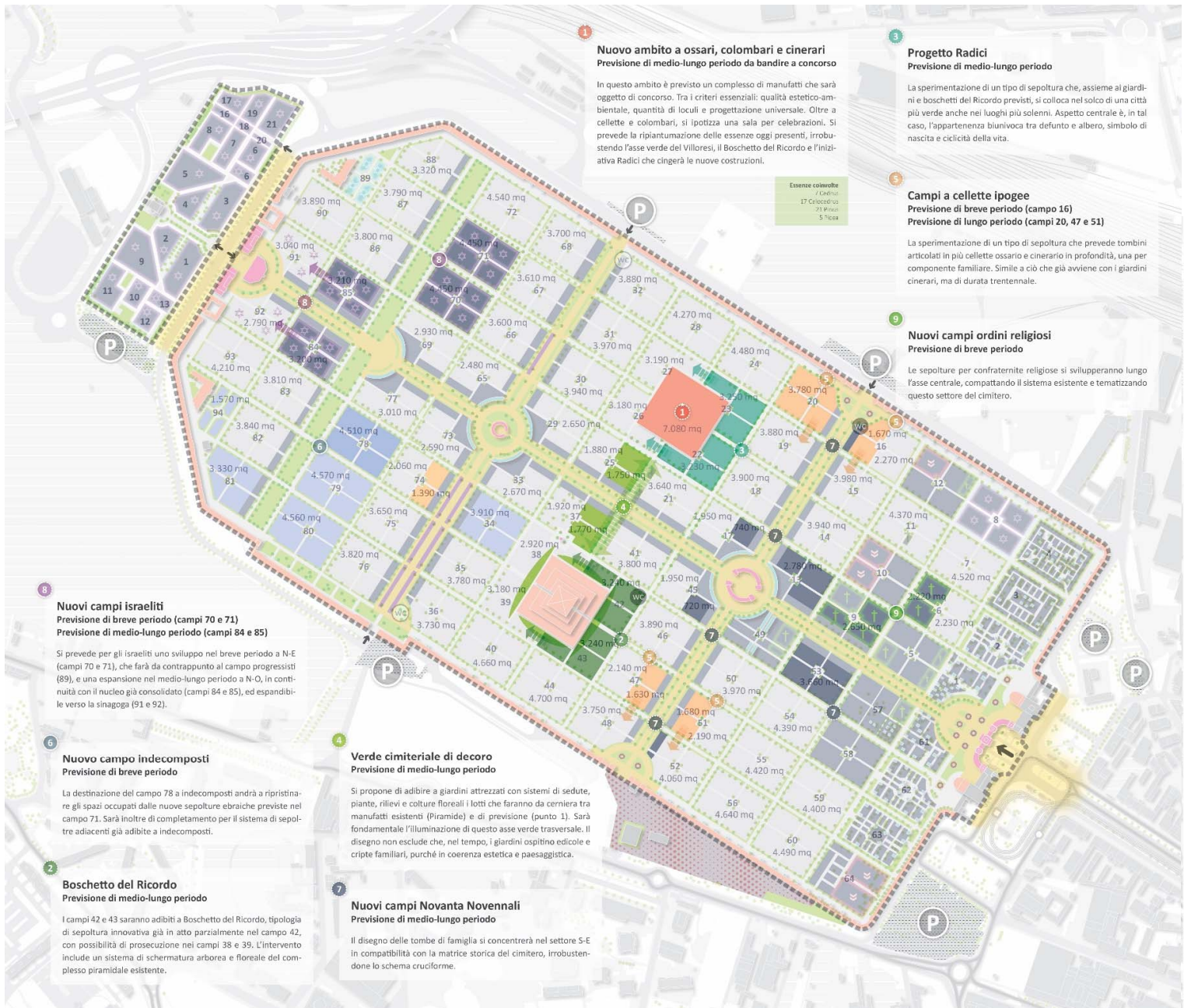




- Legenda**
- Campi e manufatti**
    - Campi decennali | vuoti
    - Campi decennali in scadenza dal 2023
    - Campi bambini
    - Campi indecomposti | vuoti
    - Campi Novanta Novennali
    - Sepolcreti di guerra
    - Campi ardini religiosi
    - Campi israeliti
    - Campi israeliti progressisti
    - Campi fetti
    - Fidicole
    - Ossari, colombari e cinerari
    - Cellette ossario
    - Ossari comuni sotto giardino
  - Attrezzature interne**
    - Verde dimiteriale e alberature
    - Strutture di servizio
    - Aree di servizio e deposito
    - Servizi igienici
  - Accessibilità**
    - Trasporto pubblico locale e fermate | Bus | Tram
    - Parcheggi pubblici
    - Ingressi pubblici

as-built plan of Cimitero Maggiore, 2018, developed by the Comune di Milano in partnership with Politecnico di Milano.





future development plan of Cimitero Maggiore, 2018, developed by the Comune di Milano in partnership with Politecnico di Milano.

## Funerary pastiche

In 2005, Maggiore's latest addition is inaugurated to the public. A 50.000 vault building taking the form of a ziggurat measuring over 30 meters in height and with a base of 85x85. Three stepped floors lead to a last, domed floor. Underneath it, and reaching down until the underground level, walls are lined up with slates, most still awaiting an inscription. Those bordering the un-plastered ceiling remain particularly empty. White metal ladders 4 or 5 meters in height lie in corners and passages, suggesting the recent presence of a visitor who dared climbing it to lay a flower or electronic candle on the slate of a loved one.

Four stairs rising from the mid-point on each side of the pyramidal building culminate at the domed level. On each floor, a landing giving onto both sides grants access to the core of the building and the atrium, or to the terraces containing vaults in parallel rows and along the entire perimeter wall which doubles as a parapet. The entire building is clad in white stone with some exposed concrete elements and details.

Ordered by a double intercolumniation reminiscent of Claude Perrault's (1613-1688) Louvre's East Façade, the entire building can be read as a daring, if not *maladroit*, collage of architectural types and symbols. Starting with the main volumetric concept: the pyramid or ziggurat, a practically literal citation of the ancient

funerary mega-monuments of old Mesopotamia and Egypt. In elevation it presents itself as symmetric sequence of double columns supporting extremely tall beams with exaggerated gutters taking the place of the expected triglyph aligned to the columns, in the manner of Greek temples.

The stylisation goes further: simple metal joints connect the columns to the slab and replace the expected capitals of traditional classic order. Fluting, however, is present and executed by making the facets of the coffering system for the columns intentionally coarse and large. The doming could recall a traditional renaissance or baroque element, but the choice to flatten its shape and clad it in a bluish reflective material likens it more to the domed tops of mosques such as Muhammad Ali in Cairo, Egypt. The result is not, however, pluralistic; classical order and ornamentation still prevail in the overall composition and the white-washed surfaces and columns ensure an image which refers to Antiquity.

Authorship of the building is not credited on any official website but is usually attributed to Calogero di Stefano, an architect with a career in public works in the Sicilian capital of Palermo.<sup>18</sup> The details of the conditions regarding the public commission for the building at Musocco are not clear, but it is fair to assume that the architect applied for a public tender, following regulations in effect since 1994.<sup>19</sup>

The *Piramide*, as it has been dubbed by the municipality and the media, achieves something Rodolfo Vantini might have only dreamt of for Brescia; instead of operating as a single iconographic monument in an orderly sequence of elements in the cemetery, the Pyramid at Maggiore attempts to be every single icon at the same time. Perhaps galvanized by its own gigantism, the project seems to compete for Bigness with the Thick Wall and the vast emptiness that surround it. The attempt, of course, is in vain; far from an unavoidable monolith of dozens of storeys such as the one envisaged by Thomas Wilson for London, the Maggiore Pyramid is a meek 4-storey, flattened presence. From within the fields, the monument is easily eclipsed by the vegetation and one only becomes aware of it when it is extremely close. Its presence goes evidently unnoticed from outside the Thick Wall.

As a public equipment, its success is equally dubious. The project, although providing a substantial increase in the number of vaults, suffers from significant conceptual and design pathologies. The rainy and relatively cold climate of Milan makes the open and atmospherically unprotected spaces of the Pyramid a rather uninviting and potentially dangerous place for visitors. The cargo elevators present within the volume are impractical and relatively concealed; as a result, more than a few visitors have sus-

18 The architects' involvement in the project is not corroborated by any official publication found, but cross-referencing between a 2007 'international marble award' awarding an honourable mention to the project and architect, the architect's name mentioned on an article about Cimitero Maggiore on the blog *Urbanfile*, and their name mentioned in architectural

projects in Palermo's municipal website provides us with some degree of certainty.

19 Legge 11 febbraio 1994, n. 109.



tained injuries trying to climb the stairs on the outside of the building. Detailing errors have additionally caused premature infiltration damage to the terrace flooring and stone façade. As a result, many terraces are currently barricaded. As of 2017 the Pyramid, not 20 years of age, is officially undergoing renovation works.

2019's Piano Regolatore Cimiteriale explicitly mentions the municipality's intentions of providing Cimitero Maggiore with a second structure of similar function to the Piramide. It is to be located on the opposite side of the cemetery on an axially mirrored position. Regardless of an already manifest intention from public officials not to repeat the design of the pyramidal building, the choice of insisting on an axial composition of monuments suggests that the municipality might be looking to correct its mistake by insisting on another, better, icon for Maggiore.<sup>20</sup>

With Milan's burial practices rapidly shifting towards more efficient and financially viable modes of land access it is not unlikely that a future scenario for Maggiore may consist of 'urban villas' in contrasting juxtaposition progressively taking the place of today's fields.<sup>21</sup> The Verano in Rome and Poggioreale in Naples are living precedents to this form of architecturally dense cemetery transformation. In the following decades cremation and above-ground inhumation are likely to continue increasing

as they have in the past. In a context of shifting funerary attitudes, the Milanese cemetery will have to re-assess its territory and architecture to welcome new practices and populations. Its architecture will either be the result of the semi-conscious replication of iconographic types in quotational terms, or the result of an active questioning of practices and traditions and the positing of architectural forms which break away from Classic representation and step into the domain of non-referential interpretation.



Piramide building seen from the surrounding lawns at Cimitero Maggiore. Photo by the author.

20 "Consiglio Comunale. Approvato Il Nuovo Piano Regolatore Dei Cimiteri Milanesi." *Ufficio Stampa*, Comune Di Milano, 10 Dec. 2019, [www.comune.milano.it/-/consiglio-comunale.-approvato-il-nuovo-piano-regolatore-dei-cimiteri-milanesi](http://www.comune.milano.it/-/consiglio-comunale.-approvato-il-nuovo-piano-regolatore-dei-cimiteri-milanesi).

21 Between 2010 and 2016, cremation and above-ground burials continued to rise while inhumation is seeing

a slow but steady decline. For quantitative values, see: Area Servizi Funebri e Cimiteriali. Comune di Milano, Commissione Consiliare, 15 March 2017, [https://www.comune.milano.it/documents/20126/993822/Area+Funebri+-+Sistemi+informatici+15\\_03\\_2017.pdf/584134b9-e6b8-33c8-ba51-bfd-f918f51d1?t=1551096259670](https://www.comune.milano.it/documents/20126/993822/Area+Funebri+-+Sistemi+informatici+15_03_2017.pdf/584134b9-e6b8-33c8-ba51-bfd-f918f51d1?t=1551096259670). Accessed 08/10/2020





Barricaded terraces at Piramide at Cimitero Maggiore. Photo by the author.



Empty columbaria wall at Piramide, Cimitero Maggiore. Photo by the author.

## The possibility for post-monumentality

“What has been most violent? The religious urge to destroy idols to bring humanity to the right cult of the true God or the anti-religious urge to destroy the sacred icons and bring humanity to its true senses?”

Bruno Latour (1947-), What is Iconoclasm?

Cimitero Maggiore will continue to grow, as will Milan. In fact, following current trends, the Lombardian capital is set to continue growing at double the rate of the national territory for years to come.<sup>1</sup> Even with the presence of several fairly sized cemeteries around the metropolitan area, Maggiore remains the densest and most fit to accommodate future populations in search of accessible and affordable places of final rest. As such, Maggiore’s vocation as a dense city of the dead has been progressively ascertained with each expansion and with each new building erected. The two next cemeteries in order of size, Lambrate and Bruzzano, are still decades away from reaching the level of density and urban proximity of Maggiore; their character still largely that of park cemeteries surrounded by vast

<sup>1</sup> Anastasio, Giambattista. “Milano Cresce Il Doppio Dell’Italia.” *Il Giorno*, Il Giorno, 8 Nov. 2019, [www.ilgiorno.it/milano/economia/pil-crescita-1.4875305](http://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/economia/pil-crescita-1.4875305).

green spaces and low-density neighbourhoods.

As expressed by the municipality through the 2019 Piano Regolatore Cimiteriale, Maggiore is poised to become Milan’s next hyper-dense cemetery after Monumentale, albeit in an architectural scale unknown to the 19th century predecessor. Whereas Monumentale became dense and crystallised through the accretion of family mausoleums and perpetual concessions, Maggiore could become crystallised through the haphazard densification of its fields in the form of columbaria.

What is at risk in this seemingly democratic form of cemeterial transformation is that these public structures, if not critically envisioned, may fail to put forth an image of the cemetery that is multi-confessional, multi-cultural and democratic. Given the cemetery’s tendency towards inertia and class privilege, this could mean the Milanese cemetery could fail to become a bastion of cultural identity and social equality for the changing Lombardian capital.

The following drawings imagine a future for Maggiore in which monumental traditions and classic aesthetics have yielded to pressing needs of space. Far from being a utopia-heterotopia scenario, it represents a possible future for Maggiore based on 20th century developments in Italy and elsewhere.



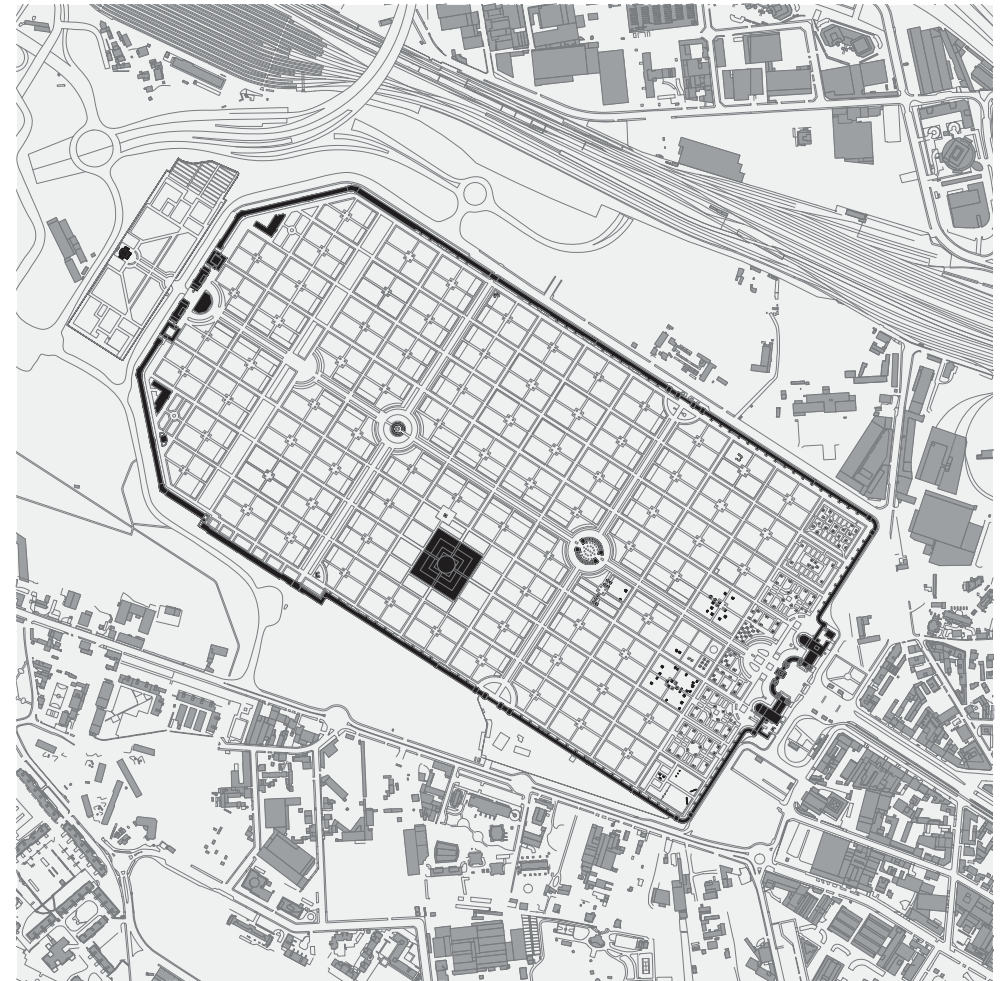
Main entrance to Cimitero Maggiore from 1895, with the strong presence of Catholic iconography and historicist ornamentation. Photo by the author.





**Cimitero Maggiore as an urban island.**

The cemetery is delimited by railway infrastructure and the Rho Expo center to the North, by the Cascina Merlata real estate development on the West and by the existant urban fabric on South and East.



**Border and territory**

Maggiore's encompassing wall effectively severs its interior from the rest of the city. Such a violent disrpture opens the potential for the territory within to be reenvisioned as a city of the dead which does not follow the urban pattern that surrounds it.





#### Structuring system

The rigid matrix of Maggiore is analogous to the Spanish or Manhattan city grid. It allows for full block occupation in the form of fields or columbaria without compromising its structural nature.



#### Maggiore as a collection of urban villas

Much like in the Verano or the Poggioreale, each block can be imagined as a self-sufficient entity in an heterogenous composition of *villas* for the dead.

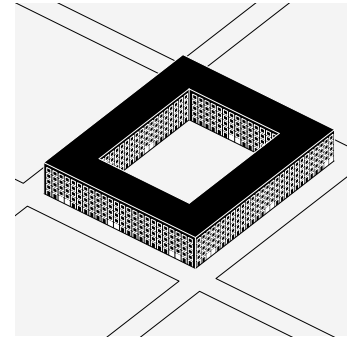
With blocks turned into islands of their own through the affirmation of discernible architectural gestures, diverse meaning becomes a potentiality in every square of the grid.

As described before, densification in the contemporary cemetery tends to take shape as columbaria and their three typological sub-types: the linear bar type akin to the *Siedlung*, the courtyard block akin to the *camposanto*, and the hypogean tomb which finds a reference point in Roman *loculi*. Together, these three types compose the lexicon of densification in existing cemeteries.

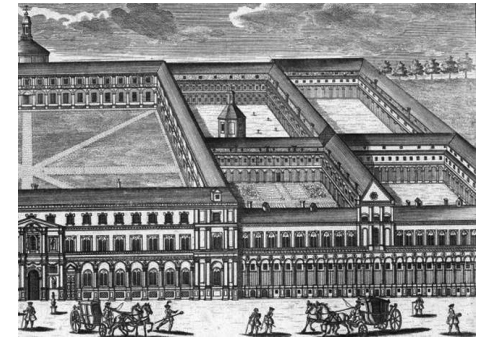
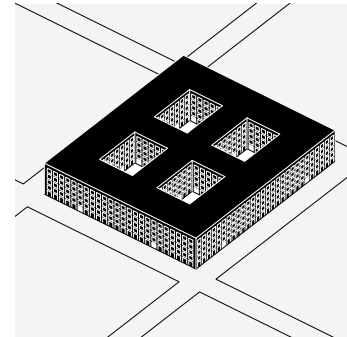
The rationalising nature of the columbaria means that compositional references can be found outside the genealogy of the cemetery. Indeed, the task of housing the 'biggest number' is the common framework for most of the urban transformations of the last century, of which the cemetery-turned-megastructure is one.

The following sequence posits a lexicon for densification at Maggiore according to the three columbaria sub-types (organised into columns) and their possible compositional declensions. Next to each item is an architectural element representing the possibility for design intentions to be found outside of traditional funerary types. The list is not exhaustive, but aims to offer a compositional starting point for countless combinations.

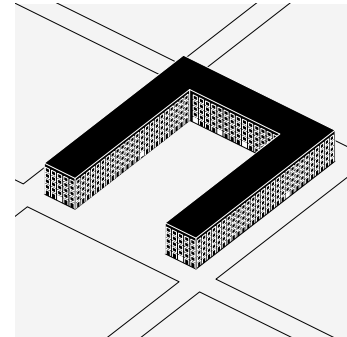
Famillistère



Cloister

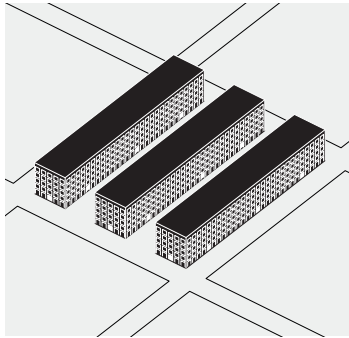


Palace

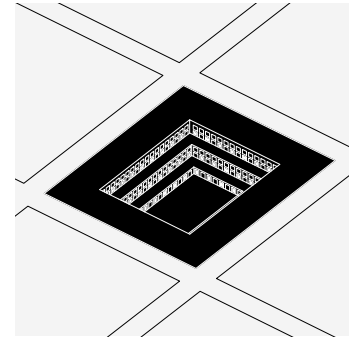


from top to bottom:  
Famillistère de Guise, France, 1884.  
Ca' Granda of Milan, Italy, 15<sup>th</sup> century.  
Palais de Versailles, France, 18<sup>th</sup> century.

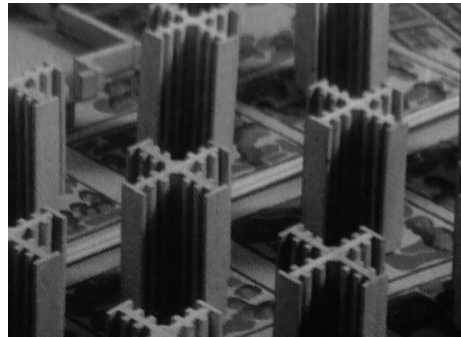
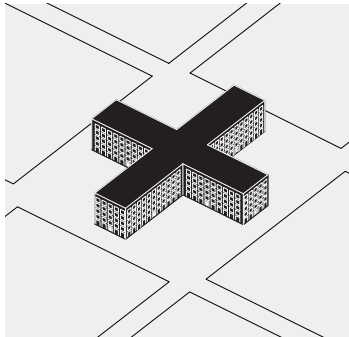
Siedlung



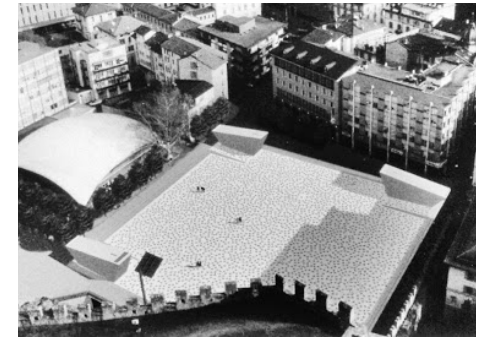
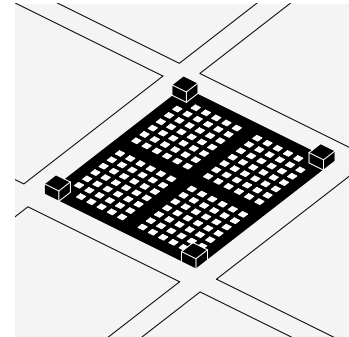
Stepwell



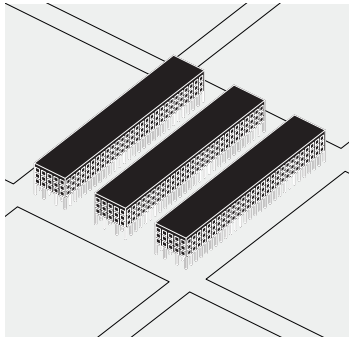
Cité



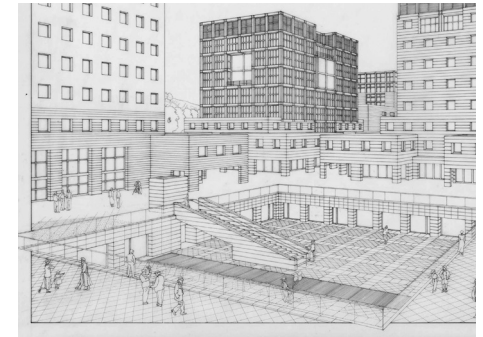
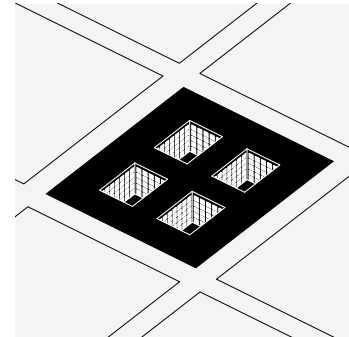
Slab



Pilotis



Sunken plaza



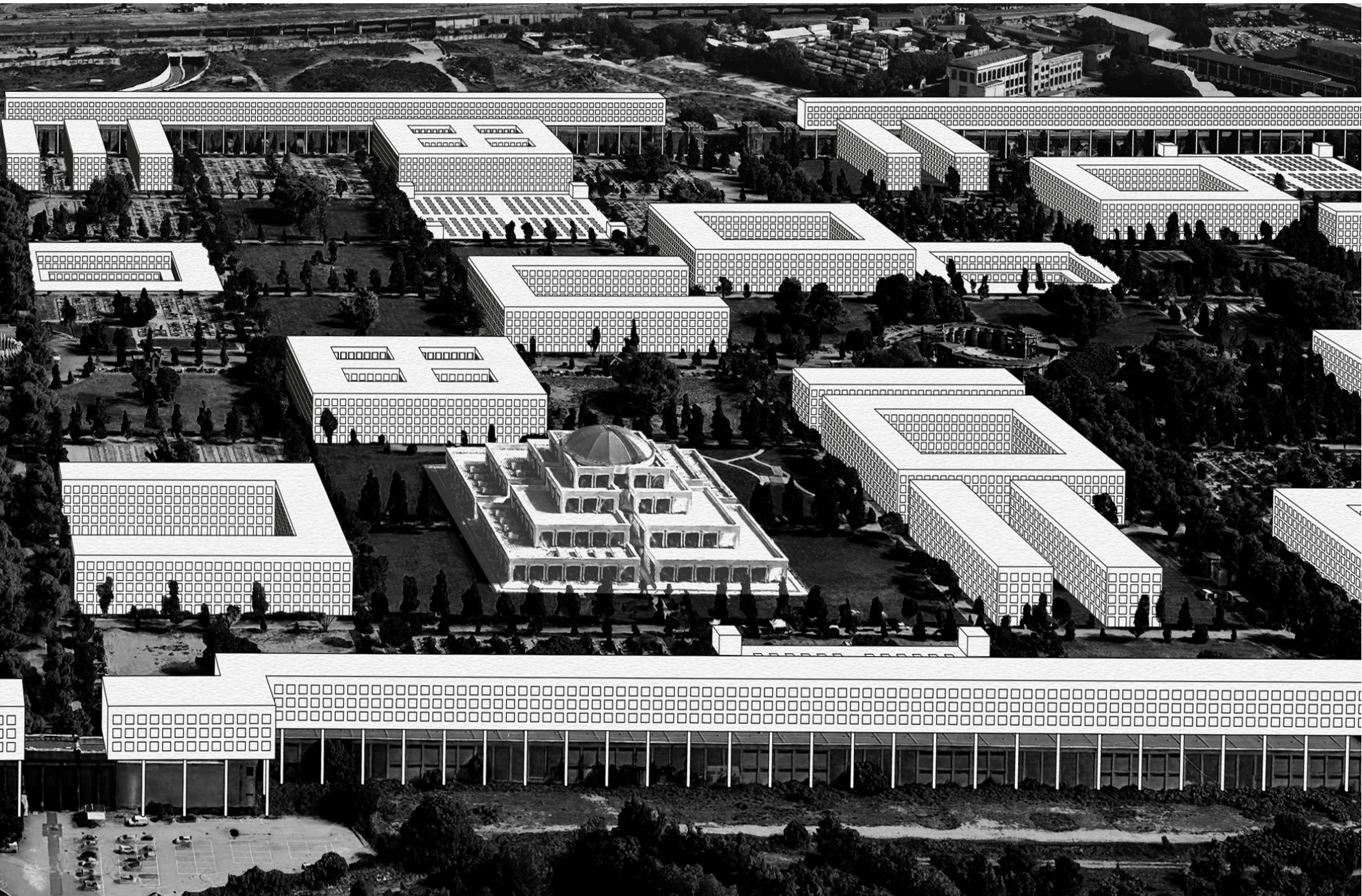
from top to bottom:  
H. Scharoun, Siemenstadt, Munich, Germany, 1913.  
Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin, 1925.  
H. Kollhoff, Leibnizkolonnaden, Berlin, Germany, 2000.

from top to bottom:  
Queen's stepwell, Patan, India, 11<sup>th</sup> century.  
L. Vacchini, Piazza del Sole, Bellinzona (CH), 1999.  
V. Gregotti, campus Pirelli-Bicocca, Milan, Italy, 1985.











## Imaginaria

Although a vocabulary of typologies and their urban analogues is a useful tool to establish occupation modes, it can only determine so much as general geometries and broad spatial relationships between entities. The character of individual architecture, meaning here the perceived *thingness* of a specific building beyond matters of size, remains indeterminate.

Architectural ideation seems inseparable from referencing: 'what is the main reference for the project?' 'Which past buildings or projects have influenced the present one?'... Architectural analysis can seldom escape the search for metaphors. A legitimate condition perhaps, given that the making of the city is necessarily historical and cannot be thought of in an epistemological vacuum. Referencing seems an inexorable precondition to architectural thought; memory, either lived or passed on, constitutes the primacy of architectural thinking. In this sense, can there be any architectural meaning outside an individual's references and interpretations?

In Susan Sontag's (1933-2004) essay *Against Interpretation*, the American writer urges the Arts to experiment with and deploy techniques that could liberate the artistic object from what she calls a fixation of content over form. To her, the Western attitude towards art is limited by the classic notion that the art-

work must necessarily represent or say something, as opposed to simply being. To Sontag, the task of contemporary art production is to "cut back content so that we can see the thing at all."<sup>2</sup> *Against Interpretation* is a powerful reading key for monumental architecture and the task of representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Death and its meaning to humans can hardly still be enveloped by one single religious narrative, let alone be represented by a unitarian gesture of symbolism expressed through architecture. 21<sup>st</sup> century multi-cultural societies cannot be summarised into one temple – diverse societies require diverse forms of representation and multi-dimensional narratives for life and death.

The shortcoming of contemporary symbolism in the context of death has been its relentless commitment to the narrative of Eurocentric secularism. In the process of eliminating Christian iconography in favour of self-effacing spirituality, a new form of iconography was born: light-washed walls, diffuse light sources, games of chiaroscuro and abstract sculptural forms are only some of the gestures composing the secular lexicon of funerary architecture. Monastic asceticism and its contemporary offspring, minimalism, seem to have become the new point of reference for all things spiritual.

What appears as a diplomatically ideal answer to the issue of multi-culturalism in faith and

architecture may in fact conceal an unwillingness from public power and architects to allow symbolic meaning to creep 'back' into architecture insofar as such meaning does not conform to contemporary norms of secularism based on catholic and protestant aesthetics. Such iconoclastic tendencies, although preaching secularism and freedom of choice, may in fact be asserting a far graver alternative to interpretation: a unitarian narrative of superficial religiousness.

Perhaps drawing uncredited reference from Sontag, Olgiati (1958-) & Breitschmid's (1966-) concept of non-referential architecture attempts to apply the same criticism of interpretation to architecture. The thesis developed by the Swiss duo could perhaps be summarised with an excerpt from the text; in explaining non-referentiality they go on to assert that "a building exists only for itself."<sup>3</sup> Such a bold statement is consciously followed by an explanatory paragraph which tries to mitigate the shock: "a building does not require external systems to justify itself [...]". What is being called for here is architecture's emancipation from interpretation, from the tendency to explain and give meaning to things by way of analogies and categorisation.

How then, can one hope to design meaningful buildings that are connected to a general 'history of things' and at the same time independent from the constraints imposed

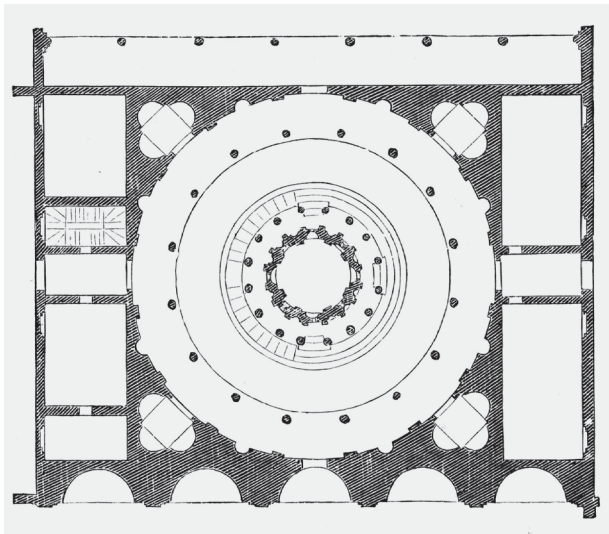
2 Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation", *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Penguin, 2013.

3 Olgiati & Breitschmid, p. 26.



by cultural interpretation? In addressing the age-old factuality of death, how can a building provide a framework for experience that is sense-making without over-relying on archetypes and iconographies? The church, the Pantheon, the pyramid, the mosque... a cross, a concentric nave, a zenithal opening... Can death be represented outside of known types and remain recognisable to a broad audience? And in the process of architectural ideation, can images constitute a valid and self-sufficient source of meaning or is all referencing fated to be quotational and thus reductive?

The following selection of images assembles an architectural imaginary for death and mourning – one that can serve as a sense-making basis for the densification of the urban cemetery in the 21st century. References are drawn from funerary architecture but not exclusively; the task of providing sense-making monuments for housing the dead allowing for a broader lexicon. As such, the images selected posit the possibility for an architecture of death that is symbolically independent from religious iconography all the while remaining grounded in common memory and the human psyche.



Donato Bramante, early design for Tempietto di San Pietro according to Sebastiano Serlio, 1502

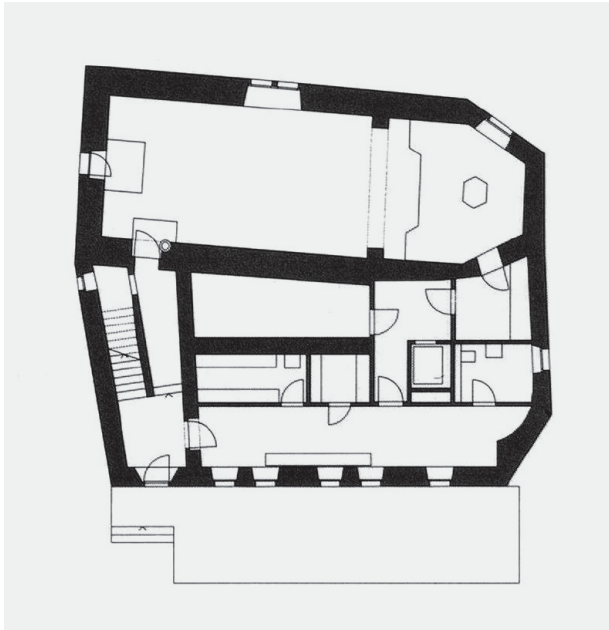


Sigurd Lewerentz, funeral chapel at Borlänge, Sweden, 1919-24.

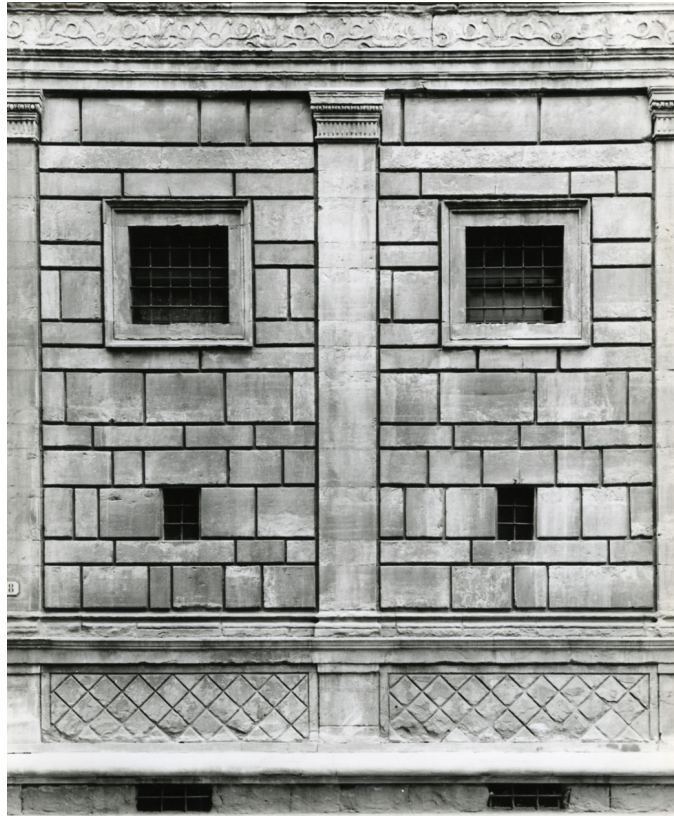


Erwin Heerich, Turm Stiftung Insel Hombroich pavilion, Neuss, Germany 1989.





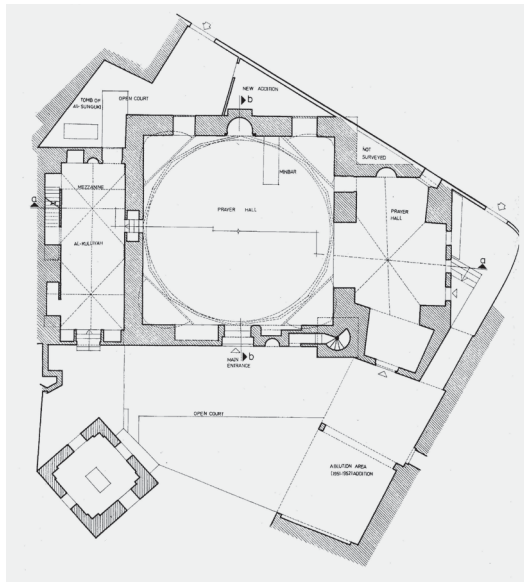
Ospizio di San Gottardo, Switzerland, 1237.



Leon Battista Alberti, Detail of Palazzo Rucelai in Florence, Italy, 1446.



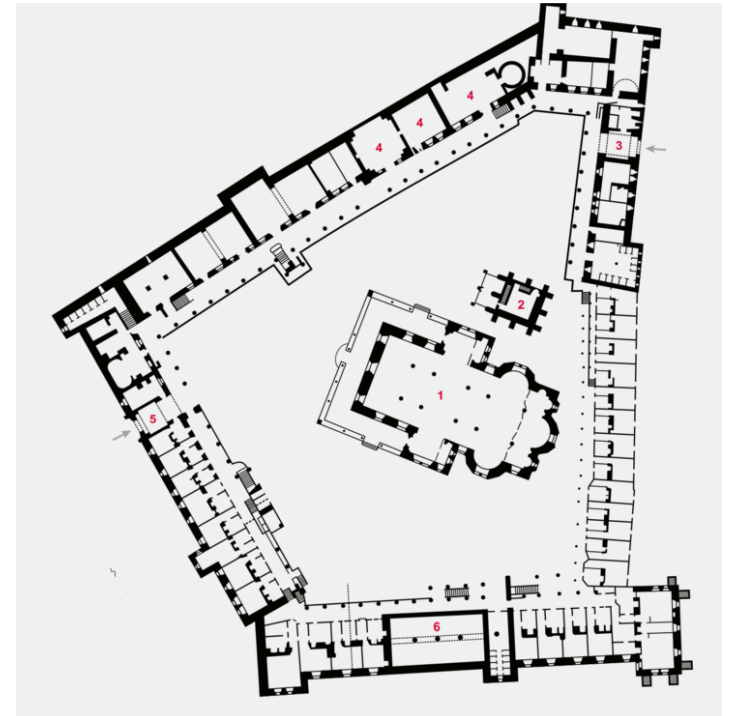
Gottfried Böhm, Neviges Mariendom, 1972.



Al-Uwaysiyat, Tripoli, Lebanon, 1461.



André Bloc, structure habitacle n.2, Meudon, France, 1964.

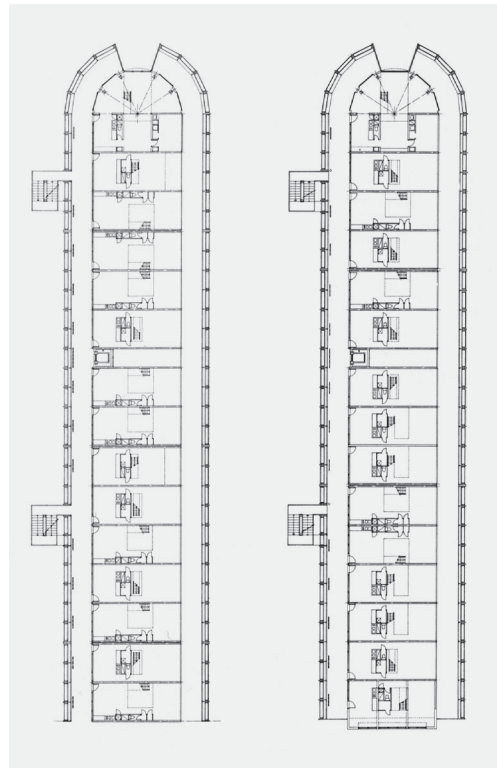


Rila Monastery, Bulgaria, 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.





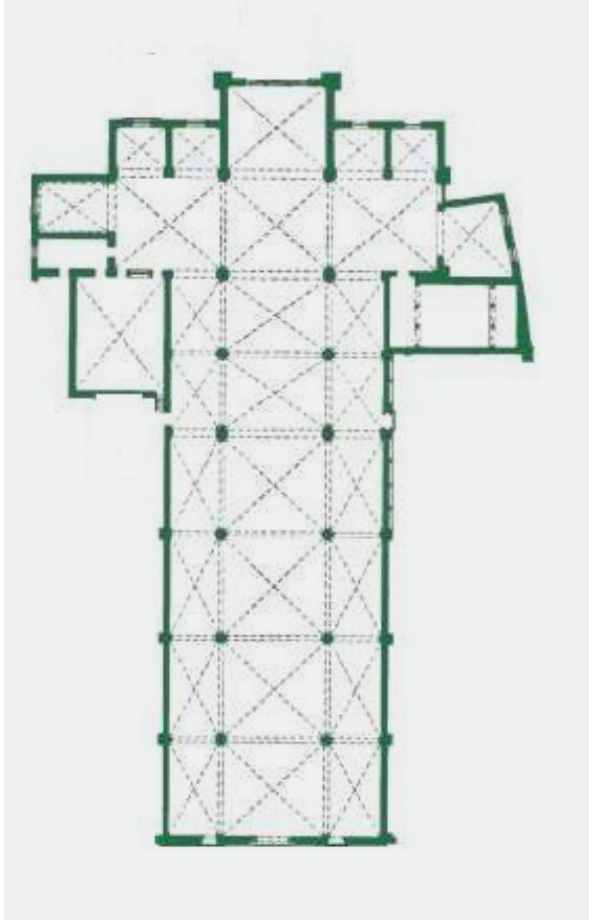
Peter Märkli, La Congiunta gallery, Giorno, Switzerland, 1992.



Jean Nouvel, Nemausus social housing, Nîmes, France, 1988.



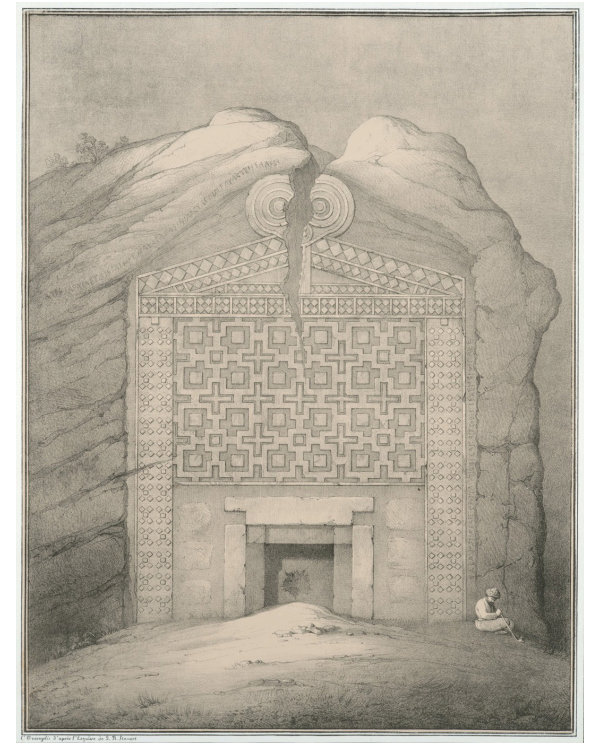
Michelangelo et al., Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy, 1470.



Leon Battista Alberti, Chiesa di Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy, 1470.

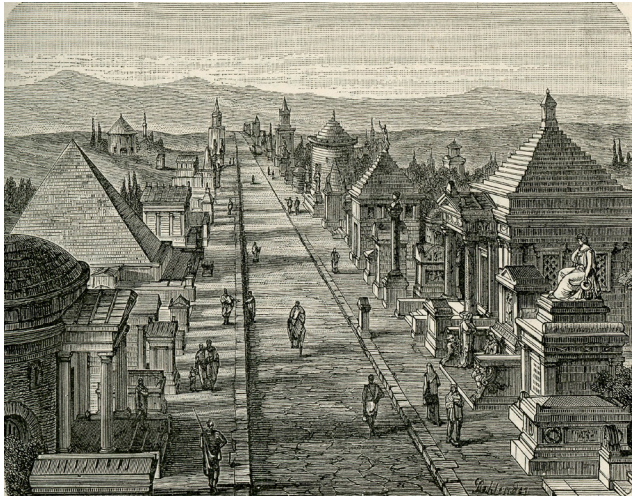


Francis Bacon, unnamed, 1929-30.

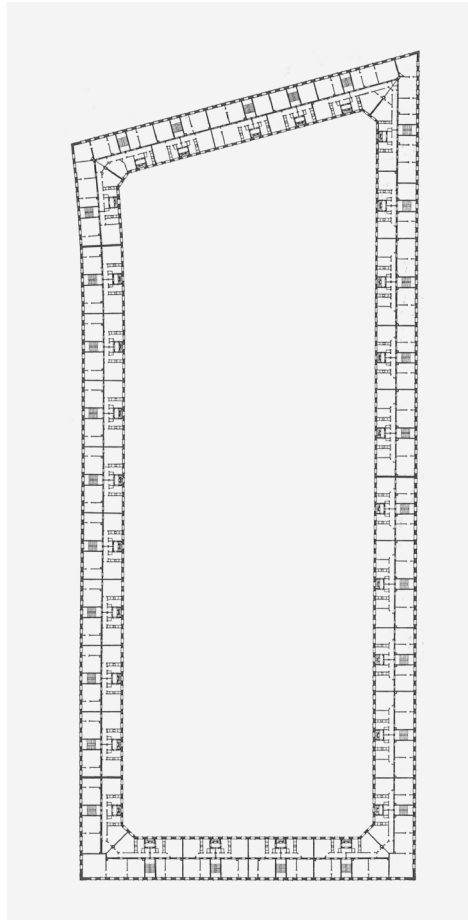


Tomb of Midas, 740 BCE.





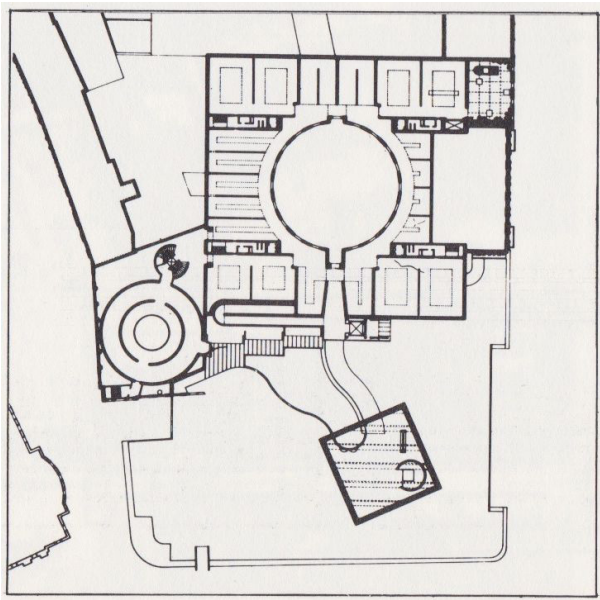
Appian Way and its funerary monuments. Etching by Gustavo Strafforello, 1894.



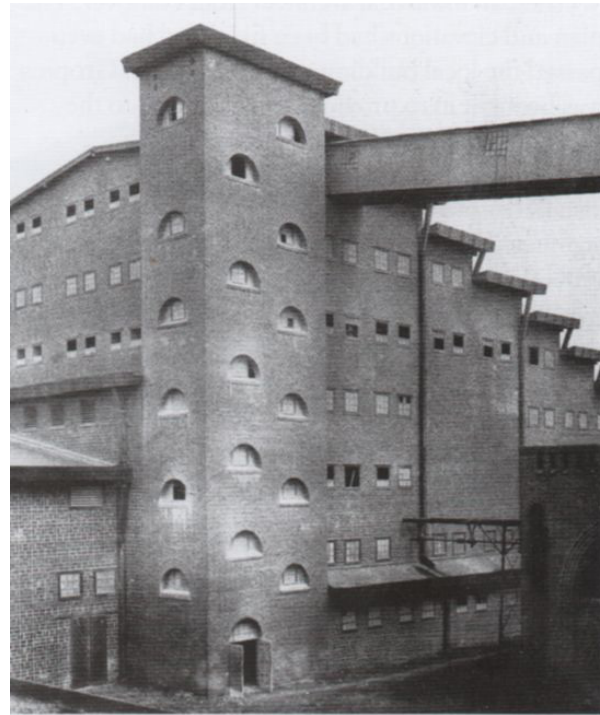
Kay Fisker, Hornbækhus, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1923.



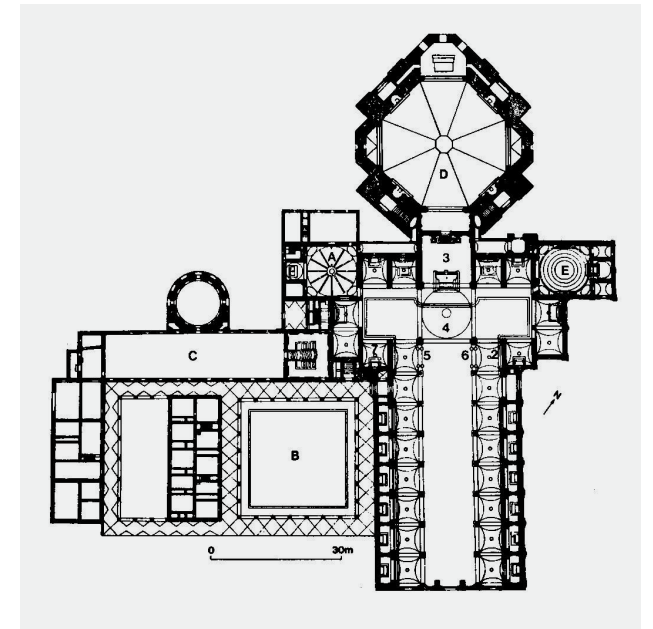
Gigon Guyer, Signal box in Zürich, Switzerland, 1999.



James Stirling, design for Nordrhein-Westfalen Museum, 1975.



Hans Poelzig, Sulfuric acid factory in Lubon, Poland, 1912.

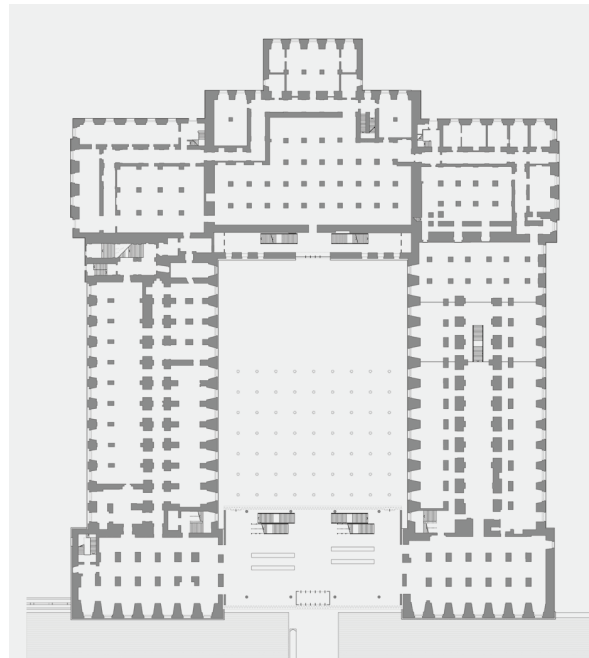


Brunelleschi et al. Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy, 1470-1642.





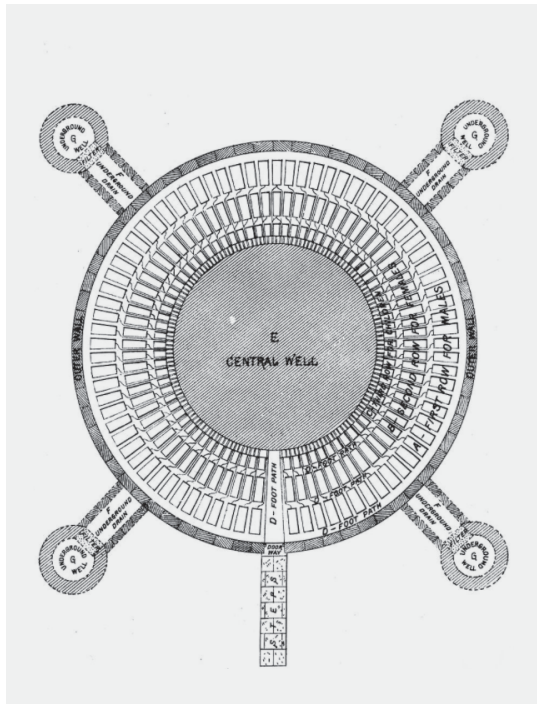
Mehmandust tower, Iran, ca.1100 CE.



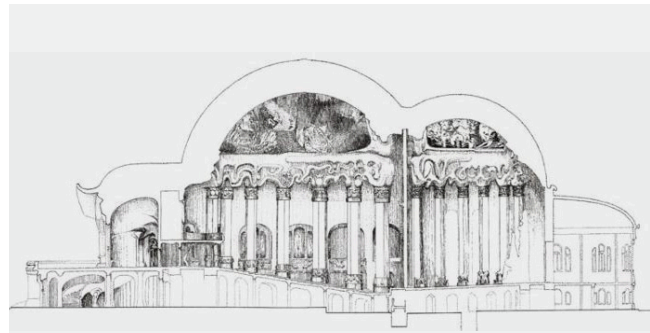
Alfred Messel & Ludwig Hoffmann, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 1930.



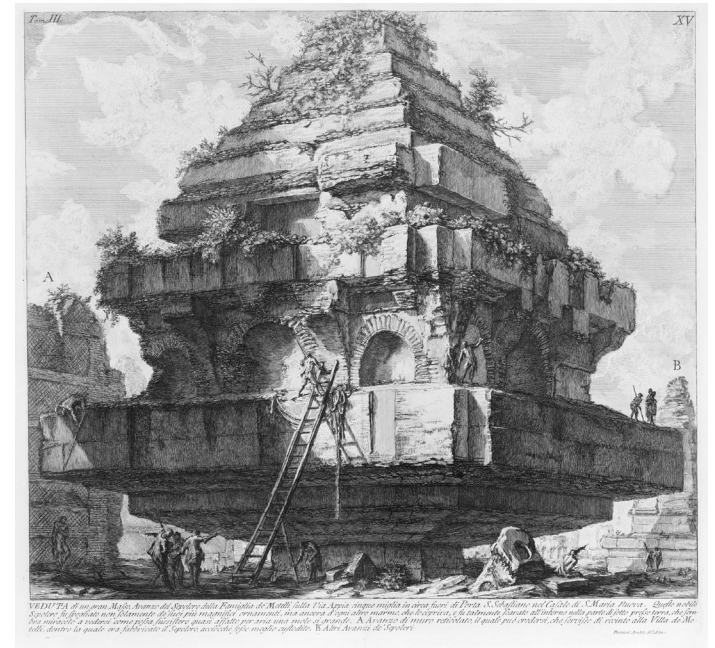
Etruscan necropolis at Cerveteri, Lazio, Italy IX - III century BCE.



Zoroastrian dakhma, or tower of silence, ca. 150 CE.

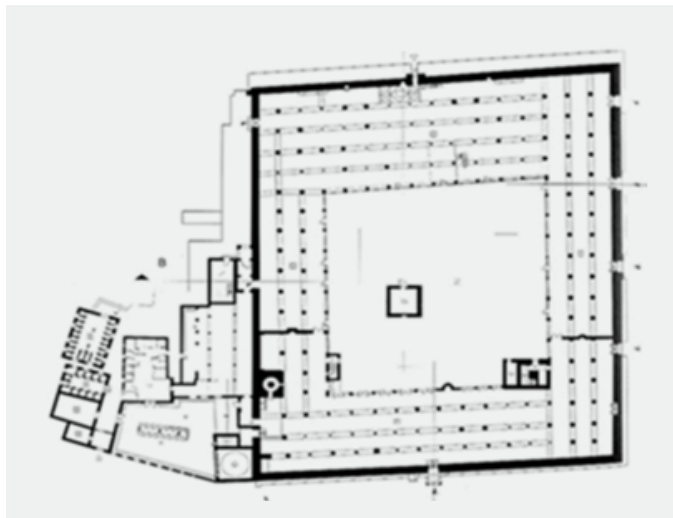


Rudolf Steiner, Second Goetheanum, 1928.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Remains of the Tomb of the Metelli on the Appian Way, 1757.

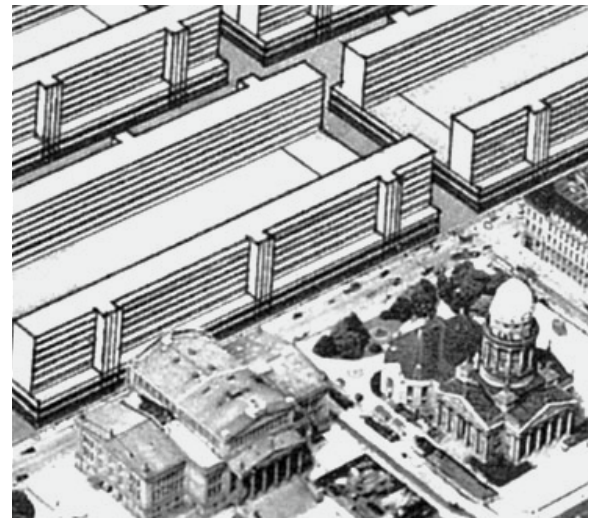




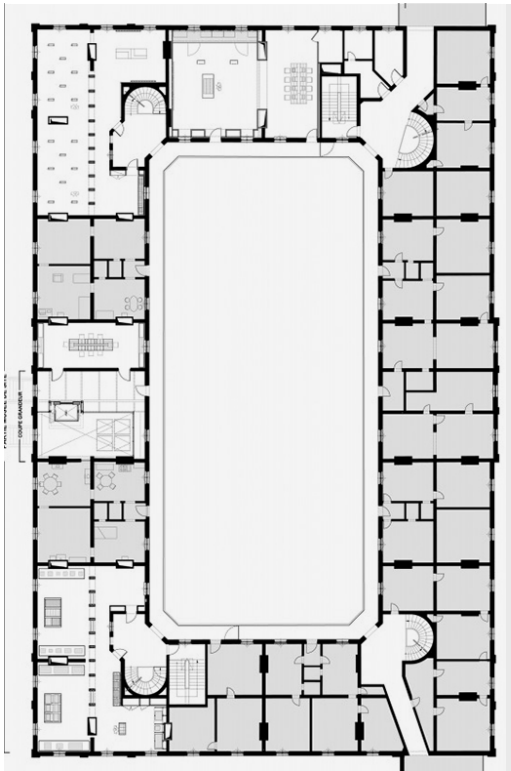
Great Mosque of Sana'a, 715 CE.



Tomb of Eurysaces the Baker, ca. 50-20 BCE.



Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Vorschlag zur Bebauung der Berliner City*, 1929.



Plan of the Familistère de Guise, France, 1884.

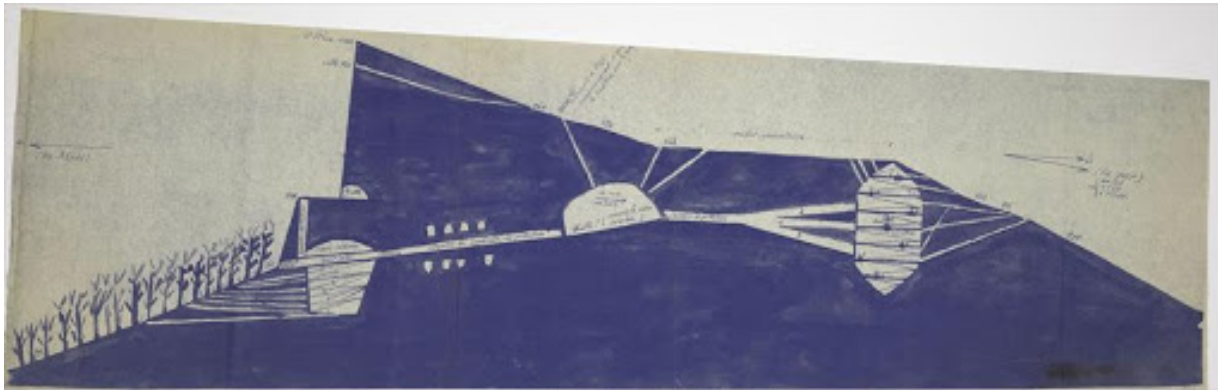


Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy, 1420.



building in the old part of Sana'a, Yemen, built before the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

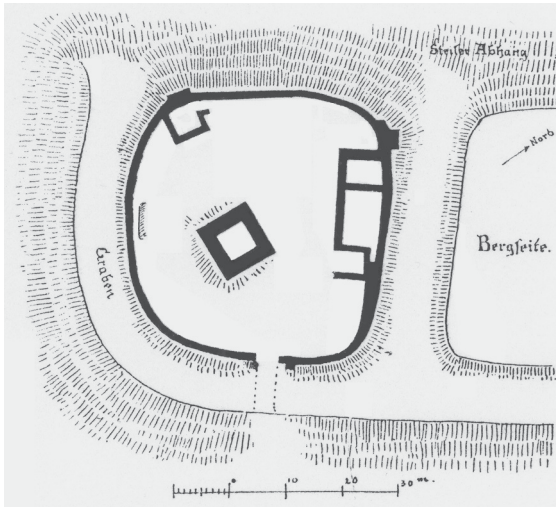




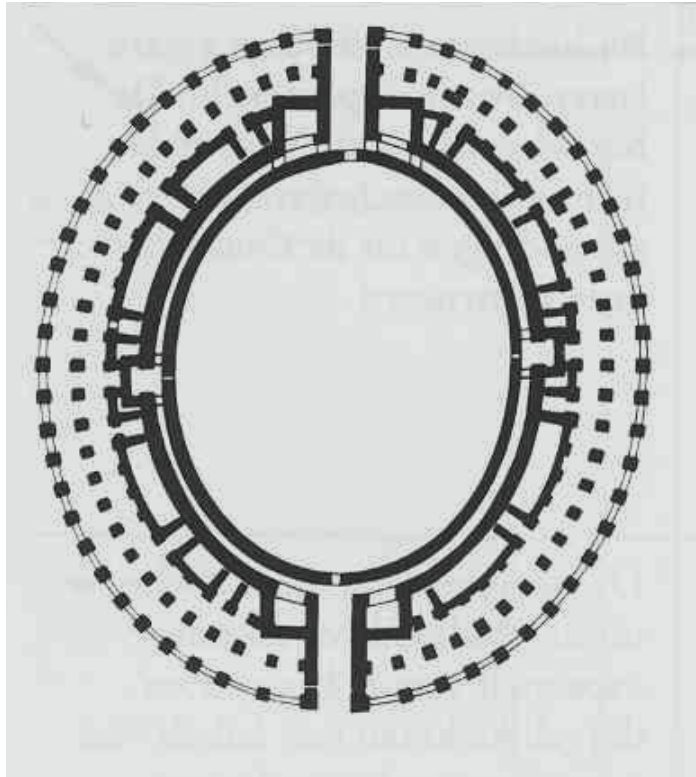
Le Corbusier, concept for Basilique Sainte-Baume, 1948.



Bas Princen, photograph of building in Dubai, UAE, 2009.



Burg Hardenberg, Velbert, Germany, 11-12<sup>th</sup> century CE.

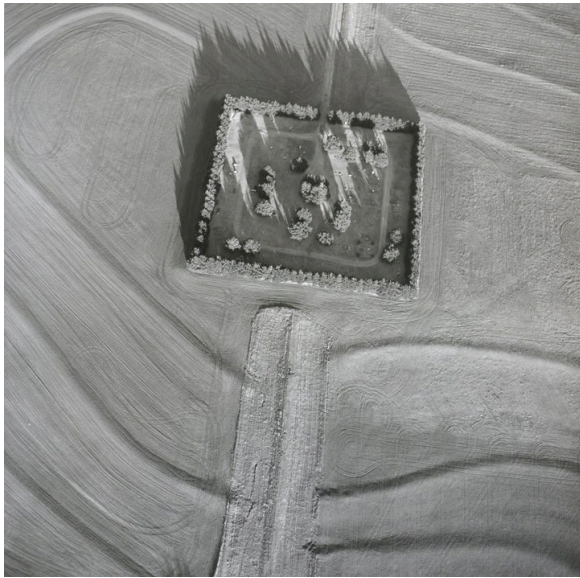


Amphitheatre of Xanten, Germany, ca. 71 CE.

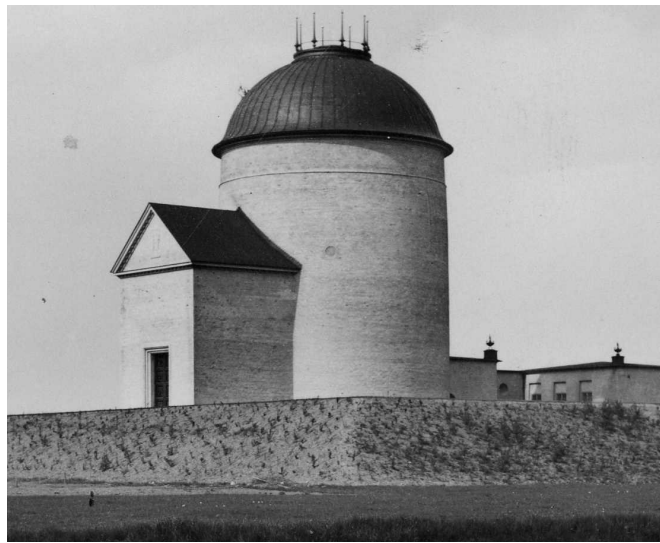


Jean Dubuffet, Large Black Landscape, 1946.

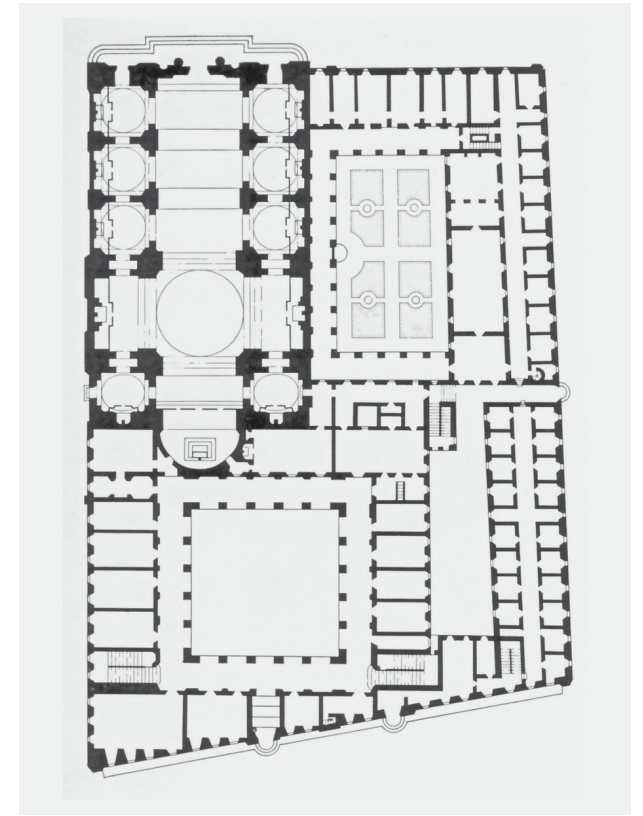




Terry Evans, photograph of Rose Hills cemetery in McPherson County, Kansas, USA, 1991.



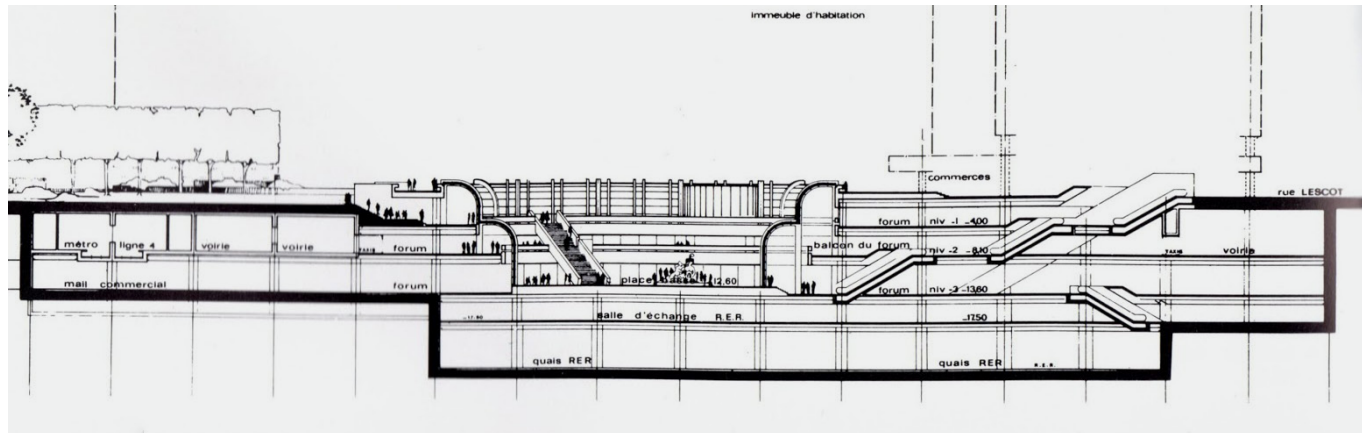
Ragnar Östberg, Helsingborg Krematorium, Sweden, 1929.



Bartolomeo Ammannati, Collegio Romano, Roma, Italy, 1584.

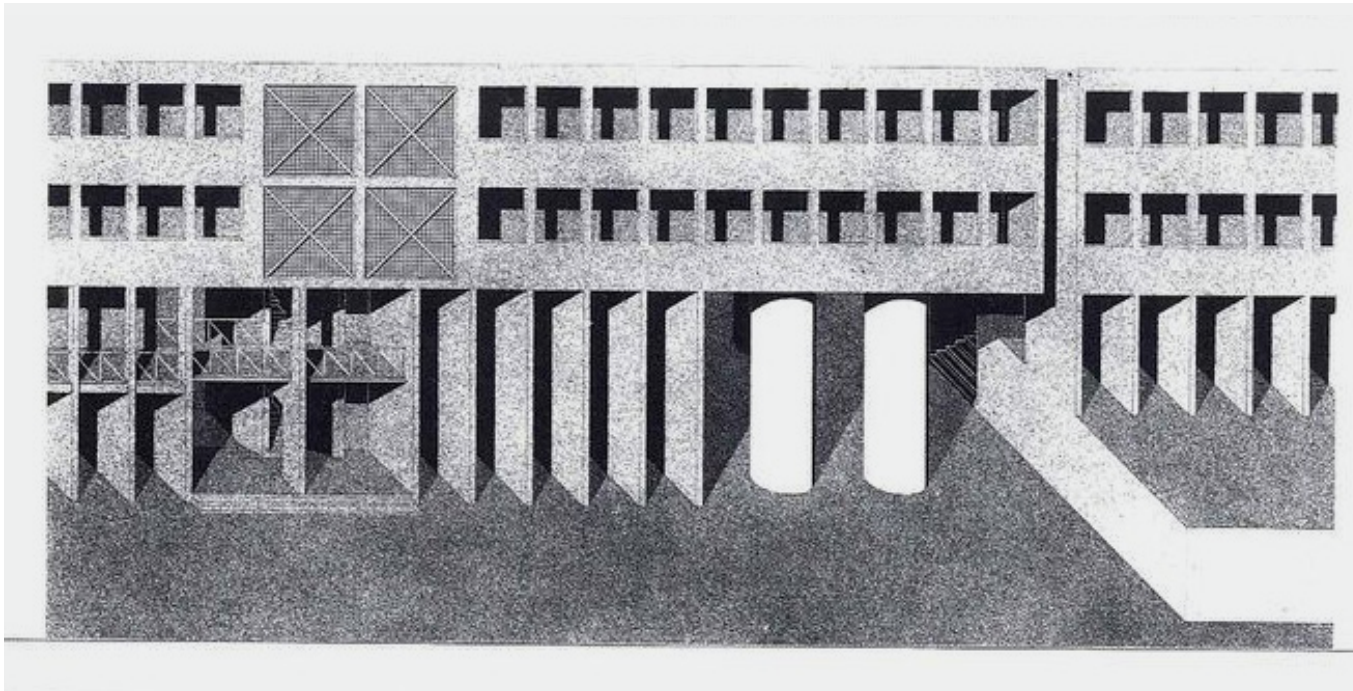


Onsitestudio, Football center in Sassuolo, Italy, 2019.



Section of the demolished Forum des Halles, Paris, ca. 1985.

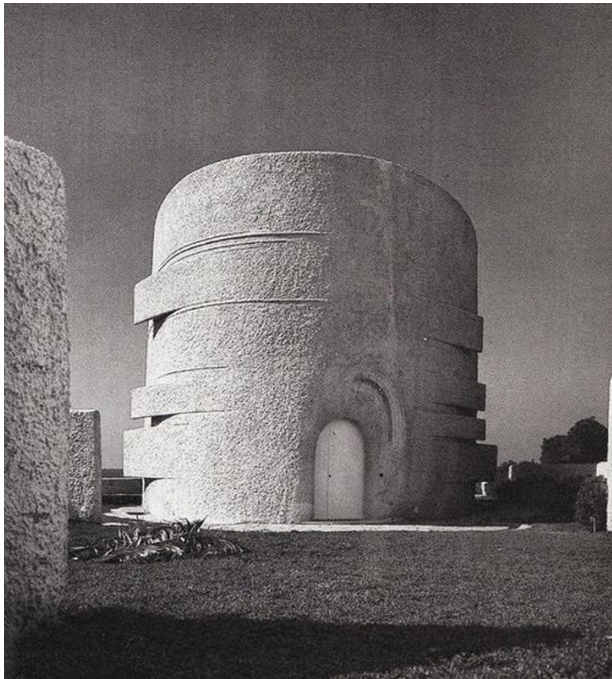




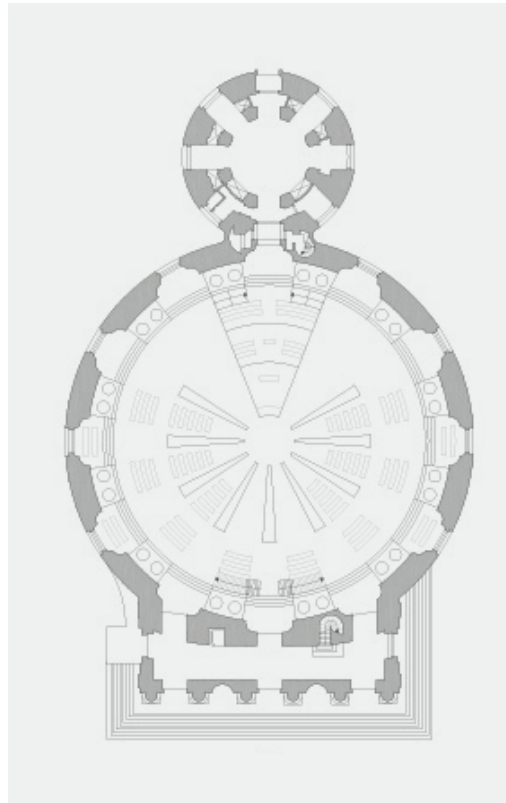
Aldo Rossi, Elevation of Gallarate housing project, Milan, Italy, 1972.



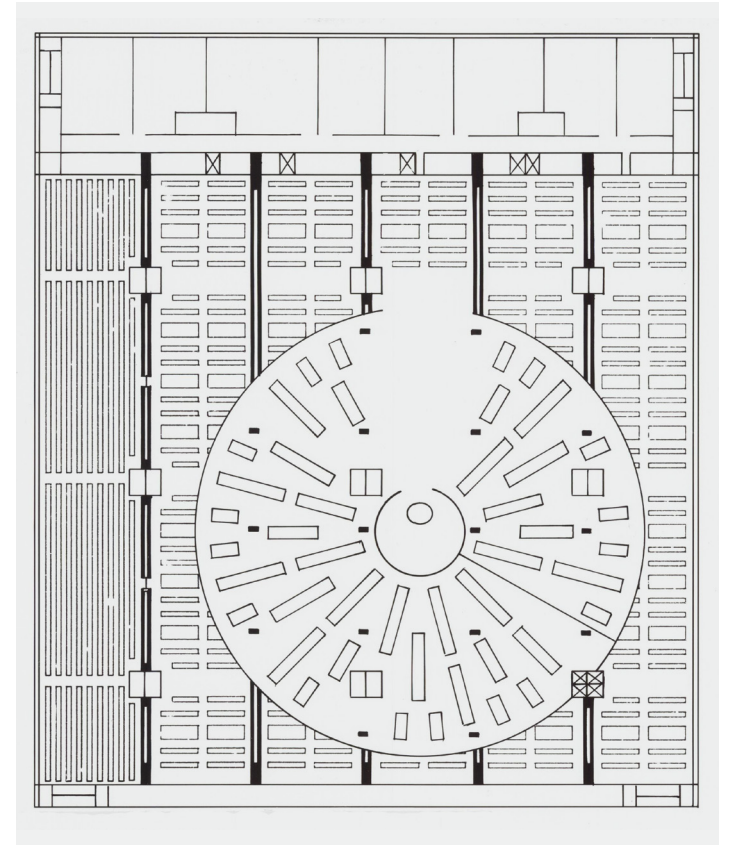
Monadnock, Tower at Nieuw-Bergen, The Netherlands, 2015.



Luigi Moretti, Villa La Callifa, Santa Marinella, Italy, 1965.

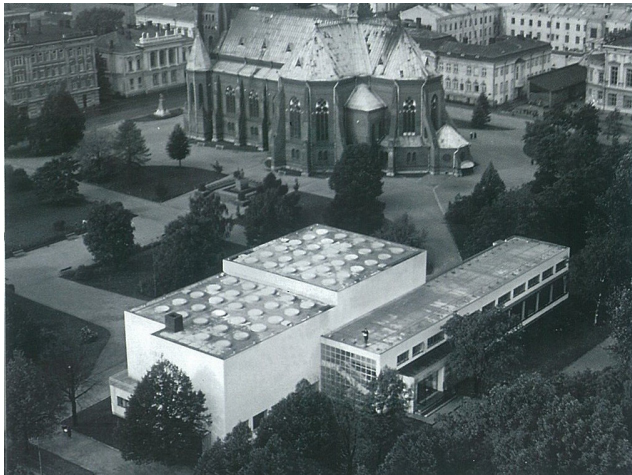


Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff, St. Hedwig's Cathedral, Berlin, Germany, 1773.

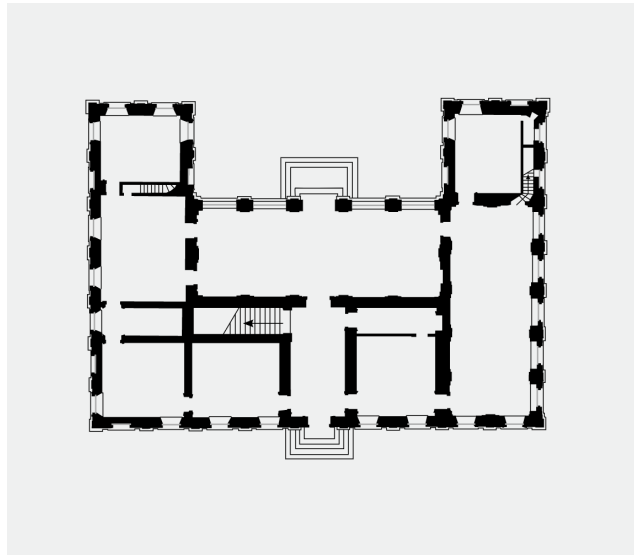


OMA, Très Grande Bibliothèque, Paris, 1989.

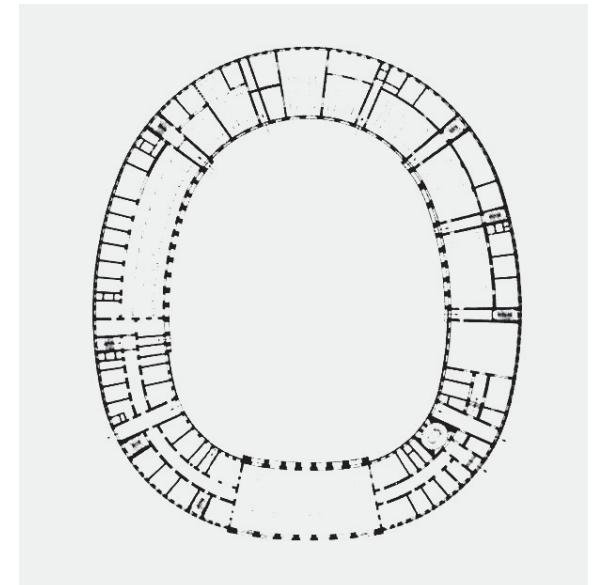




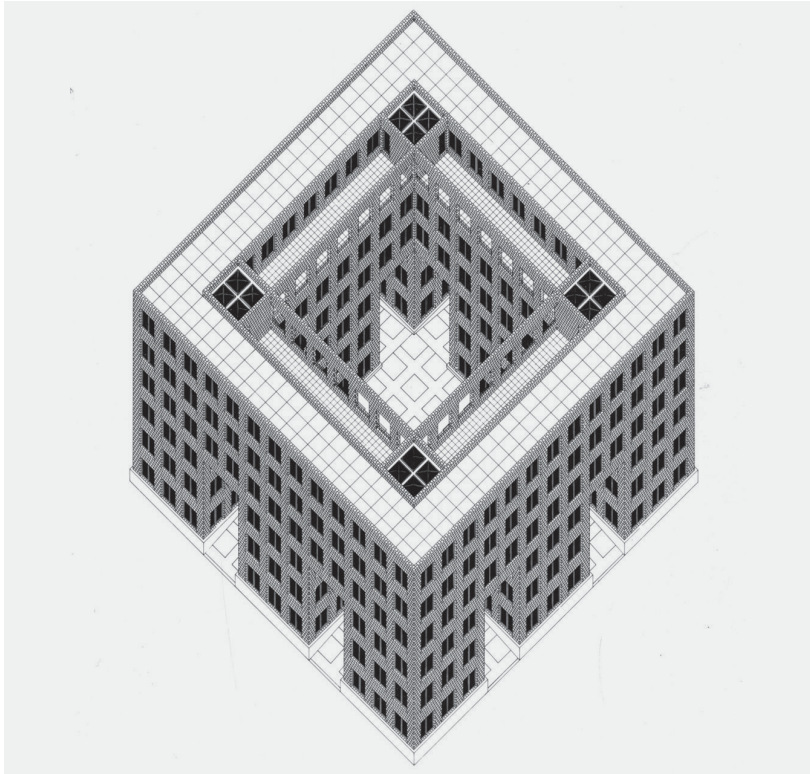
Alvar Aalto, Viipuri Library, Vyborg, Russia, 1935.



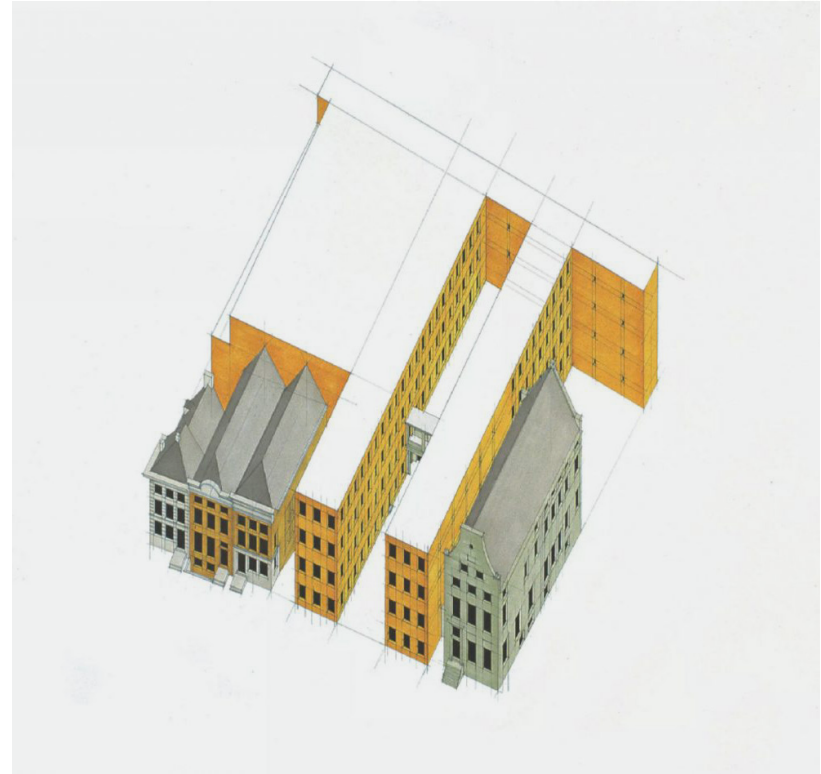
Baldassare Peruzzi, Villa Farnesina, Rome, Italy, 1510.



Hans Poelzig, Feuerwach Dresden, 1917.

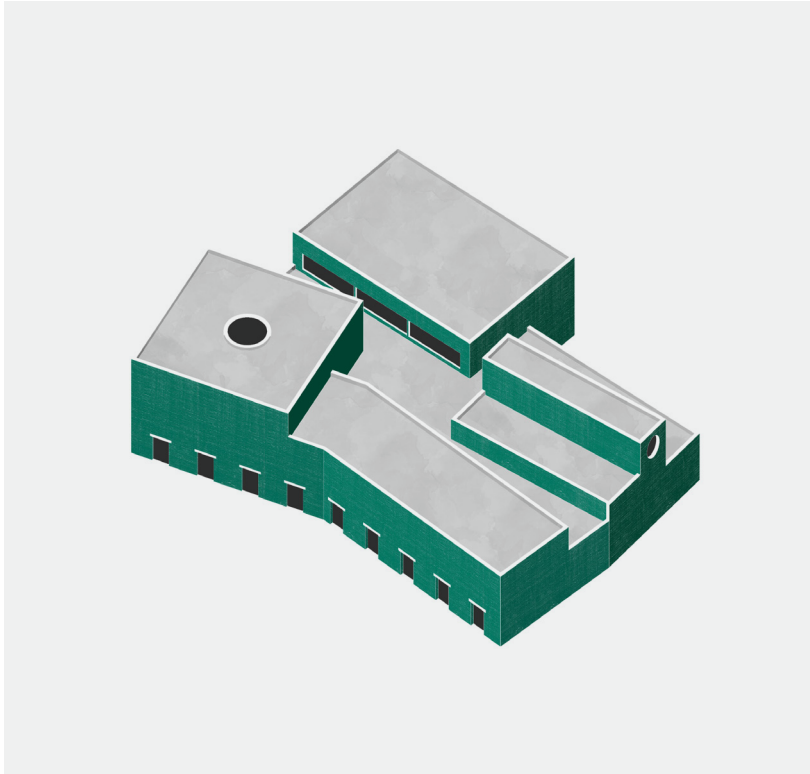


O.M. Ungers, IBA block 1, Berlin, 1989.



Giorgio Grassi, Groningen public library, The Netherlands, 1992





Multi-confessional centre at Cimitero Maggiore, Italy, 20xx.

## Generic-specific, or the task of determination in architecture

Finding the “specific” in architecture means reviving the uniqueness of things, to re-encounter and to preserve the diversity and culture of each place. This is the key to join together what starts out as an autonomous approach—the abstract idea behind a project—with the contingencies and the tangible reality of a place.

Fabrizio Barozzi (1976-), “Finding the Specific and Avoiding the Generic in Architecture” interview with Rory Scott

The modern metropolitan cemetery has undoubtedly reached a critical mass which can no longer be reversed. And although demographic trends in late-stage capitalism economies would indicate populational degrowth, such trend is thwarted by global migration flows and populational concentration in urban areas. Coupled with ever-present rural exodus, the amassing of citizens in the metropolis means that the modern cemetery has not yet reached a point of inflection leading to shrinkage. On the contrary, in most metropolises in Europe and across the globe, cemeteries have not stopped growing – their growth pattern is

simply deviating from the traditional European landscape approach of the last centuries towards denser, more space-efficient alternatives.

In Italy, due to the unique amalgamation of traditions stemming from the Romans together with bourgeois culture turned mainstream in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, densification has been underway for over a century in the cemeteries of the Peninsula. There, the walls of the metropolitan cemetery have slowly been converted into thick strip buildings (or *columbaria*) housing tens of thousands of coffins and ash vaults. Where perimeter walls have not been occupied one usually finds communal columbaria buildings resembling apartment blocks (in Italian *palazzi*) occupying the central fields. The combination of both perimeter building and courtyard blocks is also quite common, as individual characteristics of cemeteries usually require hybrid occupation modes.

If the columbarium was re-introduced into cemeteries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as heritage from the Romans and interpreted as a symbolically rich device, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had been almost completely stripped of symbolism. Most funerary architecture built in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Italy is strikingly modernist and remarkably dull. It appears that in the process of addressing populational growth and urban densification, architectural sense-making in the cemetery became eclipsed by the func-

tionalist deployment of columbaria in the fashion of Reconstruction Era social housing projects.

Exceptions such as Rossi’s San Cataldo or David Chipperfield’s San Michele in Isola extensions do offer critical alternatives to the expansion of the cemetery, but their impact is marginal when confronted to the body of generic funerary architecture that multiplied across Italian cities as municipalities scramble to provide burial spaces on the basis of immediate need. As such, the growth of the modern cemetery and its architectural consequences have yet to be incorporated into a theoretical framework that addresses matters of representation, identity, and monumentality.

The generic architecture of death that was born in the past century out of functionalist doctrines and classicist quotation must give way to an architecture of death that is conscious of its task of enabling sense-making experiences and dignified mourning to all individuals. Symbolism *should* make its way back into the cemetery, only no longer through the prosthetic collaging of religious symbols upon surfaces and roofs. In this sense, the present work can also be read as a call for new symbolism in architecture that is not interpretative nor iconoclastic. The answer, as is often the case in the complex reality of political subjectivity, lies in the grey zone of compromise and negotiation.

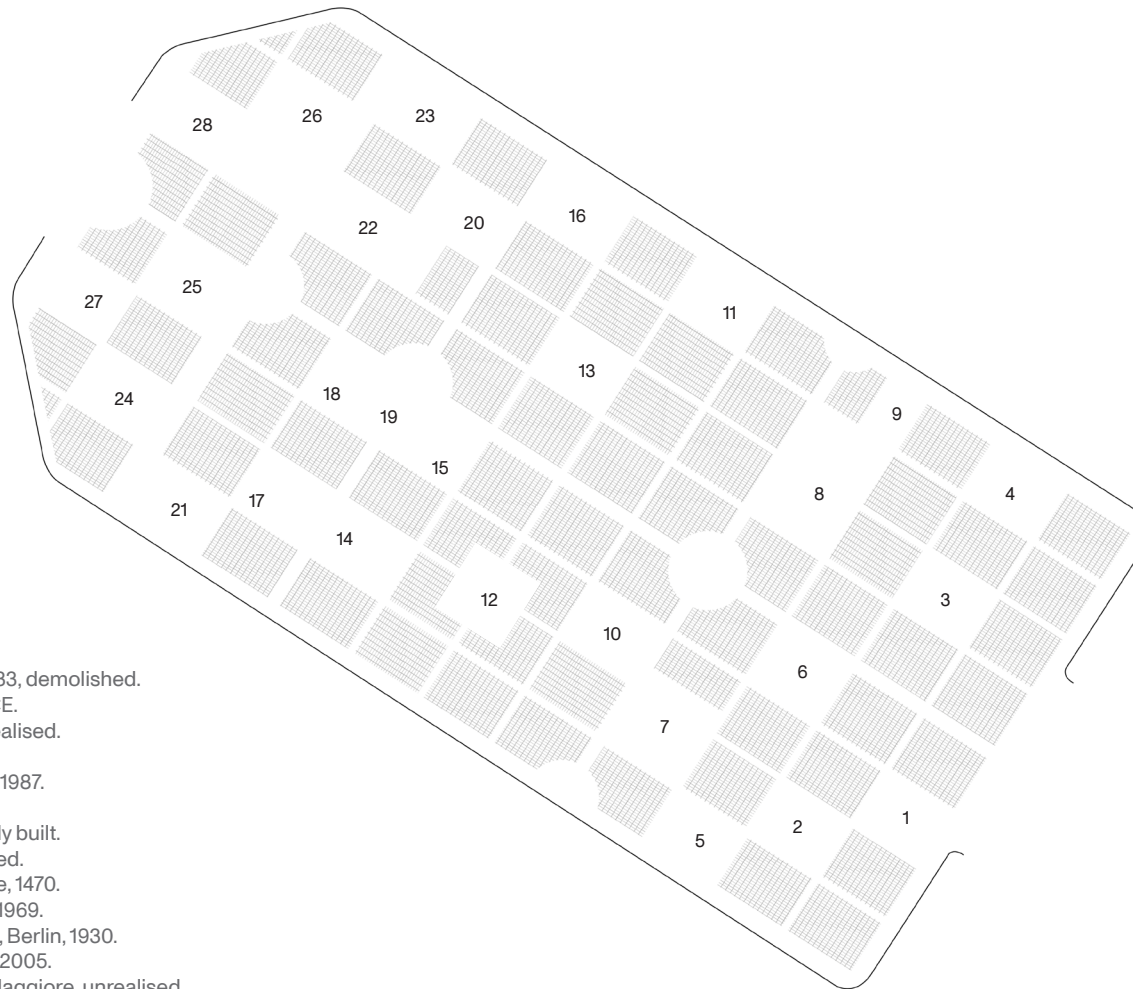


Specificity in architecture – the potential to create unique and compelling experiences that address an existing socio-political context – arises as a consequence (and not as a precondition) of these negotiations.

Throughout the chapters of this thesis, the attempt has been made to establish an understanding of the cemetery as an institution determined by more than theology. The intimate connection between death and politics, death and the city, and death and architecture is analysed in order to make available a reading of the cemetery which is no longer fixed by the canons of classicism but rather fluid and indeterminate (or rather, constantly re-determined). Just like the contemporary globalising city is constituted of diverse values and plural identities, so must the contemporary cemetery foster diversity and plurality of meaning in order to be a truly civic institution.



Conceptual plan of imaginaria at Maggiore



1. John Soane, Bank of England, London, 1833, demolished.
2. Jaulian monastery, Pakistan 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.
3. Hans Poelzig, Dresden Feuerwache, unrealised.
4. Dominique Perrault, BNF, Paris, 1995.
5. Jean Nouvel, Nemausus housing, Nimes, 1987.
6. André Bloc, plan for housing, unbuilt.
7. Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo cemetery, partially built.
8. OMA, Très Grande Bibliothèque, unrealised.
9. L. B. Alberti, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470.
10. João Villanova Artigas, FAU-USP, Brazil, 1969.
11. Messel & Hoffmann, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 1930.
12. C. Stefano, Piramide at Maggiore, Milan, 2005.
13. E. Nercolini, Multi-confessional hall for Maggiore, unrealised.
14. Kay Fisker, Hornbaekhus housing, Copenhagen, 1923.
15. G. W. von Knobelsdorff, St. Hedwig's Cathedral, Berlin, 1773.
16. David Chipperfield, San Michele in Isola, Venice, 2013.
17. Michelangelo et al. Dome of Saint Peter's, Rome, 1547-85.
18. Bramante, early design for Tempietto, Rome, unrealised.
19. Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Pedregulho housin, Rio de Janeiro, 1947.
20. Brunelleschi et al. Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Florence, 1470-1642.
21. M. Fiorentino, Corviaie housing, Rome, 1984.

22. G. Grasi, Regional office building in Trieste, unrealised.
23. Bartolomeo Ammannati, Collegio Romano, Roma, Italy, 1584.
24. Plan of the Familistère de Guise, France, 1884.
25. Zoroastrian dakhma, or tower of silence, ca. 150 CE.
26. Alvaro Siza, S. Victor housing, Porto, 1977.
27. Rila Monastery, Bulgaria, 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.
28. Amphitheatre of Xanten, Germany 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.



## Appendix: towards plurality in death

Once the cemetery is understood as a parallel territory operating under its own set of rules and changing at its own pace, then a concrete strategy for healthy and democratic transformations can begin to be drafted. The notion that the cemetery is an unchanging landscape of eternal rest (an Elysian field, if one prefers) must be replaced by a critical geographic stance which is also necessarily political.

If the right to live and die is inalienable, and if the right to a proper burial regardless of creed constitutes one of the foundations of secular democracies, then the cemetery as an institution is severely lagging. Amidst new waves of nationalism, xenophobia, and protectionism in Europe and elsewhere, the individual right to be buried in 'one's land according to one's faith' is under attack. Despite current efforts, multi-culturalism keeps on growing. The grotesque speeches by politicians and the gruesome violence we see daily in our social feeds are the desperate actions of a decentralised movement that knows it cannot face a globalising economy on its own, but only through fear.

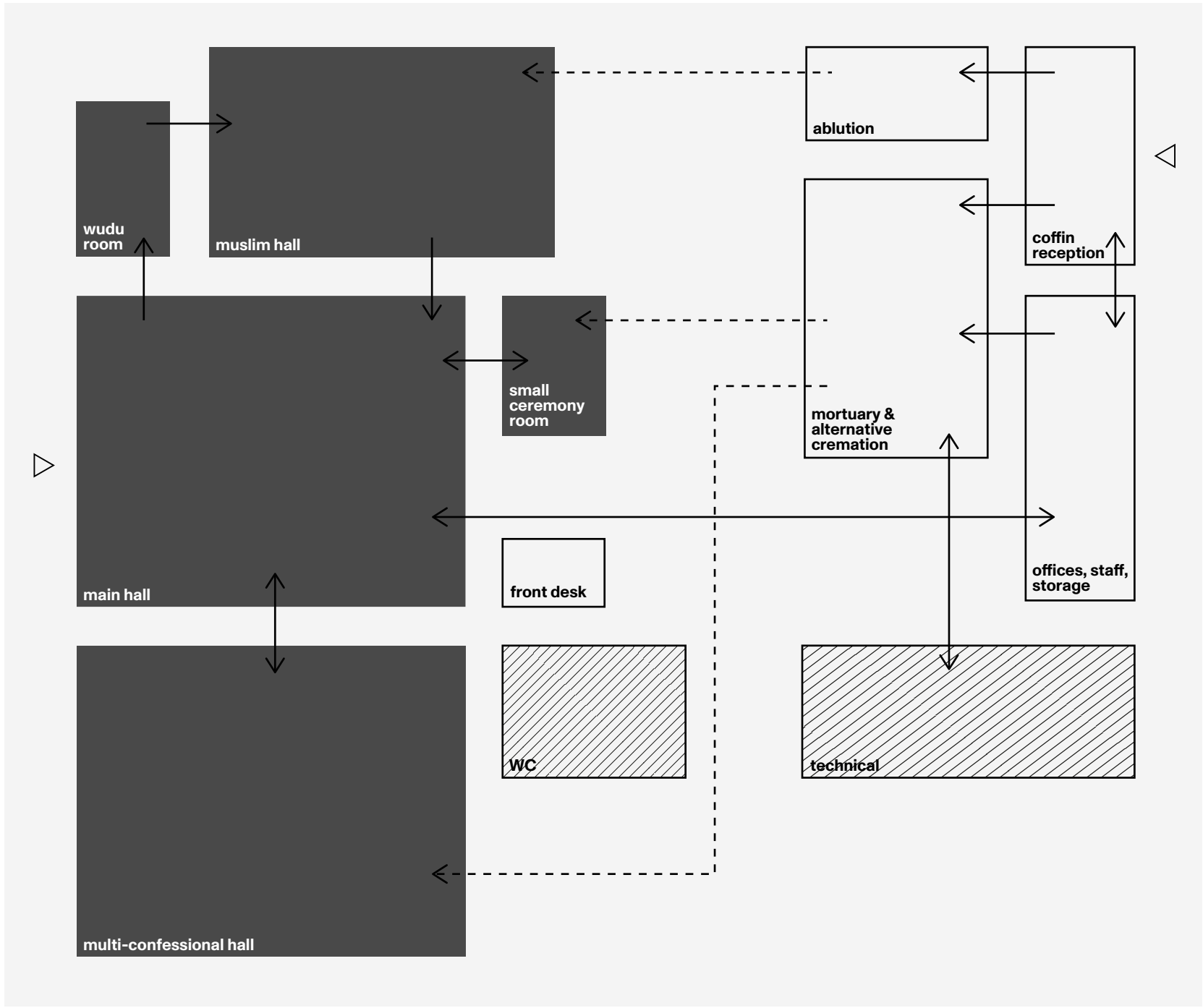
To bury every citizen according to the creed they hold to be true; to provide the necessary spaces so that every family and community can mourn with dignity – this is one of the necessary steps society must take in order to ensure truly inclusive and democratic cities. The appendix to this research is an overture towards an architecture of inclusiveness in death which seeks to part with the separatist tendencies of religious leaderships and public administration which wish not to enrage their electoral base.

A hypothetical design offers a counterpoint to the current development process of Cimitero Maggiore. By what seems to be in every aspect an accident, Maggiore is precisely aligned to the Qibla, Islam's sacred direction relative to Mecca. This coincidence makes that its fields can seamlessly be used by the Muslim community without requiring major changes in the landscape. The exercise repurposes the portion of Maggiore currently planned to become a second columbarium (fields 22, 23, 26 and 27) into Muslim fields and provides facilities that cater to the needs of communities not addressed by existing structures.

The architectural element should house:

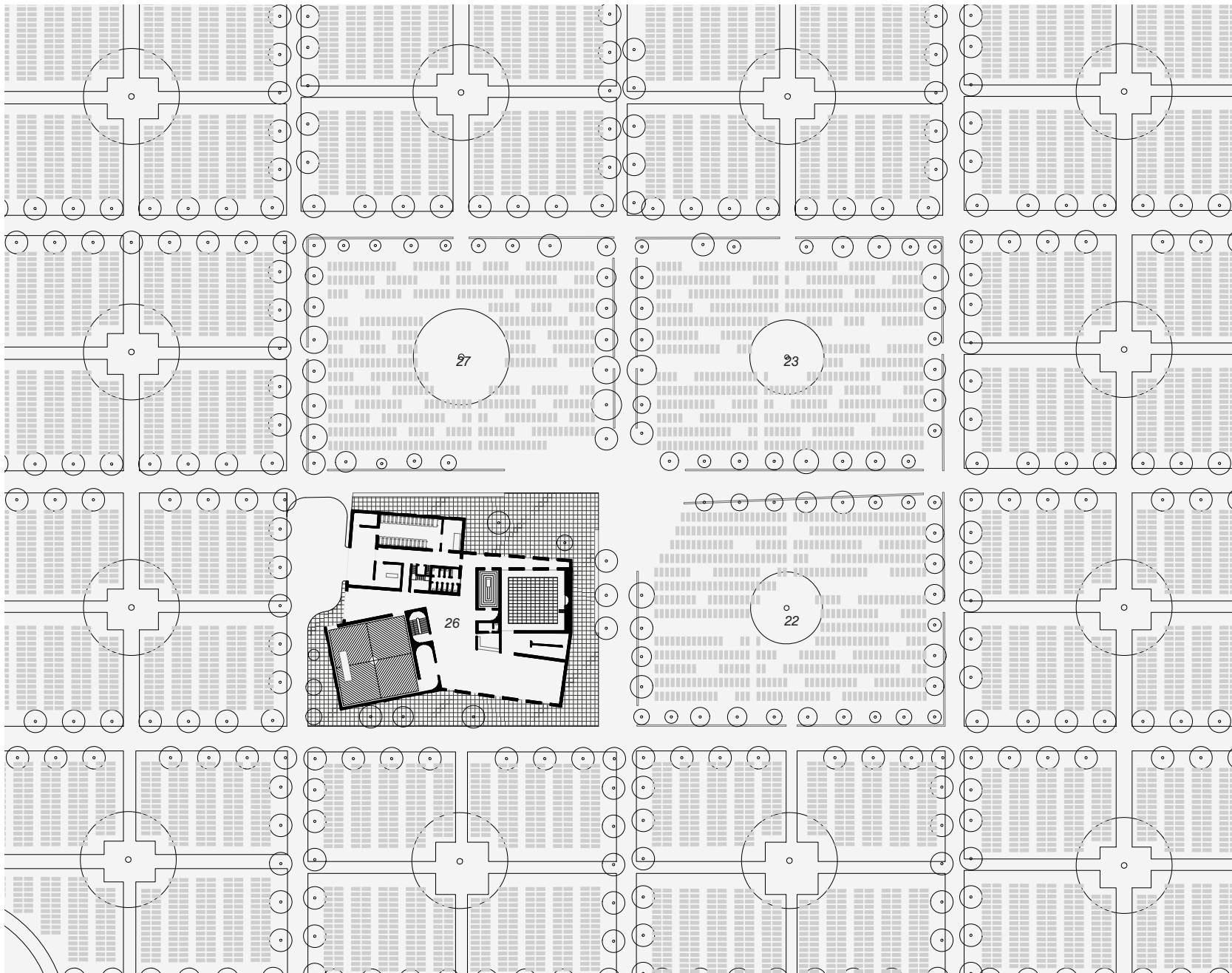
- a hall fit to welcome large groups of people not necessarily attending the same ceremonies and not necessarily belonging to the same faith. 500m<sup>2</sup>
- a multi-confessional ceremony hall available to any religion not contemplated by the existing chapel at Maggiore. 500m<sup>2</sup>
- a Muslim ceremony hall, following the design features imposed by Islam and accessible only after ceremonial ablution has been performed. 300m<sup>2</sup>
- a wudu (final ablution) room leading to the Muslim ceremony hall. 70m<sup>2</sup>
- a small ceremony room for individual families and small groups. 60m<sup>2</sup>
- a mortuary room where bodies and coffins can await burial
- a facility for the flameless cremation of bodies (e.g. alkaline hydrolysis), in compliance to planning regulations which forbid regular cremation within city limits. 200m<sup>2</sup>
- an ablution room for Muslim (or otherwise) funerary rituals. 60m<sup>2</sup>.
- a hall for receiving coffins. 100m<sup>2</sup>
- offices, storage and staff facilities. 200m<sup>2</sup>

Amounting to 1990m<sup>2</sup>, to which shall be added 500m<sup>2</sup> for toilets, technical spaces and circulation. The total area expected is of ca. 2500m<sup>2</sup>.



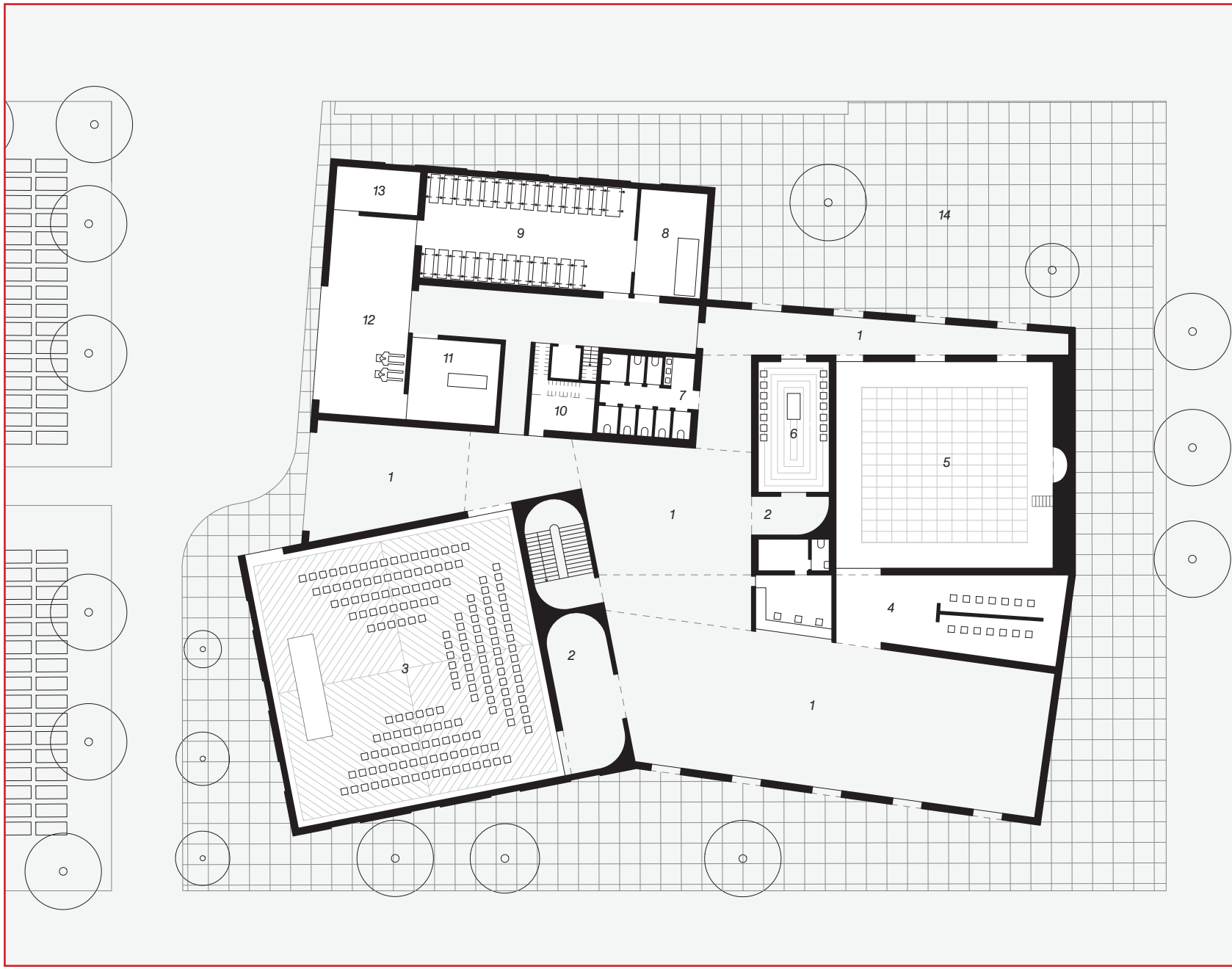
program distribution scheme

- ritual
- facilities
- technical

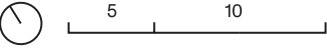


situation plan

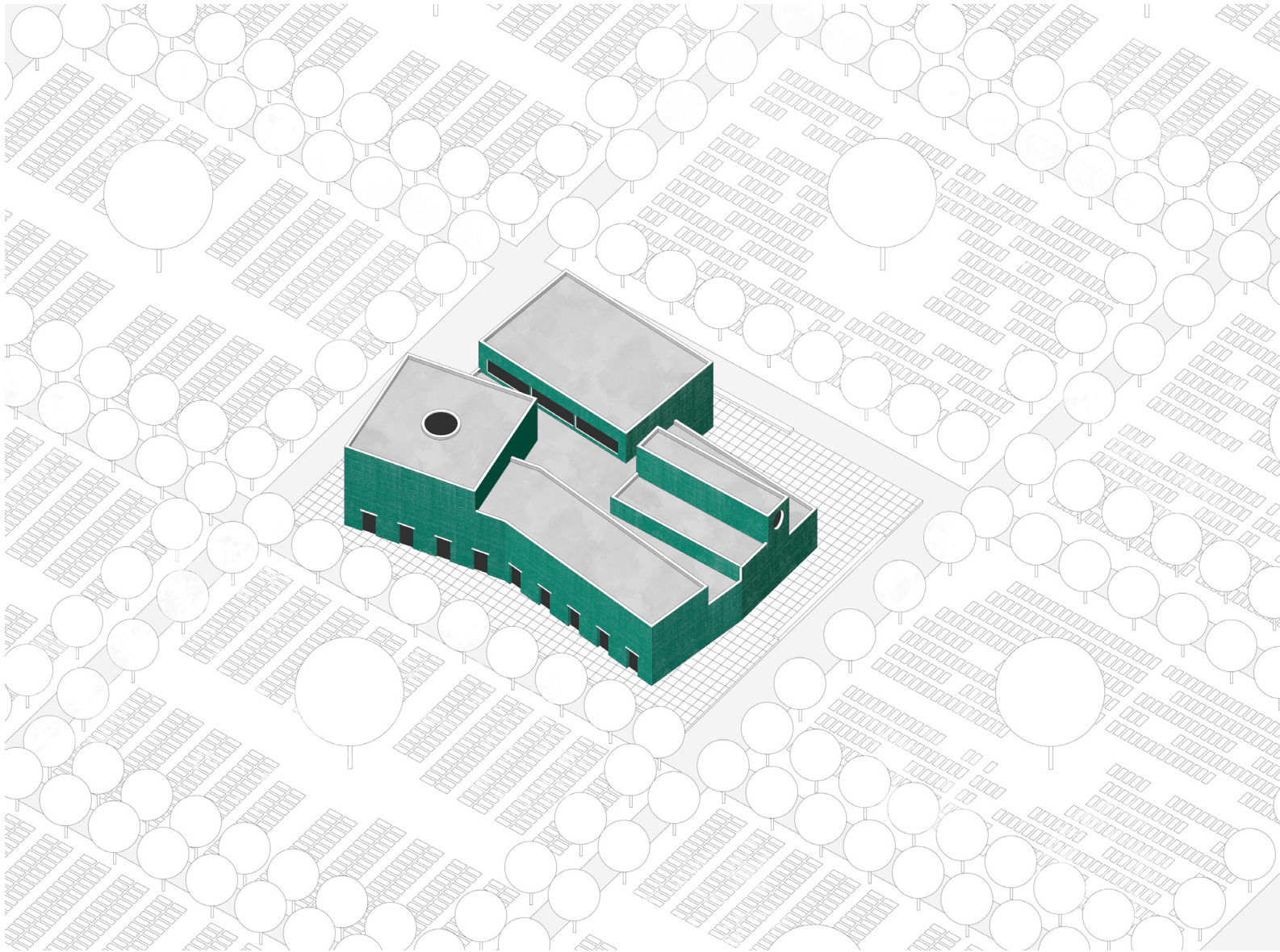




- 1. main hall & gathering space
- 2. garderobe
- 3. multi-confessional hall
- 4. ablution area
- 5. muslim ceremony hall
- 6. small ceremony room
- 7. toilets
- 8. flameless cremation room
- 9. morgue
- 10. janitor room
- 11. final ablution room
- 12. coffin hall
- 13. storage
- 14. open-air ceremony space



concept of ground floor plan



axonometric drawing of concept



collage of concept with Maggiore's context



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