
THE BURIAL LANDSCAPE IN THE CONTEMPORARY METROPOLIS

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Her current Ph.D. investigates the designer's creative agency to address open-ended problems through the hermeneutic design process and the consequent potentials and limits of Artificial Intelligence-based tools in such a practice. The research asks what AI could be for landscape design practice, considering its outcomes as interpretative (meta) art. Her research work constantly cross-pollinates with her teaching, as she explained in the Kiley Teaching Fellow lecture at the Harvard GSD in November 2019.

Since the beginning of times, human life cycles have been based on birth, growth, ageing and death. Each phase of this process implies the need for specific spaces, both private and shared, that through different practices (hosted, suggested or banned) acquire a specific identity for their inhabitants. This dynamic, according to Heidegger (1971), relates with the action of people dwelling in sites, and generates meaningful places within the territory.

Which are the places that people inhabit today? As pointed out by Toyo Ito telling the story of "la muchacha nomada de Tokyo" (2000; 61-62), in contemporary urban regions we spend a lot of time not in traditional spaces of living but in in-between spaces, as infrastructures. For this reason, this paper will contribute to the reflection on how infrastructures become places rather than simplistic and mere technical areas generated by functional requirements, and sectoral logics. Considering burial spaces as necessary infrastructures with an established relationship with the urban realm, is it possible to consider them as places to activate quality of life more than just hosting the eternal rest?

Framing the urban role of infrastructures

We define "infrastructures" all those hidden -but relevant- physical supports related with the daily modes of operation of current cities. They, not only the mayor ones related with the "great system" (Sola-Morales, 2004), influence the territorial processes of transformation and re-combination but, at the same time, contribute to the normal protocols needed to urban life, as transportation, waste collection, water management or energies and services provision (De Las Rivas, 2013). In a recent paper, James Corner (2006, p. 29) pointed out that

“from ecology we know that individual agents acting across a broad field of operation produce incremental and cumulative effects that continually evolve the shape of an environment over time. Thus, dynamic relationships and agencies of process become highlighted in ecological thinking, accounting for a particular spatial form as merely a provisional state of matter, on its way to becoming something else. Consequently, apparently incoherent or complex conditions that one might initially mistake as random or chaotic can, in fact, be shown to be highly structured entities that comprise a particular set of geometrical and spatial orders. In this sense, cities and infrastructures are just as ‘ecological’ as forests and rivers”. Therefore, infrastructures evolve, they age and, sometime, they get obsolete. This evolution concerns both their physical materiality and their spatial role.

As said by Paul Edwards (2003; p.200), infrastructures intended as collectors of flows within the urban realm are “socio-technical” systems, that interact not only with engineering constraints and economical needs, but also with social and cultural aspects of everyday life. This is particularly clear for infrastructures that support the daily experience when living involves the most intimate aspects of life, when we learn (schools, universities, cultural centers), when age or viruses debilitate our bodies and we are convalescent (hospitals and retirement homes), when we pray (sacred spaces), when we die (burial spaces). The resulting system become increasingly sophisticated through the centuries, and these plaques (Lanzani, 2012) are some of the most relevant fragments of contemporary land mosaic (Reed & Lyster, 2014; Forman, 1995).

Around it, an intense public debate within the fields of architecture, engineering, urban planning but also biology, philosophy, theology and religion, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc. takes place.

At the scale of the building, the above-mentioned spaces correspond to established architectural typologies, that follow specific standards developed to enhance their functional performance. Moreover, within the architectural field, each of those spaces is the result of the juxtaposition of specific elements, languages, and patterns. Those features evolve together with the cultural shifts, changing approaches, and technological evolutions. For example, classrooms, theaters, and baptisteries evolved through time even if their role in the society stayed the same.

At the urban scale, those infrastructures usually have specific settlement strategies related with their peculiar function and character, sometimes inherited by old technological systems. They interact with their close context, contributing to the identity of neighborhoods and sectors of the city. For example, the Città Studi neighborhood in Milano is shaped and pigeonholed by the presence of several university venues. Their presence contributes to the urban vibrancy, and within several different

urban regeneration projects they are a key factor to produce new urbanity. In this sense, the infrastructure becomes a catalyst of urban flows, integrated economic activities and living practices. Within them, and often around them, the city changes rhythms and spaces' usage patterns. Designers must take in account this potential while shaping such spaces, linking this power with the local genius loci (Norberg Schultz, 1979), integrating infrastructure and the city avoiding the creation of enclaves.

Burial spaces in contemporary cities

Within this reflection on infrastructure's relationship with the emotional moment of everyday life, the burial space is an interesting testing ground, because within the city is both a needed public function, an historical presence, and due to its symbolic and practical role attracts a constant flow of visitors.

From an anthropologic point of view, the treatment of the dead body and so the cemetery design varied among different cultures, and therefore could be considered a "cultural landscape" (Francis, 2003). For example, in the Scandinavian context, as pointed by Helena Nordh, Katinka H.Evensena and Margrete Skårb, cemetery design and use are related with natural and cultural-historical elements, suggesting to consider them as restorative environments in the user's perception (2017). Therefore, a variety of cultural attitudes, and their intermediate nuances, produced different cemetery types, ranging from one closer to the idea of wilderness of Henry David Thoreau (1905), with minimal tombstones dispersed in the landscape, to more managed and organized ones.

In her article "Defining the place of burial: what makes a cemetery a cemetery?" Julie Rugg (2000, p. 261) recognizes that cemeteries are more than an ad hoc site in which the disposal of human remains has taken place: because together with the burial functions, they accommodate all those rituals -customary religious, ethnic and cultural- related with funeral practices and memories.

Nowadays, in the context of globalization, these cultural differences appear to be outdated, since migratory flows have deeply modified the cultural context in which cemeteries stand. This condition, together with the above-mentioned conurbation process, suggests a rethinking of the cemetery architecture.

Moreover, from an urban planning point of view, in south European cities cemeteries have always been considered a key element of the urban system, even if the because of the Saint Cloud edict of 1804, they have been historically placed outside of the city. Nowadays, after a process of metropolization (Indovina, 2007) related with the 'explosion of the city' pointed out by A. Font

(2007), urban growth included the formerly suburban cemeteries and, often, they become an enclave within the consolidated urban fabric.

Therefore, the cemetery as “culturally and historically valuable place” (Nordh et al., 2017) definition is at the same time an anthropologic, and a design problem.

Last Landscape project - a Cemetery Park

The research project presented in this book proves the thesis of this paper. After performing a research on the burial industry in the city, the Authors found the decommissioned Farini Railway Yard as a coherent position for a new burial space. From an urban planning point of view, the area is interesting because of its location at the edge of the historic city, in between densely inhabited neighborhood, with a strong connection with major railway infrastructure and the hub of Porta Garibaldi Station – Porta Nuova development. The intensity of flows in the area suggests a potential for a strong urban integration, which is apparently in contradiction with the traditional burial space architecture. In fact, the integration of the burial ground with a public park has an historical precedent in East-London, where in the late Victorian years existing cemeteries has been opened and turned into public gardens (Brown, 2013).

In the southern-European cities, the burial space segregation is both a consequence of public health rules, which impose a buffer zone between the cemetery and the city, and a cultural issue related with the consideration of death by the Catholic culture. Consequently, fields of individual funerary monuments and a fenced edge characterize the traditional Italian cemetery typology. As mentioned before, this rigid framework is not best in fitting the need of a multicultural society within a post metropolitan territory.

The Authors carried out the challenge of integrating a highly connected urban place with the presence of the buffer zone, offering intimacy while fostering an intense, high-quality public life by using the tools of landscape design.

A porous, permeable vegetated buffer zone defines the edge of the burial space, providing compliancy with the public health standards without affecting the accessibility of the site. While a fence is still needed for safety reasons, the perception from the urban space is the one of a park, instead of the one of a blinded wall.

Within the fence, a gradient of intimacy defines a variety of spaces, from the more public to the more intimate, related with the rituals. Except for a few small buildings, as for example the crematorium, spaces are conceived as “vegetated rooms” where

plants and earthworks define the degree of segregation and privacy of the various zones. The spatial complexity generated by this approach allows for multiple activities to happen simultaneously, in fact defining a system instead of a simple typology. Moreover, this burial landscape does not belong to any specific architectural tradition. Within the apparent cultural neutrality of the vegetated rooms, plant community carefully selected because of their cultural value in a variety of traditions makes the space able to fit a number of different rituals, adapting the cemetery to the need of the contemporary multi-cultural metropolis.

In conclusion, considering the burial places as necessary infrastructures able to activate quality of urban life as well as hosting the eternal rest is both an anthropologic and design problem, which implies the definition of a sociotechnical role for such infrastructures. The case studio presented in this book provides a design proposal where cultural relevance and integration with the city within the post metropolitan territory are defined through the tools of landscape architecture.

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