

SPACES OF DEATH

Connecting the Worlds of the Dead and the Living

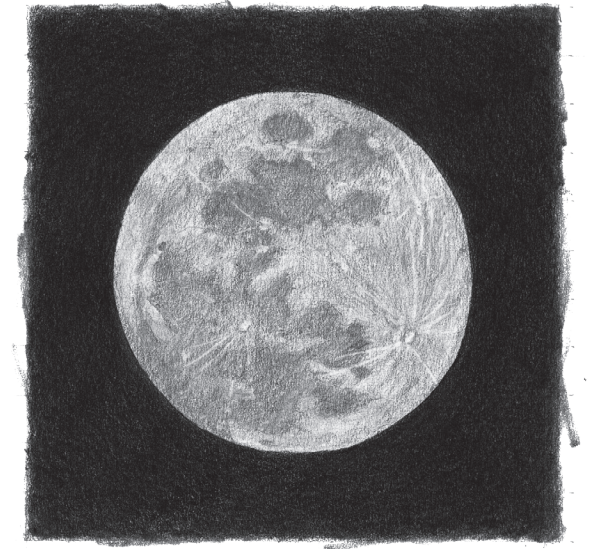
Arthur Masure

EPFL



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MANSLAB



ÉNONCÉ THÉORIQUE

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To my dad,

Man on the Moon

PREFACE

Having come in direct contact with terminal illness and eventually death a few years ago with the death of my father, I have developed a significant interest in the state of our collective thinking and acting surrounding the dead, the dying, and their interaction with the living.

Whilst my family, my father and I had many moments together preceding his death – some of which were spent discussing his imminent loss of life – there were moments during the process in which even those most used to dealing with the dead and their grieving family members, the palliative care doctors, nurses and funeral directors, simply ignored the act of discussing or dealing with what was happening. Although we were with my father in his final moments, we were recommended to leave the room as he took his final breaths. Similarly, following his funeral, which we had organized by the side of the *Lac Léman*, his body was driven away in a hearse, to a destination we were unsure of, to be cremated. Where or when this cremation was happening, we did not know; we were simply handed his ashes a few days later.

There exists a deep avoidance of the realities of death within our society – even amongst those most acquainted to it – and considering that death is so in line with life, and that it is hard to argue that life is not that which is most important for any living being, death de facto becomes equally as important. It feels acutely relevant to be able to understand why we deal with death in the way we do, and which spatial constructs we, as humans, have developed to ease the tensions between the physical spaces attributed to the world of the living and the worlds of the dead.

How do we design spaces between the threshold of life and death, in which the grieving can think, the dead can rest, and the rest feel alive? How can we appreciate our lives more, be truer to ourselves, the earth surrounding us, and the living beings we interact with? Death is an inevitable part of life, and we must accept it as such. Architecture – as the spaces we inhabit and are surrounded by on a daily basis, from before our birth to our infinite presence on this Earth, first as living beings and then as corpses, souls, and memories – plays an elemental role in the relations we have with the dead.

This work is by no means comprehensive in its study, yet forms the building blocks for further research into *spaces of death*. Its aim is to explore thoughts about life and death, and how these thoughts shape the spaces we have for the dead, and in particular how these are linked to the living. The work, when discussing *spaces of death*, is in part phenomenological in its approach, and therefore aligns itself with personal interpretations and sensations of space. As such, elements of the work lie parallel to my own experience of the world, in life and death, hence focusing more strongly on Western European spaces and thoughts concerning the philosophies and psychologies of death. Efforts are made to broaden the sphere of the research to a more comprehensive world view, although the scope of this particular work only allows this to some extent.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginnings of time, humanity's desire for immortality and a universal denial of the finality of death have prevailed: the perceived chasm between 'primitive' societies of old and our modern-day 'advanced' ways of living crumbles when facing death and dealing with our own mortality. Why, as an ever-evolving society, have we been unable to find ways in which to better approach the finality of our lives? If anything, today's society seems as far removed from death as ever before, with hygiene, modern medicine, efficiency, and a removal of the primitive emotions of humankind having been pushed to the fore. Whilst we are living longer due to our relentless drive towards immortality, the ageing population has become one of the ultimate issues in the financially wealthier parts of the world. Other areas will soon have to deal with these same issues.

The body, as an object within space and an object of space itself, is the center of each of our individual universes. Surrounded by the separate bodies of experience of our loved ones and people around us, our own body, our own mind, our own self remains at the center. We are the Earth in our Galaxy, and as such, we cannot imagine a point in time with ourselves no longer in it. Whilst history tells us that we, in fact, were not yet present at any moment before our birth, the unknown future without us in it is unacceptable, impossible to comprehend. That which is unknown stokes fear within us, and it is this fear that drives us to a denial of death, and consequently an unfulfilled life. Following Heideggerian philosophy, the acknowledgement and acceptance of death as our undeniable fate must be faced squarely, to free oneself from the anxiety surrounding death, and to truly become oneself, in life.¹ The way in which we approach death, whilst alive, is thus a vital part – if not the most vital part – of

¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

living a fulfilled life. To realize that we must all die, is to understand the little time we have, and to make the most of it by being true to who we are.

In some of the first recorded settlements dating back to the Natufians in the Epipaleolithic Levant, the dead were arguably a determining factor in developing more sedentary communities, or at the very least building structures of a more permanent character to which people could return²; to allow for “periodic and persistent returns to ‘ancestral’ places in the landscape.”³ Importantly, the dead – from the very beginnings of human settlement – have been ever-present and of much importance to the living. Within the households and settlements of the living, the dead “prop up the living,”⁴ forming the metaphoric base on which life resides.

The population of the worlds of the dead massively outnumbered that of the world of the living: there are almost 8.1 billion people currently alive, of an estimated 117 billion of our species that have ever been born on Earth.⁵ The architecture of death used to be central to the city, yet this has moved evermore outwards – the importance of death to the identity of the city has diminished, to the extent that, in general, any notion of death attempts to be removed completely, or at the very least, hidden away.

The present work is an exploration of death and the spaces attributed to it, examined through three main chapters. The first, *I. Death, the Hostile Stranger*, looks into and explains a general removal of death from the world of the living, through discussing ways in which death is perceived, now and in the past, the responses we may have towards death, and how these affect

² Bar-Yosef, “The Natufian Culture in the Levant, Threshold to the Origins of Agriculture,” 168.

³ Boyd, “On ‘Sedentism’ in the Later Epipaleolithic (Natufian) Levant,” 173.

⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, 219.

⁵ Kaneda and Haub, “How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?”

our final relationship with death. The second, *II. Dealing with the Dead* introduces the four classical elements as a lens through which to categorize various treatments of death from around the world and through different times, after which these elements and their respective spatial (and sometimes non-spatial) responses are explored in more depth. The third and final chapter, *III. Contemporary Spaces of Death*, acts as a 'catalogue' of sorts, analyzing nine contemporary Western European spaces of death and my experiences of them, where applicable. These three chapters provide the material with which to draw conclusions relating to that which concerns us most: the connection between the worlds of the dead and the world of the living.

“The body spends more time in its final resting place than in any dwelling inhabited when alive [(if buried)],”⁶ so why do we now spend such little effort, and so little care, in dealing with the dead? How do we reconnect the dead and the living, and what role does architecture play within this?

⁶ Heathcote, *Monument Builders: Modern Architecture and Death*, 6.

I. DEATH, THE HOSTILE STRANGER

Death, the Hostile Stranger

Ariès’ Death Through Time

Fear and Anxiety of the Unknown

The Denial of Death. Forbidden or Hidden?

Religion, Ritual and the Sacred

The Afterlife

Reflections

Death has long been described as a taboo, of something to fear yet not openly discuss. We value our lives and see death as the abrupt cessation of life, such that death is an act of violence inflicted upon us by an evil entity. It is argued that death is hence a topic so painful, so severe, that we prefer to collectively hide it away, ignoring all mention of it in the ‘hope’ of being able to avoid it ourselves, for as long as possible.

This chapter aims to consolidate various views on death to provide a theoretical base on which to explore *spaces of death*. Viewing the human body as a machine that ceases to exist when it breaks physically, I explore our Western European relation with death through history, the notion of death-inspired fear, I question whether death is forbidden or simply hidden, and finally end on religion, the afterlife, and the ritualization of death.



Overleaf [Fig. 01]
*The forest at Skogskyrkogården
before its inception as a
cemetery, Enschede, 1915*

DEATH, THE HOSTILE STRANGER

The term *death* here forth denotes “the cessation of life,”¹ or “[the] permanent cessation of all vital functions.”² Death is most commonly defined through its opposition to life, and whilst the notion of life (of the human, at least) is a concept with which we are generally quite adept, it is interesting to consider the duality between *person functioning* and *body functioning* within a more extensive definition of death. Where *body functioning* denotes those functions that keep the body alive, and *person functioning* describes higher cognitive processes such as communication, rationality, creativity, and self-consciousness – the processes that make someone who they truly are – we must take care to distinguish between the death of the person and the death of their body.³ Most often, these deaths occur at approximately the same time, yet particularities exist where determination of death may be less straightforward. For people in vegetative states, for example, an agreed upon death classification is hence vital, and at times still proves to be problematic.

When considering the two views, the *body view* tells us that when the body is no longer alive, we are dead, yet we only lose what really matters when we stop being a person. The *personality view* tells us that for a person to exist, their ‘alive’ body does not suffice: their personality must remain present.⁴ Considering the latter, this begs the question: is a dead body – a corpse – truly just a corpse with no more relation to the person that once inhabited it? This is a difficult notion to grasp, and I am more prone to believing the *body view*: the human body is simply a machine that is prone to breaking, and once it breaks, we die. Once we die, even though we no longer have a personality, our physical existence remains until fully decomposed. Whilst this decomposition depends on the way in which we are dealt with – in a way that either

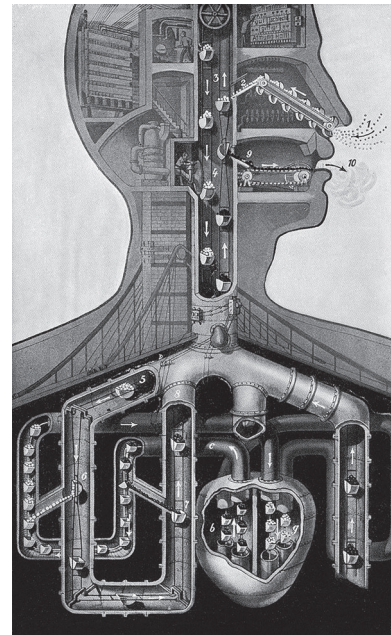
¹ Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, 1992, 20

² s.v., “Death,” in *Merriam-Webster*

³ Shelly Kagan, *Death*, 2012

⁴ Kagan, *Death*

[Fig. 02]
The human body as a machine
Fritz Kahn’s ‘Respiration’, 1943



we or our relatives have chosen, most probably in line with societal and cultural norms – there will be a point in time where our bodily properties are so far removed from what they were when we were alive, that we can then be classified as no longer existing.

Death, then, as the direct opposite to life, is perhaps that which humanity has been striving to avoid for the longest time, causing us to live ever longer, often in semi or non-natural conditions towards the end. The extension of life comes down to factors such as improved hygiene, access to healthcare and medication, nutritious food, and safe living conditions. Consequently, death has become “socially constructed,” such that people from different areas, backgrounds, and economic profiles do not die from the same causes, after the same time, and, importantly, we do not all see death in the same way.⁵ Disparities in religious beliefs, for example, may be considered one of the main social constructs affecting the way we see and approach death.

It may be important to keep in mind the contrasting ways in which death can approach us, be it natural or unnatural, accidental or intentional, violent or peaceful, sudden or expected, premature or too late in ridding us of our suffering. Reaction and approaches surrounding each of these sub-categories will be invariably different, as different emotions and response mechanisms may be triggered, depending on the reason and type of death.

Even more meaningful, however, is the differentiation between the death of the *self*, or the death of *another*. Whereas the death of the *self* will often come too soon, it may also come as a relief, if suffering, illness, and old age are involved. The death of *another*, however, and in particular a loved one, often infinitely

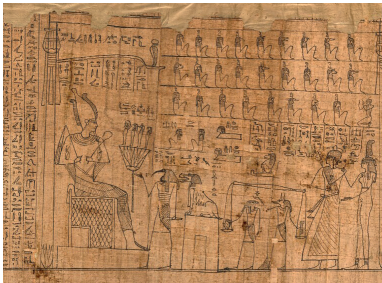
complicates and saddens our lives.⁶ The lost loved one may live on somewhere within the universe, as particles, as memories, and as genetic offspring, but their physical presence will never return.

Death and our mortality are subjects much discussed through time, with written evidence dating from the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* [fig. 03] over 4000 years ago, to the writings of Plato and his mentor Socrates’ recorded dialogues, to the present day. As such, there exists a vast array of interpretations and understanding of what death is, and what happens when we die, some of which will be explored in this chapter.

As one of few animal species considered to possess the knowledge of our own inevitable deaths, most of us will agree that we will undoubtedly die somewhere down the line, withstanding of modern medical practices and regardless of belief systems.⁷⁸ The myriad ways in which we differ, however, appear when considering how we deal with the unknown, how we avoid, deny, or rarely embrace the imminent passage from life into death. Death lies deep within the realm of the unknown, and unless we are confident in a belief of the afterlife or other parallel notion, this leads us to fear and anxiety, and a potential avoidance or denial of our mortality. Death is a hostile stranger, and we, the living, are all entirely at its mercy.

⁶ M. Beatrice Blankenship, “Death Is a Stranger,” in *The Atlantic*, 1934, 649–57.

[Fig. 03]
Detail from an Ancient
Egyptian Book of the Dead
(c. 375-275 BCE),
in which the deceased
passes into the afterlife



⁷ W. M. Spellman, *A Brief History of Death*, 2014

⁸ Blankenship, “Death is a Stranger”

⁵ Margo DeMello, “Dead Bodies,” in *Body Studies*, 2014, 78–96

ARIÈS’ DEATH THROUGH TIME

Some 150,000 years ago, the human being is said to have obtained an awareness of its mortality, and various factors have subsequently affected our anxiety towards our inevitable death. Language and the ability to communicate and instigate behavioral changes within communities, along with our ability to distinguish between the self and the other, the obtention of a full sense of personal identity, and the ability to anticipate future events, have all played a role in the fear we hold surrounding human death.⁹ Through time, however, other social and spatial factors have played an important role in the relations between the living and the dead, and in particular their spaces, which will be discussed briefly in this chapter. There is no linear progression, but rather a back-and-forth relation between the worlds of the living and the dead through time, and the proximity of the respective spaces of the dead to those of the living.

In *The Hour of Our Death*, Ariès argues that the progression of our dealing with death from the Early Middle Ages up to 1981, the year in which his book was published, takes place in four main stages, which he names, 1. *The Tame Death*, 2. *The Death of the Self*, 3. *The Death of the Other*, and 4. *The Invisible Death*. I propose a fifth stage for the present day, that of a *Death Too Soon*, which is further examined in the following chapter. This work will conclude, at the end of the document, with a proposal for a sixth stage: a return to a more *natural handling of death*.

The first of Ariès’ stages is that of the *Tame Death*, “the oldest death there is,” a death that precedes the wild nature of death today.¹⁰ As an event so prevalent in everyday life, death exists as an ordeal of the *community* rather than of the *self*, an event so familiar that it brings communities together. A community,

weakened by the loss of one of its members, comes together to ritualize the deaths of its members through ceremonies to unite and re-strengthen the group. More than just the coming together to strengthen a community’s bonds within, these ceremonies also seek to defend against the “savagery of nature:” as such, death is removed of its “natural extravagance” and instead is “imprisoned in ceremony, transformed into spectacle.”¹¹

Despite these societies’ familiarity with death, they still show a degree of fear to living in close proximity to the dead: whilst honouring their burial places, they keep them out of the way, partly in fear of their returning from the dead, and partly for other spatial reasons. In Antiquity, for example, the Etruscans built cities for the dead closely replicating their cities for the living, in which ‘houses’ sheltered the dead, and streets were used for funereal gatherings and rituals, [fig. 04].¹² The Ancient Romans placed their dead along the often most-travelled roads leading into and out of their cities: the *Via Appia* – the Appian Way – is perhaps the most well-known example, “a place suspended in time between life and death,” in which death and its terrors are kept out of the *pomerium* and the inner city that it protects, but are kept in close enough proximity as to respect them and to facilitate visits, [fig. 05].¹³ Among the early Christians, any remaining aversion towards the dead and living in proximity to them seems to disappear, with the reintroduction of burial spaces within the hearts of cities, around basilica, in underground catacombs, or other important religious areas. From this point onwards, and up to around the eleventh century, “the dead completely cease to inspire fear,” and the taboo of living with the dead ceases.¹⁴

⁹ Langs, *Death Anxiety and Clinical Practice*, 1997

¹⁰ Philippe Ariès, “1. The Tame Death,” in *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981

¹¹ Ariès, “1. The Tame Death”

[Fig. 04]
Etruscan Banditaccia necropolis in Cerveteri, Italy



¹² Ivana della Portella et al., *The Appian Way: From Its Foundation to the Middle Ages*, 2004

¹³ della Portella et al., *The Appian Way*, 18

[Fig. 05]
The Via Appia as per Piranesi’s imagination, 1756



¹⁴ Ariès, “1. The Tame Death”

This leads to Ariès’ second stage, the *death of the self*, which is marked primarily by a shift from the collective destiny of the community to that of the individual, but also of a drastic shift in the belief in an afterlife. The individual of the Late Middle Ages is no longer content with the afterlife as solely a place of respite. Instead, death becomes the metaphysical and metaphorical separation of the soul and the body, such that the body perishes, and the soul lives on, immortally ever after. Death becomes more incorporated into the totality of life instead of representing solely the moment of departure.

“When we are born, we start to die, and the end begins at the beginning...”¹⁵

Manlius, consul of the Roman Republic in 392 BC.

No longer so much a transparent and commonplace event, death becomes dramatized, and the dying feel an increasingly strong sense of desperation at the loss of life. Between the death of an individual and their burial, a series of ceremonies are implemented, concealing the nature of death behind its ritualization. Before this period of *remote and imminent death*, Ariès argues that humans as recorded “in the pages of history,” never truly feared death. Whilst there did exist a fear of dying and sadness associated with it, this fear was always expressed; it was “not so formidable that they were tempted to push it out of sight.”¹⁶ Now, however, an increased fear of death causes people to discuss it less freely – or not at all – and death consequently becomes something to fear. Death, which had previously been perceived as familiar and tame, becomes violent and savage. During this period, we see a rise in the art of the *macabre*, [fig. 06].¹⁷



[Fig. 06]
Dance of Death,
leaf from “*The Nuremberg Chronicle*,” Michael Wolgemut, 1493

¹⁶ Philippe Ariès, “2. The Death of the Self,” in *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981

¹⁷ Ariès, “2. The Death of the Self”

In the nineteenth century, the rise of romanticism and sensibility gives rise to the idea of the third stage, *The Death of the Other*, an *other* for whom we care deeply: the other whose disappearance through death we cannot tolerate due to our proximity to said person. This loved one most often belongs to our nuclear family: “One person is absent, and the whole world is empty.”¹⁸ The fear of death, which had stemmed from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and had pertained to the death of the self, now pertains to the death of a loved one, here named *the other*. In contrast to fearing the death of a loved one, we fear and are negatively affected by the physical separation from them. Death in itself is “exalted as a moment to be desired,” as a passing into a better afterlife, whereas the loss of a loved one through death is the worst thing that could happen to us.¹⁹ Due to this focus on the *other*, the afterlife becomes less a place of immortality of the soul, and more a place for reunion with all the loved ones we miss. Even for those who do not believe in any specific immortality project and deny the notion of a life after death, the preservation of memories could be deemed equal to the realistic notion of the afterlife of the religious.²⁰

Spatially, the eighteenth and nineteenth century cemetery – no longer physically connected to the church yet often at the centre of established villages, prominent in towns, yet perhaps somewhat removed from city centers due to its threat to public health – takes over the role of the church as a place of contemplation and mourning.²¹ Making its return in the heart of civilization, the cemetery represents death as beautiful for the dead: a mask of beauty is placed over death, hiding it even more within society. Described as something beautiful or desirable, the reality of death is rendered somewhat invisible.²²

¹⁸ Philippe Ariès, “3. The Death of the Other,” in *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981

¹⁹ Ariès, “3. The Death of the Other”

²⁰ Ariès, “3. The Death of the Other”

²¹ Tony Walter, “Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?” in *Sociology* 25, 1991

²² Op. Cit., Ariès, “3. The Death of the Other”

²³ Charles Baudelaire,
Œuvres complètes,
in Op. Cit., Ariès, “3. The
Death of the Other”

*It is death that consoles and makes us live, alas!
Death is the goal of life, death is our only hope,
Which like an elixir cheers and intoxicates
And gives us heart to live another day....
It is the famous inn inscribed in the book,
Where we can eat and sleep and take our ease.”*²³

Charles Baudelaire

Ariès concludes *The Hour of Our Death* by writing about his ‘modern attitude’ towards death – that of the *Invisible Death* – as an attempt to protect the dying and grieving from their own emotions. The advancement of medical technology and the decrease of tight-knit communities leads to an abandonment of solidarity and the need to defend against the savagery of nature. Our reliance on medicine and our advanced healthcare systems have rendered illness and death as something to be ashamed of. As something which the system has failed, it is declared as being taboo: it cannot be openly discussed without serious judgement.

²⁴ Philippe Ariès,
“4. The Invisible Death,” in
The Hour of Our Death, 1981

*“Death must simply become the discreet but dignified
exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is
not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of a biological
transition without significance, without pain or suffering,
and ultimately without fear.”*²⁴

Philippe Ariès

Having published his book over 40 years ago, I would like to examine and propose my completion of a contemporary history of death in the following chapters, where I discuss contemporary fear and anxiety surrounding death, and whether death can truly be perceived as a taboo in our modern society.

FEAR AND ANXIETY OF THE UNKNOWN

When discussing *fear*, *anxiety*, and other negative emotions surrounding death nowadays, a vast majority of people would agree that they feel such negative feelings in some way, whether directly in contact with it, or just thinking about the inevitable event that is our death. As it touches such vast groups of people in a variety of ways, it is important to determine of what we are truly afraid. Of whose death do we feel fearful? Our own death or that of the other – a loved one who may be missed? Are we afraid of the process of dying and the potential suffering that may come with it? Or are we scared of the pure fact of being dead?

Our fear and anxiety of the unknown in relation to death, relates first and foremost to one’s *own* death and whatever comes with it, but may also refer to the *death of the other*, a potential loved one, for whom the unknown hence relates to our inability to imagine a world without this loved one in it. Both are of equal importance, yet it is the fear of the death of the self that appears to have been of more interest within recent literature. What these two paths have in common, however, are that the fear and anxiety towards the unknown both relate to *the unknown that the self fears*; either an unknown realm in which the self is dead, or a world in which a loved one no longer exists as a living being, with whom we can directly interact. It is also sometimes argued that the death of the other most affects us through its reminding us of our own mortality; that nobody – not even the best of us – will be spared. As such, both the fear of death of the self and the fear of death of the other seem to stem from the basic knowledge that human life in the realm in which we exist must end, even if it were to continue in another, far-away world of the after.

²⁵ Irvin D. Yalom, *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*, 2009

“Our existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and inevitably, diminish and die.”²⁵

Irvin D. Yalom, existential psychiatrist.

There exist people for whom the fear of the process of dying causes far greater angst than the idea of being dead itself, and as seen later on, this could arguably be more justified. Death is often preluded by unfortunate lengths of illness, painful accidents, at times degrading moments of physical or mental breakdowns, and it would be deemed, on first sight, to be perfectly reasonable to be concerned about the fate that lies in store for us when we die. Although we can only hope that death is gracious to us, arriving when enough life has been lived – allowing time for farewells but not too much time for suffering – we know from experience that this is often not the case.

²⁶ Aphorism given by the fictional character *Deshnev Senior*, in Isaac Asimov, *Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain*, 1987, 71

“Life is pleasant, death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.”²⁶

Isaac Asimov

As declared by Asimov in *Fantastic Voyage II*, the transition towards death is problematic, yet death in itself is deemed to be peaceful. To hence obtain a further understanding of the validity of any fear we may have towards death – as in being dead – we will consider Kagan’s three conditions for fear to be deemed a valid response. These conditions are:

1. That which one is afraid of, must be bad,
2. There must be a non-negligible chance of that bad thing occurring,
3. There must exist some uncertainty of whether the bad thing will happen.²⁷

²⁷ Op. Cit., Kagan, *Death*, 290-92.

Let us ignore Kagan’s third point, which invalidates any fear towards our being dead, and instead consider the notion of being dead as being something bad. Epicurus (342-270 BC), Greek philosopher, said that death cannot be bad for us as we no longer exist.²⁸ In line with the *body view* mentioned previously, Epicurus believes that death means the disappearance of the person, such that that person’s death inherently does not affect them because they themselves are no more. Death is bad for the survivors who have known and who loved the person who has died, and their nonexistence after death leaves behind positive memories of experiences and interactions that the survivor knows will never happen again. To the person who has died, however, the only negative connotation that can truly be placed on their being dead is the act of losing life (which is generally deemed to be good), or rather as the “deprivation of the good things in life.”²⁹

²⁸ Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” between -271 BC to 341 AD

²⁹ Op. Cit., Kagan, *Death*, 207

Whilst this is absolutely true for people who were healthy, enjoying life, and still had things to look forward to upon their death, for some people the time may be right. There exists a clear issue of timing, in which the personal matter of dying at a reasonable moment in life becomes important. Therefore, rather than considering the fear of death, which Kagan argues is inappropriate, we should be discussing the *fear of dying too soon*, such that Kagan’s third point becomes an uncertainty of *when* and *how* something bad will happen, rather than *whether* it will

³⁰ Kagan, *Death*, 297.

happen.³⁰ Of course, *dying too soon* becomes a subjective statement because there is no particular age we can expect to reach, but the understanding of average life expectancies and norms allow for this consideration.

Our feelings of unjustness of those around us dying tend to decrease with age. The death of a young person will trigger feelings of anger and unfairness. In contrast, the death of a great-grandparent will certainly provoke feelings of sadness, yet also immense gratitude for the amount of life lived.

*“There is conspicuous disagreement about the matter: some people think death is dreadful; others have no objection to death per se, though they hope their own will be neither premature nor painful. Those in the former category tend to think those in the latter are blind to the obvious, while the latter suppose the former to be prey to some sort of confusion.”*³¹

³¹ Thomas Nagel, “Death,” in *Mortal Questions*, 1979

Thomas Nagel

THE DENIAL OF DEATH. FORBIDDEN OR HIDDEN?

It has been commonly stated that we tend to avoid any mention of death and almost deny its existence, explained by the knowledge that, in our unconscious, death to ourselves is seen as impossible.³² This, of course, remains true up to a point at which we are directly confronted with it ourselves or through a loved one. At this point, we no longer have the option to avoid or deny and must begin on our path to acceptance, yet our denial up to said point sets us back in being able to deal with the inevitable.

It is important, here, to distinguish between the fear of death (discussed previously) and pure denial, in which fear denotes a certain acceptance of the inevitability of death, whereas denial necessitates a (made-up or existing) belief system on which to fall back. Such belief systems will likely push forward the ideas of the afterlife or a rebirth, to provide a sense of immortality to its believers.

Becker’s *The Denial of Death* is perhaps the most well-read work regarding the subject. In his re-interpretation of Freud and Kierkegaard, Becker discusses what he believes is a consistent human endeavor to develop strategies in our daily lives to fend off awareness of our vulnerability and mortality, and thus to escape into a sense of immortality. To do this, he describes *heroism*, the notion of leaving behind something of lasting worth and meaning; in line with Frankl’s finding meaning in life by creating a work or doing a deed of lasting importance.³³ By doing such a ‘heroic’ deed, we may feel appeased at the thought of our immortality through having left something behind. As such, he argues that society is a system of “statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for this earthly heroism,”and that in the end, it is our deep reliance on our heroic or

³² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 1969

³³ Victor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search For Meaning*, 1946

³⁴ Sam Keen, “Foreword,” in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1973

³⁵ Keen, in Becker, *The Denial of Death*

³⁶ Op. Cit., Walter, “Modern Death”

³⁷ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 1986, 41

³⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 44

mortality-denying systems that pit us against each other.³⁴ In essence, Becker therefore argues that “our heroic projects that are aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world.”³⁵ To defend our death-defying beliefs, we must destroy those challenging our own: if another belief system is found to be true and our own is not, we will be unlikely to make it into the realm of whichever immortality project we have believed in. For this reason, the destruction of the opposing belief system may seem an appropriate response.

Considering the oft-mentioned idea that we inherently avoid and even deny the inevitable coming of death, can death be perceived as a taboo in our society? *Taboo* refers to something prohibited or forbidden, by custom rather than by law. It may be something that is simply not mentioned in conversation, or more strongly, it may be so terrible that we do not even think of it; we deny its reality.³⁶ Bataille, in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, describes its main function as combatting violence; in this case the violence that death acts upon the living.³⁷

*“We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is, to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence.”*³⁸

Georges Bataille

Bataille says that the witnessing of a corpse is such a violent act to the living, that we inherently turn death into a taboo to avoid this ‘violence’: witnessing death is deemed to be such a visceral act that we must avoid or deny it to avoid acting violence upon ourselves.

In our cities, death – at the very least its spatial presence – has been mostly eradicated since quite some time. “The city has neither the place nor the time for its dead anymore,” and nor does the city’s society have the mental or emotional capacity.³⁹ With the removal of cemeteries from city centers for hygiene and spatial reasons, came “a reduction in the relationship between the cities of the living and the cities of the dead, and an increasing reluctance to address death as the inevitable consequence of life.”⁴⁰ The way in which our lives are organised now, makes it such that simply thinking about death may be deemed an act of transgression, an act of deviance outside of the norm. If we are to follow the Heideggerian conviction that we must accept our mortality in order to truly live, we must be transgressive, and break away from what is expected of us. It is therefore not an easy act to live, as living authentically means breaking away from society’s expectations, and fighting the ‘taboo’ that is thinking or talking about death.

Having said this, it is difficult to argue that our society has entirely eradicated the mentioning of death. It is perhaps fruitful to establish a separation between *natural death* and *violent death*: *natural death* being increasingly “smothered in prudery”, whilst *violent death* can be seen all around us, in films, the media, video games, and so on.⁴¹ Walter, after Gorer, describes this as the rise of the ‘pornography of death’, [fig. 07] caused by a censorship of

³⁹ Wim Cuyvers, *DE-AD*, 2022, 135

⁴⁰ Edwin Heathcote, *Monument Builders: Modern Architecture and Death*, 1999

[Fig. 07]
For the Love of God,
Damien Hirst, 2007



⁴¹ Op. Cit., Walter, “Modern Death”



[Fig. 08] Screenshot from
Six Feet Under, Episode 1

⁴²Walter, “Modern Death”

⁴³Op. Cit., Becker, *The Denial
of Death*

⁴⁴Geoffrey Gorer, *Death,
Grief, and Mourning*, 1967, in
Walter, “Modern Death”

⁴⁵Robert Blauner,
“Death and Social Structure,”
in *Psychiatry* 29, 1966

⁴⁶Op. Cit., Walter,
“Modern Death”

grief and mourning in polite society. Therefore, he argues that “we must give back to death – *natural death* – its parade and publicity, re-admit grief and mourning.”⁴² We must learn to accept death as it comes, talk about it freely, and “practice dying”, as Socrates said, to let an awareness of our mortality purify our motives. To counteract ‘the pornography of death’ as a social response to death, ‘problematic’ experiences such as grief and bereavement must be handled ritually, in spaces appropriate for this cause.⁴³

Death is seen as a failure of modern medicine and technologies in keeping us alive and as such is a taboo within these smaller subgroups. Before the advent of modern medicine reduced death rates, a significant amount of people died in what could be deemed the prime of their lives, through illnesses and ailments entirely treatable nowadays. In contrast, most deaths in the modern western world are of the elderly, whose deaths may be sad but are more bearable. Due to this, “Blauner argues that we miss the deceased today less than in previous centuries.”⁴⁴ Both Ariès and Blauner argue then, that *natural death* in today’s society is not such a big deal: death in modern society is not a taboo as it is not forbidden, but rather hidden.⁴⁵

Through this, it becomes clear that although often expressed as being taboo, death itself might not be able to be deemed a taboo after all. Death represents the power – and ultimate victory – of raw nature against the technological culture we are surrounded by.⁴⁶ This reminder of a force more powerful than ourselves hurts our egos and diminishes us into something irrelevant, in the grand scheme of things. I would argue that the issue at hand is not a societal denial of death per se, but simply an avoidance of our own death, as something we cannot fathom to grasp. Whilst

the dying and bereaved are avoided and become isolated as they highlight the Achilles heel of the modern individual, this is due to the fear of our own *dying too soon*, rather than any societal taboo. Perhaps the taboo that exists around death is one surrounding bereavement and grief, rather than the notion of death itself.

Over time, we create belief systems to ease our passage into death through the idea of the afterlife, of resurrection, of living on in some way. We now have less need for the belief systems enveloping the afterlife, as we tend to die at old age. Although sad, we are often able to accept the death of those who have lived long, good lives, without having to rely on an immortality project.

RELIGION, RITUAL AND THE SACRED

Religion and *ritual* are constructs often used to help ease the passage from life into death. The term *sacred* is derived from the Latin *sacer*, “referring to that which is ‘consecrated,’ ‘dedicated’ or ‘purified’ to the gods or anything in their power.”⁴⁷ As such, it is generally intertwined with a *religion*, and often refers to a space organized such that it lies within the confines of a city or other populated area, but has the quality of being totally ‘other’. This ‘totally other’ force of the *sacred*, as a limit experience, is often used as a political tool to legitimize the organization of space within the city, whilst also enabling a different experience of time: *sacred space* is space that allows a breaking away – if only temporarily – from the linear homogeneity of normal time.⁴⁸ Sacred space may therefore align, in some ways, with Foucault’s *heterotopic space*, as space that allows an extraordinary relation with time. *Sacred spaces*, some of which may be *spaces of death*, are often articulated as stable and permanent, spaces that will forever allow its users to enter. For many, these spaces allow its users to take time out from the pace of the real world and to enter an alternate reality of calm.⁴⁹

Religion is a unified system of beliefs that forms the *sacred* into a defined set of rules, imposing upon its members an ethos through the practice of prescribed *rituals*: without said *rituals*, religious practices and their corresponding spaces cannot exist.⁵⁰ *Effective ritual* solves the seemingly unsolvable problem of managing unmanageable distress, such as the death of a loved one. In modern societies, rituals seem to facilitate the standardization of something distressing such as death, allowing for a moderate distancing from the negative emotions surrounding the distress. In contrast, they were historically needed more as a protection from under-distancing.⁵² Scheff argues that modern society requires

two forms of *ritual*: those that increase distance between the human and its distress or emotion, and those that decrease it. In a society that is predominantly over-distanced from the emotions surrounding death, he believes that *rituals* highlighting past moments of collective distress would be beneficial.⁵³ [The next chapter, *II. Dealing with the Dead*, discusses various *ritual* treatments of the dead and their corresponding spaces.]

With regard to death and its imposition of an afterlife, *religion* can be viewed as a mechanism with which to deal with our mortality, a mechanism to escape the greatest evil, which is that of a violent death. *Religion* is a construct, made to ease the human path from life to death, through belief systems that take away our anxiety or fear of what lies ahead; of what lies in the unknown world of the dead.

⁴⁷James Stormonth and Philip Henry Phelps, “Sacred,” in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1895, 883

⁴⁸Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérezade, *Rituals and Walls: The Architecture of Sacred Space*, 2016

⁴⁹James Pallister, *Sacred Spaces: Contemporary Religious Architecture*, 2015

⁵⁰Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, in Pallister, *Sacred Spaces*

⁵¹Op. Cit., Aureli and Shéhérezade, *Rituals*, 14-15

[Fig. 09] *Burial ritual in All About my Mother, film*

⁵²Thomas J. Scheff, “The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual,” in *Current Anthropology* 18, 1977, 483-505

⁵³Scheff, “The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual,” 490



THE AFTERLIFE

The notion of an *afterlife* – the *afterlife* in the sense of a life continued after death – is perhaps the most prevalent human immortality project. As one of the main premises of most religions, the *afterlife* suggests death as the beginning of a new phase of existence; “a gateway to a [potential] better life beyond.”⁵⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, the *afterlife* thus acts as a belief system that steers us away from contemplating upon our immortality, acting as a sort of denial mechanism in which the easier option is to conform to said beliefs, with the promise of a continued, and hopefully better, life.

⁵⁴Dame Sue Black, *All That Remains: A Life in Death*, 2018

“... if you believe that people die and that there is a much better life after life, then the [existential] problem is solved, in many ways.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵Wim Cuyvers, Interview at Les Montavoies, 01:30:00

Wim Cuyvers

Whilst some religions like Christianity have constructed the *afterlife* as an otherworldly domain – heaven or hell – other religions like Buddhism and Hinduism view the worldly release from an eternal cycle of incarnation and rebirth, as the most successful kind of eventual *afterlife*.⁵⁶ To the ancient Egyptians, death was viewed as a transition to the next phase of one’s eternal existence; a re-birth on an eternal trajectory.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Douglas J. Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 2005

⁵⁷Mark, “Death in Ancient Egypt,” in *World History Encyclopedia*, 2017

Disregarding the appeal to religious authority and the belief of some sort of paradise or earthly rebirth after life, it is innately challenging to consider what happens following death. We have never known a world without ourselves in it and as such, our future is easily perceived as infinite, even though we know that biologically, it is not. Our future – so closely linked with the

transcendent present moment such that together they “compose a single temporal form” – is often perceived as having the potential to be better than the present, or very recent past. As de Beauvoir explains, the present is seen as a vehicle towards the future: “[the present] retrieves itself only by transcending itself toward the permanence of future being.”⁵⁸ Rather than entrusting one’s salvation upon an existing belief system, should we not assure it with our own existence? We are often so hellbent on avoiding being dead that we no longer truly live.

“...every living moment is a sliding toward death... every movement toward death is life... the present must die so that it may live...”⁵⁹

Simone de Beauvoir

⁵⁸Simone de Beauvoir, “The Present & The Future,” 1947

⁵⁹de Beauvoir, “The Present & The Future”

Scheffler, who believes that “biological death represents the final and irrevocable end of an individual’s life,” considers the continuation of other living human beings as an afterlife of sorts: others will continue to live after we have died. In this sense, even though we may die, we continue to live on in the people who encountered us, as memories, learnings, or values obtained. Biologically as well, we may leave offspring and family members with whom we share genetic make-ups; another immortality project perhaps easing our path into death.⁶⁰

Throughout history, humanity has developed religions and belief systems, and the notion of the *afterlife*, to turn the unacceptable and feared fact of death into an acceptable reality: through religion and the *afterlife*, we never really die.

⁶⁰Samuel Scheffler, “Lecture 1: The Afterlife (Part 1),” in *Death and the Afterlife*, 2013

REFLECTIONS

I first came into direct contact with death when I was eight years old, with the death of my grandfather. I distinctly remember going to see him at the mortuary, entering the room with my parents, to see him lying on his deathbed. I did not stay long, but his grey, lifeless face and lack of movement were enough to convince me that he really was dead. I remember being scared to enter the room, and being somewhat shocked at my first encounter with a corpse, especially of someone I knew well, but I did not have nightmares or any traumatic feelings after the fact. Even at a young age, my parents encouraged the viewing of my dead grandfather, and in the long run, it probably helped me to accept his death. The first time I touched a dead body, however, was my dad's. Below is a journal entry where I reflect on this moment.

Journal entry (17 November 2023)

*"Papa's body seemed so heavy after he had just died. The man that I so admired and looked up to was still there in bodily form, but **he** was no longer there. Without any movement of his chest, without the slightest in- or exhalation of air, life had quickly been replaced by death; death as the antithesis to life.*

His face, motionless and grey, gave away nothing about what he felt as he died. Did the morphine cocktail he had been given allow him to feel anything at the precise moment of his death?

[...]

After spending almost 23 years of my life with my dad, I can say now that I would be happy with my life if anyone thinks of me in the same way that I think of my dad. Life is tough, but life faced with imminent death, is infinitely tougher, especially if death comes too soon. He was an inspiration in life, and even more so in how he faced his imminent death.

When suffering becomes too much to bare any longer, the dilemma between removing that which is 'artificially' keeping you alive and continuing a life of suffering with short moments of happiness, is torturous. For my dad, the fear of dying abruptly through nursing mistakes without having had the chance to say a final farewell, or of dying and no longer being able to communicate on his deathbed, were strong enough reasons to die. And rightly so. Importantly for him, and for those surviving him, his death was dignified, and let nature take him away."

Apart from within the immediate family, the only moment in which mourning is visible is at the funerary ceremony; all other emotions remain hidden away. Few people mention the death of a loved one ever again after the ceremony, placing more importance on avoiding the difficult discussions surrounding bereavement, rather than supporting those who are most affected by the death of a loved one. Death rarely happens within the home, and even if it does, the body is often removed to another place, away from the bereaved and their spaces of life. In our increasingly secularized world, forever striving towards spatial and temporal efficiency, cleanliness, and the hiding away of the emotions that make us human, we do not seem to have found a desirable way in which to deal with death, and lack spaces in which to do so.

II. DEALING WITH THE DEAD

The Treatment of the Dead

Death and the Four Elements

Earth

Fire

Air

Water

Reflections

This chapter deals with the dead and how they are treated, exploring existing methods, rituals and spaces in Western Europe and further afield. The *Four Classical Elements* are taken strongly into consideration when looking at examples of *dealing with the dead*, in order to relate effectively to our human sensibilities and the nature from which we are born.

Here starts the exploration of the spatial qualities inherent and granted to spaces of death, forming a basis from which to analyze and critique various contemporary architectural examples in chapter *III. Contemporary Spaces of Death*.



Overleaf [Fig. 01]
*A kāshivāsi, bound for
moksha at the cremation
ghats in Varanasi, India*

THE TREATMENT OF THE DEAD

Since the beginning of humanity, cultures have taken care of their dead in some way, most commonly through burial, cremation or embalming, but also various other treatments. This final showing of care towards the dead is often paired with some kind of ritual farewell, to allow survivors of the deceased to mourn, and for the deceased to make an efficient passage through to death.¹

¹ Margo DeMello, “Dead Bodies,” in *Body Studies*, 2014, 88-89

Here follows a generalisation of the steps the deceased may undergo post-death, following the main stages below:

1. The deceased is temporarily separated from the world of the living, first to a mortuary and then into a coffin.
2. The deceased is temporarily brought in front of the living, for a viewing or for a ceremonial farewell.
3. The deceased is permanently separated from the world of the living, through interment, cremation, dispersion, etc.
4. The deceased’s loved ones gradually accept their disappearance, through ritual, grief, mourning, etc.
5. The deceased is fully accepted into the world of the dead: loved ones can continue paying respects.²

² Fabien Trécourt, “Rites Funéraires : Le Vert Dans la Tombe,” in *Le Monde Hors-Série*, 2023

DEATH AND THE FOUR ELEMENTS

The four classical elements – *earth, fire, air and water* – date back to Ancient Greece, where the philosopher Empedocles (c. 450 BC) first proposed them as a set of four, [fig. 02]. Proposed as a basic way in which to understand our relation to the Earth, they provide elemental building blocks with which to relate our senses – “our window into the world we inhabit” – to the physical, natural world.³ Interestingly, these elements are said to have been identified by various cultures independently, suggesting a universal understanding of our world through said elements, inherent to humankind. As an ancient concept, it persisted as an influential cultural thought throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, and is still used today, not necessarily as a scientific way in which to understand and describe the world, but as something of philosophical and metaphysical importance.

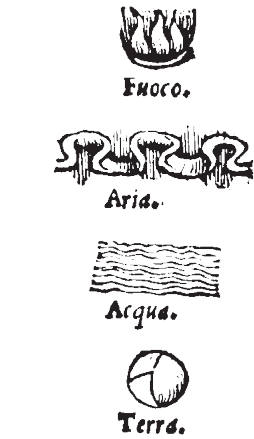
The four elements find themselves often described as pairs, where *earth* and *air* represent the physical environment in which we reside, and *water* and *fire* are the elements of life; all that which is dynamic, [fig. 03]. As living beings, we are constrained by gravity’s pull towards the center of the Earth along the *axis mundi* – an imaginary axis running through each living individual, perpendicular to the surface of the Earth – restricting us to its surface.⁴ The surface world on which we inherently exist, corresponds to the first element, *earth*. As the *anti-earth*, *air* represents the space above *earth*, occupying everything lying above the surface, above our heads.⁵ The two elements of life, *water* and *fire* are equally opposed along the *axis mundi*: *water* – the essence of life – is paired with *earth* as it is oriented downwards, flowing along the surface on which we reside. *Fire*, on the other hand – “the element of death and destruction” – rises upwards, pairing with *air*.⁶

Our existence as ‘surface dwellers’ gives rise to three distinct physical spaces: the *underground*, the *surface*, and the *sky*. The *surface*, as the space we reside on, is familiar to us, whilst the *underground* and *sky* remain relatively unknown, even though we may attempt to explore it through means of flight or speleology, for example. Whilst flying or exploring the depths of the underground below our usual surfaces, we in fact remain anchored on a *surface*: the unknown factor of the true *underground* and *sky* is that which drives us towards a desire for verticality, both downwards and upwards. In religion especially, countless creation stories are based on the duality of the *sky* and *underground*, taking form in various interpretations of *heaven* and *hell*. Life, on the *surface*, exists in between these two realms.⁷

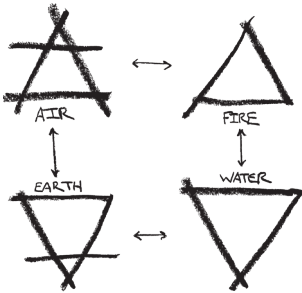
Although we build ever higher and seem to be striving for verticality, true verticality is unobtainable when residing on the *surface* of the Earth. The furthest we can go towards this otherworldly realm is to live fully within and amongst nature with the *four elements*: we must be able to be outside. For Cuyvers, architecture is an infrastructure for strangers, an accompanist of the outsider; both those whom are physically outside but also those outside of their normal place of being. Architecture is thus a combination of the spatial elements that make it possible for us to be outside, that shelter us but do not keep us inside.⁸

“Profound architecture does not merely beautify the settings of dwelling: great buildings articulate the experiences of our very existence.”⁹

Juhani Pallasmaa



[Fig. 02]
Symbols of the four elements
Philipopanareto, 1537



⁴Christopher James Botham,
“Verticality, Part I: The Context,”
in *On Verticality*, 2023

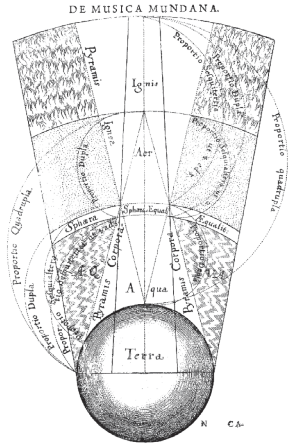
⁵Op. Cit., Botham,
“Earth, Air, Water and Fire”

[Fig. 03]
Relationships between the elements, with alchemical symbols

⁶Botham,
“Earth, Air, Water and Fire”

⁷Op. Cit., Botham,
“Verticality, Part I”

[Fig. 04]
Diagram showing the four classical elements arranged along the axis mundi, by Robert Fludd, 1617



⁸Wim Cuyvers, *DE-AD*, 2022

⁹Pallasmaa,
The Thinking Hand,
2009

¹⁰ Josep Lluís Mateo and Florian Sauter, *The Four Elements and Architecture: Earth Water Air Fire*, 2014

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 1968

¹² Juhani Pallasmaa in: Mateo and Sauter, *The Four Elements and Architecture...*

Architecture should allow for an enhancement of our relationship with nature and our innate being, rather than just acting as a shelter from the elements, or as a screen diverting attention away from them. In our domestic spaces, we are grounded on the *earth* but protected from it by a constructed floor, whilst our *fires* are contained within the hearth or lightbulbs, our *water* within pipes and vessels, and the *sky* accessible only through a window or rooflight. Pallasmaa, after Bataille and like Cuyvers after him, talks about the importance of re-eroticizing our relationship with the world through architecture, where eroticizing can be interpreted as creating ‘something more,’ something that has the potential to move us.¹⁰ To do this, he argues that architecture should be seen as a mediator, as a construct that guides us to that which is truly important. As the “four elements of imaginative experience,”¹¹ *earth, fire, air* and *water* could be the most effective tools with which to stimulate a stronger relation to the nature from which we stem, and hence to our cycles of *life* and *death*. The elements should regain a more important role within these spaces, to allow space to become a catalyst for introspection, for existential thinking and feeling.

“...good architecture always turns our interest away from the building to something else: a beautiful tree outside the window or human beings moving about in the space. In this sense, architecture mediates rather than expresses.”¹²

Juhani Pallasmaa

As a vital part of the experience that shapes our existence, Cuyvers argues that death must occur outside, sheltered, but in touch with the elements. Whilst we now generally die in-

side in hospitals where “a screen informs us of death,” a parent’s ashes may adorn the fireplace mantelpiece and the dying are kept hidden inside, he argues that we would innately “like to walk out to die, just like the old tomcat leaves the house to die, just as the old Eskimo walks out of the igloo into the freezing night...”¹³ Many of us, however, undoubtedly desire more comfort when dying, and would prefer to die in the comfort of the home in which we resided during life. Death is liminal between life and an afterlife: when we are dying, we should be within or surrounded by the places and spaces that have made us feel alive, that have given us existential experiences, and have made a close relation to the elements possible. At the same time, though, we want to retain a certain sense of ‘geborgenheit’, a sense of security amidst the spaces we are used to.¹⁴ We must therefore define space for the dying and the dead that is safe, yet in touch with the elements, to die and be dead existentially. True architecture is a place in which we can be mortal.¹⁵

The following chapters discuss various funerary traditions and rituals, each in relation to one or some of the classical elements. I aim to explore some of the spatial characteristics and qualities around these practices, and how architecture or the spaces with which we interact can model – or re-model – our relationship with the elements. Architecture serves the flow of life and as such, architecture serves death.

¹³ Op. Cit., Cuyvers, *DE-AD*

¹⁴ Patrick Thurston, Magma et Principes Interview, 2023

¹⁵ Wim Cuyvers, Interview at Les Montavoies, 2023

EARTH

As the most stable of the four elements, *earth* is the element from which all life stems, and to which all life is forever attached, from birth, through life, and into death. Everything we eat comes from the soil of the *earth* – the timeless mixture of organic matter, minerals, and organisms – such that we, ourselves, are made up of infinite parts of past living things.¹⁶ The *earth* grounds us and has the power to supply us our basic needs of shelter, of comfort, and of protection.

“To no man does the earth mean as much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security; she shelters him and releases him for ten seconds to live, to run, ten seconds of life; receives him again and often forever.

Earth! - Earth! - Earth!

*Earth with thy folds, and hollows, and holes, into which a man may fling himself and crouch down. In the spasm of terror, under the hailing of annihilation, in the bellowing death of explosions, O earth, thou grantest us the great resisting surge of new-won life. Our being, almost utterly carried away by the fury of the storm, streams back through our hands from thee, and we, thy redeemed ones, bury ourselves in thee, and through the long minutes in a mute agony of hope bite into thee with our lips.”*¹⁷

Erich Maria Remarque

¹⁶ s.v., “The Importance of the Element of Earth,” isha foundation, 2021.

¹⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet On the Western Front*, 1928

BURIAL

Burial – the interment of the body, in its entirety, into the earth – can be described as a return into the womb. Rather than our human mother’s womb, *burial* is the insertion of the body into the womb of the *Earth Mother*. Beginning in the darkness of the womb, we exit and live our lives in the light of the world, before *burial* returns us to the darkness, this time of the underground.¹⁸ Hegel describes how the act of burrowing or nesting into the earth appears to be a particularly natural act, in which the removal of material of the already existing earth makes space for a new element of the earth – the dead body – to be integrated into it.¹⁹ As such, *burial* is perhaps the easiest way in which to make room for a dead, decaying body, out of sight, into a realm sheltered away from the world of the living, but with a spatial presence that remains. The earth under which the corpse lies protects the dead from unwanted attention and protects the living from the visceral decay of the deceased body.

*“As we find in a forest a mound, six feet long and three feet wide, shoveled in the shape of a pyramid, we get serious and something in us says: ‘Someone lies buried here.’ This is architecture.”*²⁰

Adolf Loos

Inhumation of the corpse into the earth is the most ancient known form of treatment of the dead, having appeared more than 120,000 years ago in the Near East.²¹ *Burial* creates new forms in the landscape in which it lies, and whilst new settlers or colonizers often destroy existing settlements for the living,

¹⁸ Christopher James Botham, “Verticality, Part II: The Seeds of Verticality,” *On Verticality*, 2023

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, in Kori Jormakka, “Post Mortem Eclecticism,” *Other Spaces: The Affair of the Heterotopia*, 1998

²⁰ Adolf Loos, “Architecture,” 1910

²¹ Fanny Bocquentin, “Mille et un Chemins Vers un Autre Monde,” *Le Monde Hors-Série*, 2023, 50

²² Ken Worpole, *Last Landscapes: The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West*, 2003

the spaces of the dead often remain untouched.²² *Burials* have given us archaeological evidence of the way in which people lived and died, and has given us insights into their domestic lives. The spatial evidence left behind by ancient populations, through their spaces for the dead through *burial*, has been invaluable for our architectural understanding of the very first settled communities.

Nowadays, *burial* in Western Europe most often occurs in some kind of shell – either a cloth, or more often a coffin – to provide another layer of ‘protection’ both for the dead and the living. For the dead, such a shell slows the process of decomposition, whilst for the living it acts as a visual barrier from the body of the deceased during funerary proceedings.²³ *Burial* is usually carried out in a ritual form, where the body is sheltered within a coffin, is sometimes laid out for viewings, and is then brought to its final resting place into the earth, accompanied by loved ones, in a space especially made for the communities of the dead, in which the living can enter. As the body decomposes out of view of the living, a stone or other object is generally placed above the body, to which the living can return. The spatial quality of the *interred* body is often of great importance to those left behind in the world of the living.²⁴

Burial in countries with warmer climates may take place in catacombs or above-ground niches rather than into the soil and the underground – such as at the Montjuic and Igualada cemeteries, in Barcelona – after which a second *burial* may be performed to move the remaining bones into a family or communal ossuary.²⁵ There are various ways in which earth *burial* may be carried out, which will be explored in the follow-

²⁴ Op. Cit., Cuyvers, Interview, 00:04:28-00:10:42

²⁵ Julie Rugg, “Body Count,” in *The Architectural Review - Death*, November 2016

ing subchapters: *Cities of the Dead: The Necropolis, The Cemetery, Catacombs, The Egyptian Pyramids and Boullée’s Utopian Tombs*, and *Composting*.

CITIES OF THE DEAD: THE NECROPOLIS

The *necropolis*, literally translated as the *city of the dead*, can be found across the world: the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, the Etruscan Banditaccia *necropolis* in Cerveteri, Italy, and the Islamic Wadi-us-Salaam cemetery in Najaf, Iraq [fig. 05] can all be described as veritable *cities of the dead*.

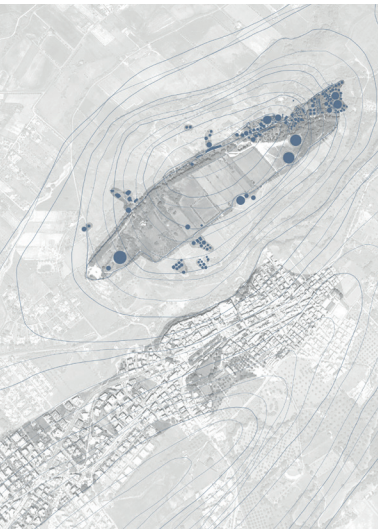
I would first like to explore the ancient Etruscan *necropolis* adjacent to Cerveteri, a small town in the vicinity of Rome, which is built atop a long, narrow hill plateau overlooking the countryside in which it sits. Opposite this hill of the living, lies a parallel hill, on which the Etruscans carved out and built their *city of the dead*, [fig. 06]. Separated from the living by means of topography and distance, but close enough to see and to visit regularly, the worlds of the Etruscan living and of the dead exist in parallel domains.²⁶

Like in Rome, the hills into which the *necropolis* is carved are made of a soft, yet very strong, volcanic stone named *tufa*. The first burial spaces for the dead were made along gullies dug into the landscape, with small, cave-like openings cut into the walls of the *tufa* stone. Later, the tombs were built as round *tumuli* – burial mounds – into which steps descended underground into separate rooms. As such, the funerary architecture takes on a strong charac-

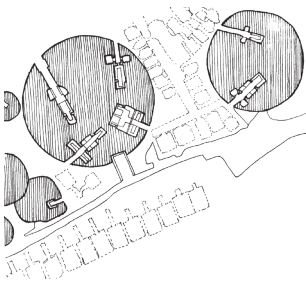
[Fig. 05] Wadi-us-Salaam Cemetery in Najaf, Iraq: covers 6 km² and contains more than 6 million corpses.



[Fig. 06] Diagrammatic location drawing of the Necropolis at Cerveteri, parallel to the town of the living. Highlighted in blue: located tombs and tumuli



²⁶ D. H. Lawrence, “Cerveteri,” in *Etruscan Places*, 1932, 17



[Fig. 07] Sketch of Cerveteri's necropolis tombs and tumuli

²⁷ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 23-24; 81-83



[Fig. 08] A tumulus tomb at Cerveteri's Banditaccia necropolis

²⁸ Op. Cit., Lawrence, "Cerveteri," 26



[Fig. 09] Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, France

²⁹ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 87

³⁰ Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 86-88

teristic of the domestic: the Etruscans essentially built small houses for their dead along a semi-submerged street system, such that the dead continued on in their own world, in a "continuation of life, though in a separate realm," the realm of the dead, [fig. 07].²⁷

*"The tombs seem so easy and friendly, cut out of rock underground. One does not feel oppressed, descending into them. It must be partly owing to the peculiar charm of natural proportion which is in all Etruscan things of the unspoilt, unromanized centuries . . . And death, to the Etruscans, was a pleasant continuance of life, with jewels and wine and flutes playing for the dance. It was neither an ecstasy of bliss, a heaven, nor a purgatory of torment. It was just a natural continuance of the fullness of life."*²⁸

D. H. Lawrence

At the end of the eighteenth century, *The Enlightenment* in Europe and the rediscovered belief in the "dignity of the sovereign individual," brought a redeveloped thinking to funerary architecture.²⁹ The *Père-Lachaise Cemetery* in Paris [fig. 09], is perhaps the most relevant example. Conceived in 1804 as a vast, picturesque, 'countryside' domain for burial, it quickly became a heavily built-up *city of the dead*, with individual and family tombs expressed as Romantic houses for the eternal rest of the dead, similar to the approach taken by the Etruscans in their *necropoles*.³⁰

Other examples of modern *cities of the dead* include the *necropolis* in Colma, California, in the USA, where the population of the dead outnumbers the living by approximately 1.5 million

dead to 1500 living: a ratio of 1000 to one. Perhaps the most radical, contemporary architectural *necropolis* to be conceived is that of *San Cataldo* in Modena, Italy, by Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri. The primary tombs for its dead are set within 'apartment blocks' surrounding the perimeter of the site, such that each corpse has its own body-sized room, [fig. 10].³¹

THE CEMETERY

I will not dwell for too long on the history of the cemetery in Western Europe, as this has already been partly covered in a previous chapter, *Ariès' Death Through Time*. However, it may be interesting to return to the events that caused the burial of the dead to move from outside the village or city limits, to be done as close as possible to the church – the all-ruling bearer of a good life and death, at the time – and at the center of the city, before eventually moving back to the suburbs or outskirts.

We have seen the ancient *necropoles*, which were often located near the cities of the living but remained a 'safe' distance away. This was continued in Ancient Rome, where the dead lay outside of the *pomerium* – the sacred city boundary – along the *Via Appia*, for example, [fig. 11]. As one of the major trade routes and entrances into the city, people entering the city were thus welcomed by the dead. The ancient peoples, although well-acquainted with the notion of death and dying, preferred to keep some distance from the dead, even though frequent visits, and dinners by their side, at their tombs, were often carried out.³² The early Christians carried on with these norms, burying their dead in fields well outside the village or

[Fig. 10] *San Cataldo* 'apartments' for the dead, Modena, Italy

³¹ Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 93-94



[Fig. 11] The Ancient Roman pomerium, in blue, in which the dead were forbidden.



³² Ivana della Portella et al., *The Appian Way: From Its Foundation to the Middle Ages*, 2004

³³ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 63-64

³⁴ Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 1984, 10

³⁵ Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 3-5

³⁶ Kori Jormakka, “Post Mortem Eclecticism,” in *Other Spaces: The Affair of the Heterotopia*, 1998

³⁷ Ken Worpole, “Housing the Dead,” in *The Architectural Review - Death*, 2016

city limits, or in catacombs, as discussed later. The dead were thus treated as familiar outsiders.

Around the seventh century CE, the burial of saints or other important figures within or underneath churches meant the beginnings of burial within the church for well-to-do citizens, or for the less fortunate, the development of *graveyards* directly beside or surrounding the church – the churchyard.³³ This now-integral relation between the church and cemetery meant that churchgoers would constantly be reminded of their own inevitable deaths, through the close proximity with the dead, admitted into the cities of the living.³⁴ This visceral imagery was further pushed by *memento mori* – acting as a further reminder of the inevitability of death – which entered the public realm in the 14th to 15th centuries:

“By Divine sentence
No matter what your estate
Whether good or evil, you will be
Eaten by worms. Alas, look at us,
Dead, stinking, and rotten.
You will be like this too.”³⁵

Burial *ad sanctos* – near the graves of saints – became the preferred place of burial and remained so until *The Enlightenment*.³⁶ During *The Enlightenment* and its free – and often secular – thinking, the desire to be buried in unconsecrated ground – ground not owned by the church – increased in importance.³⁷ Around the same time, the growing fear of unsanitary *cemeteries* within the city grew due to the understanding of the spread of in-

fectious diseases, along with negative connotations surrounding death, which pushed *cemeteries* away from the cities of the living, thus separating the two by distance. New, ‘central’ *cemeteries* for large cities were created to house many of the cities’ dead within one peripheral space.³⁸ As such, “the traditional familiarity between the living and the dead that had characterized the European city since the Middle Ages was fully rejected.”³⁹

This new unfamiliarity was only further amplified through time, and even more so with the change from burial to cremation practices, as discussed later. With the severance of the geographical and emotional link between the living and the spaces for the dead, our relation and grasp of the idea of our own death – and those around us – waned. Following a proposal in late nineteenth century Paris to close inner-city *cemeteries* and move them outwards, people took to the streets to protest, shouting: “Pas de cimetière, pas de cité! No cemetery, no city!”⁴⁰ The proximity to death and the dead is essential in our capacity to understand the reality of death: death must re-enter our cities.

The most glaring problem with burial and *cemeteries* is then, clearly, that they take up vast amounts of space: the importance given to the dead in current societies means that the administering of this space to the dead is unwarranted. Many societies have actively accepted that graves are no longer owned and are instead merely rented for around 20-30 years, in most cases, which means that once this time is up, all gravestones and other grave markers are razed. (Interestingly, in Switzerland, the crushed remnants of gravestones are recycled for road construction, in asphalt.⁴¹) It seems problematic to have to accept that there will no longer be a physical sign where a body has been interred, and that, even

³⁸ Ivo Zemp, “Kapitel 1: Kulturgeschichte der modernen Feuerbestattung,” in *Die Architektur der Feuerbestattung*, 2012

³⁹ Op. Cit., Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 10

⁴⁰ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 30

⁴¹ Reto Hans Bühler, Discussion at the Friedhof Sihlfeld, Zürich, 2023

worse, new bodies and markers will be placed on top of the previous corpses as if nobody had ever been laid to rest there.

Foucault mentions the *cemetery* when defining his concept of *Heterotopias*, where he describes the *cemetery* as a place connected to all locations and all people within a city, since each family has some acquaintance buried there. Yet, at the same time, he also describes it as this ‘other space’, a space separated from the ‘normal’ spaces of the living: *cemeteries* are a liminal space in which the living and the dead can meet freely, partially separated and away from the hectic world of the living: in this sense, the cemetery performs the dual function of serving both the dead and their survivors. The grave, whilst being the final resting place of both the body and soul of the deceased, is at the same time a tool that helps to extend a survivor’s relation with the deceased.⁴² However, to lose this liminal space after a set period of time having once had it, is distressful to the living and disrespectful towards the dead. Although it is of course necessary to accept the death of a loved one and come to terms with their disappearance, a physical place of mourning remains important throughout the entirety of life.

CATACOMBS

Catacombs – subterranean cemeteries – are vast networks of tunnels and chambers forming underground cities for the dead. Inside, *loculi* – niches for one or two corpses carved into the hallways, for the poor – or *cubicula* – small rooms for the corpses of the wealthy – provide space for the dead underneath the city. As a city for the dead, the act of taking away material for its

creation, just as in burial, makes it a “city in reverse,” since the ‘city’ is built through subtraction rather than addition.⁴³ In Ledoux’s imagined *catacomb* cemetery in Chaux, his interest lay in the duality of “the dead physically occupying the empty space excavated to provide stone for the city of the living.”⁴⁴ In this way, the material qualities of the worlds of the living and of the dead are deeply intertwined.

Burial in *catacombs* generally takes place in cities where disused quarries or excavations from mining activities leave favorable underground openings, although they are also mined where subterranean soil conditions make it possible to excavate efficiently.⁴⁵ The *catacombs* of both the cities of Rome and Paris are largely built in existing vacant mines and quarries: in Rome, like the Etruscan necropolises quarried several centuries prior, the geology of the area is structurally perfect for large underground burial systems as the volcanic *tufa* stone is easy to remove yet requires little to no additional structural support.⁴⁶

Possibly inspired by the afore-mentioned Etruscan Necropolis and Roman columbaria for cremated remains [fig. 12], the *catacombs* of Ancient Rome were first developed as they were a cheaper and more space-efficient alternative to above-ground land for burial. For the early Christian and Jewish communities of Rome in the first to third centuries CE, the underground is also said to have provided the sole space at the time for said communities to act freely without Roman persecution, although this has been disputed.⁴⁸ Whilst these spaces began as quite sporadic, unorganized ‘settlements’, the *fossore* – the catacomb excavators – expanded the system through clearly-defined fishbone patterns [fig. 13] during the third and fourth centuries CE. Cover-

⁴³ Op. Cit., Kori Jormakka, “Post Mortem Eclecticism”

⁴⁴ Op. Cit., Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*

⁴⁵ Bertram S. Puckle, *Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development*, 1926

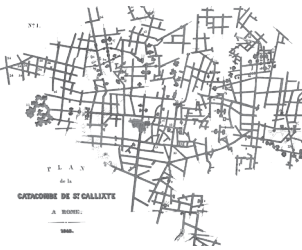
⁴⁶ Eric C. Smith, *Foucault’s Heterotopia in Christian Catacombs*, 2014, 7

[Fig. 12] *Colombari di Vigna Codini, Rome: seemingly a “negative image of a nine-story apartment building with a stair tower in the center”*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Op. Cit., Jormakka, “Post Mortem Eclecticism”

⁴⁸ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 84-85

[Fig. 13] *Plan of the vast St. Callixtus Catacombs, Rome*



⁴² Op. Cit., Jormakka, “Post Mortem Eclecticism,” 124



[Fig. 14] *Les Innocents cemetery, Paris, 1550*

ing an area of more than two square kilometers, the passages lie seven to 19 meters below ground, with up to four levels layered over one another. As the Roman Empire began to lose power and became more vulnerable to attack, burials were moved into the city across the previously forbidden boundary of the *pomerium*. As such, the *catacombs* no longer housed new burials during the fifth and sixth centuries CE but were still used for devotion.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Smith, *Foucault's Heterotopia in Christian Catacombs*, 7-9

In Paris, *catacombs* were only implemented in the late eighteenth century CE following the upheaval of many cemeteries in the city, like at *Les Innocents* [fig. 14]. Using Paris's extensive underground quarries [fig. 15], the remains of millions of corpses were displaced from cemeteries into the subterranean spaces. Not only did this solve the city's problem with burial, but it also ensured the maintenance of the abandoned quarries, which many Parisians were concerned would cave in.⁵⁰ Mirroring Ledoux's notion of the materials for the living being removed from the spaces that the dead come to inhabit, the Parisian catacombs are a parallel world of the dead, underneath the world of the living.

[Fig. 15] *Map of abandoned underground quarries, Paris*



⁵⁰ Op. Cit., Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 155

EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS & BOULLÉE'S UTOPIAN TOMBS

The Ancient Egyptian pyramids, of which the most well-known are those at Giza on the outskirts of Cairo [fig. 16], are *monumental tombs* constructed for dead pharaohs, filled with all necessary materials required for the passage to the afterlife.⁵¹ The pyramid itself is primarily made of solid stone, and therefore probably acts – alongside its obvious grandeur to demonstrate power – mostly as a symbol. Whilst the symbolism of the pyramids has been debated, the most likely possibilities are (1) that they represent

[Fig. 16] *The monumental pyramid tombs at Giza, in Cairo, Egypt*



⁵¹ Brian Handwerk, "The Pyramids at Giza Were Built to Endure an Eternity - But How?" in *National Geographic*, 2023

the "primordial mound" from which the Egyptians believed the Earth stemmed, and (2) that they are representative of the rays of the sun, thus indicating an important connection with the heavens. It has even been argued that the Pyramids were meant to perform as a "resurrection machine," pointing towards the sky.⁵² As the only surviving structures of the *Seven Ancient Wonders of the World*, the pyramids – particularly those at Giza – are perhaps some of the most renowned and sublime funerary monuments.

Ledoux's contemporary, Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799) – French architect during the *Age of the Enlightenment*, mentioned previously in this chapter – worked extensively around spaces and architectures of death, albeit all as paper projects. Inspired by the Egyptian pyramids' expression of "the timelessness of Nature through the simple majesty of [their] mass and [their] success in withstanding the ravages of time," Boullée's work often took inspiration from the pyramids' form and excessive monumentality.⁵³

"Derived from a comprehensive vision of the human condition as a reflection of the larger cosmic order," his funerary architecture was developed around three central themes: (1) a buried architecture, (2) an architecture of shadows, and (3) a naked architecture.⁵⁴ Through a Loos-like lack of ornamentation, play with shadows in incised negative spaces, and forms that appear to be almost entirely submerged into the Earth, together with their sheer monumentality, Boullée's funerary monuments, [fig. 17], are sublime, allowing their visitors to become aware of their own, human irrelevance and mortality in comparison to the vastness of the universes he creates.⁵⁵ Most often completely disconnected from the sky or the outside world, Boullée's sections show our relation to the

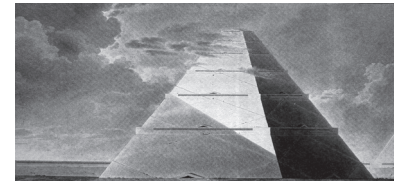
⁵² Toby Wilkinson, "Before the Pyramids," in *Egypt at its Origins*, 2004

⁵³ Op. Cit., Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 109

⁵⁴ Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 115; 146

[Fig. 17] *Monumental pyramid cenotaph, Étienne-Louis Boullée, 1785*

⁵⁵ s.v., "Drawing [On] the Sublime," *Object Territories*



⁵⁶ Op. Cit., Etlin, *The Architecture of Death*, 146

⁵⁷ Op. Cit., Worpole, “Housing the Dead”

⁵⁸ Op. Cit., Bühler, Discussion at the Friedhof Sihlfeld

[Fig. 18] *A human composting vessel at Recompose, Seattle*

⁵⁹ s.v., “Our Model,” *Recompose*

“immensity of the cosmos,” the buildings burrowing into the underground, the *earth*, to suggest a “return in death to the fertile center of the world.”⁵⁶

COMPOSTING

New modes of corpse disposal are beginning to appear, attempting to address both the spatial concerns of burial in cemeteries, and the environmental concerns surrounding both burian and cremation, [discussed further in the next subchapter].⁵⁷

One of such modes is *human composting*, which is available in some states in the US, whilst it is being worked on legislatively by various teams in Europe, most notably in Germany and Switzerland.⁵⁸ During the *composting* process, the corpse is transformed into soil in the space of eight to twelve weeks, emitting around one eighth of the amount of CO₂ as opposed to burial or cremation. Once brought to a *composting* facility, the body is placed into a vessel and is surrounded by wood chips, plant matter and straw before the vessel is sealed. Microbes turn the body into approximately one cubic meter of soil within five to eight weeks, after which it is cured for a few weeks, and is then ready to be used as fertile soil.⁵⁹ By doing this, the nutrients remaining in the corpse’s bodily matter return to nature, feeding and nurturing new life. As beings of nature, we are thus able to return to nature when we die.

Current *composting* facilities act in the same way as some contemporary crematoria [see chapter *III. Contemporary Spaces of Death*] and traditional burial services, in that the body can be viewed at the facility and at the laying-into the composting vessel.

FIRE

Fire is the predominant element of charm, of fascination, of all things alive, temperamental, and fast. Forever reaching towards the heights of the sky, it is active and unpredictable. As the active elements, *fire* and air speak of strength, courage, and action, and *fire* in particular denotes something deep inside, of something burning within: a *fire* in the belly.⁶⁰ Metaphorically active within each living thing, Bachelard describes how everything changes through *fire*: seen as the primeval element in antiquity, *fire* is seen as the element from which all matter stems and as such is a synonym for the flow of life, and consequently of the flow of death.⁶¹

*“To the imagination, fire is not a separable datum of experience... Its heat is analogous to the internal heat we feel as warm-blooded animals; its sparks are analogous to seeds, the units of life; its flickering movement is analogous to vitality; ... its transforming power is analogous to purification.”*⁶²

Northop Fryc

As this all-changing, powerful element, *fire* is equally attributed negative or evil values, in opposition to those stated above. Whilst it suggests rapid change, this change may be one of ending life. *Fire* has the ability to violently, ragefully engulf everything in its wake, bringing all life to an end in an instant, with little to no warning. *Fire* is a destroyer of all, devouring its own ‘mother’ and ‘father’ – the two pieces of wood from which it came – to fuel its own birth and rapid growth.⁶³ *Fire* changes, speeds up the passage of time, and destroys, taking a living being from life to death, and from death to the nothingness of smoke and ash; the excrements of *fire*.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Gaston Bachelard, “Sexualized Fire,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 1968, 48

⁶¹ Op. Cit., Mateo and Sauter, *The Four Elements and Architecture*, 141

⁶² Northop Frye, “Preface,” in Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 1968

⁶³ Max Muller in Bachelard, “Psychoanalysis and Prehistory,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 24

⁶⁴ Bachelard, “The Chemistry of Fire,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 65



⁶⁵ Bachelard, “Fire and Respect,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 7

“*It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and apocalypse.*”⁶⁵

Gaston Bachelard

Fire therefore has qualities both good and evil. Deemed during *The Enlightenment* as the purest way in which to dispose of a deceased body, cremation – the burning of a dead body – is also hygienic and space efficient; two important reasons for a Western European return to cremation beginning in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.⁶⁶ During cremation, the corpse and its coffin are the food of the flames which engulf it: *fire* takes away the last notion of the body’s spatial presence through using its final resting space – the wooden coffin – as its fuel.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Op. Cit., Zemp, “Kapitel I: Kulturgeschichte der modernen Feuerbestattung”

⁶⁷ Op. Cit., Bühler, Discussion at the Friedhof

CREMATION

Cremation Through Time

The first evidence of human *cremation* – the burning of corpses – in Europe, dates to the latter half of the seventh millennium BCE, although it was heavily restricted to certain locations and was only seen sporadically. More extensive proof of crematory practices can be found from the late Bronze Age (c. 1500 BCE), up to the second and third centuries CE, when *cremation* became a much more widely used practice in the Roman Empire, as a custom adopted from the Ancient Greeks. In the Roman Empire, common people were usually buried, whilst the wealthy and elite were often *cremated*.⁶⁸ Cremation occurred either atop a wooden pyre (*rogus funebris*) for the most honoured, whilst others were burned in open

⁶⁸ Vincent Valentijn and Kim Verhoeven, *Goodbye Architecture: The Architecture of Crematoria in Europe*, 2018, 262

pits (*ustrina*). From the fifth century CE, *cremation* was mostly abandoned, and was officially prohibited by the Catholic church in 789 CE: as Christianity became officially recognized and the power of the Roman Empire waned across Europe, burial began to be preferred over *cremation* due to the belief in bodily resurrection. For over one thousand years, *cremation* as a method for the disposal of a corpse lay relatively dormant, until the intellectual and cultural upheaval of *The Enlightenment* (1680-1790).⁶⁹

In direct opposition to the Church, freethinkers of *The Enlightenment* began to question the workings of the world, opposing faith in religion with scientifically based criticism, reason, and belief in progress. The French Revolution (1789-1799) caused an important separation between Church and State, such that most public interests – like the funeral system, importantly – became state-organized. This (slowly) led to a rationalization of the burial system, which was no longer fit for purpose spatially (overcrowding), economically, and health wise (regarded as sources of highly infectious diseases), such that prominent architects like Boullée and Ledoux began to express and romanticize their fatigue with traditional burial, and their interest in fire as a tool for funerary practices.^{70 71}

“[...] *trop longtemps il avait concentré dans ses murs épais la putréfaction, les vapeurs méphitiques qui corrompent la salubrité de l’air [...] Brûler les corps auprès d’une forêt, pour obtenir des cendres précieuses, des souvenirs consolants ; pratiquer des voûtes conservatrices, les rendre salubres par l’extinction de la chaux [...]*”⁷²

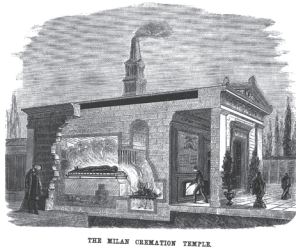
Nicolas LeDoux

⁶⁹ Op. Cit., Zemp, “Kapitel I: Kulturgeschichte der modernen Feuerbestattung”

⁷⁰ Zemp, “Kapitel I...”

⁷¹ Op. Cit., Heathcote, *Monument Builders*, 35-36

⁷² Nicolas Ledoux in Zemp, “Kapitel I...”



[Fig. 19] *Milan Cremation Temple*

⁷³ Op. Cit., Zemp, “Kapitel I: Kulturgeschichte der modernen Feuerbestattung”

⁷⁴ Op. Cit., Valentijn and Verhoeven, *Goodbye Architecture*, 263



⁷⁵ Maurice Maeterlinck in Op. Cit., Heathcote, *Monument Builders*, 36

[Fig. 20] *The funeral of Thomas Shelley, poet, on a pyre, 1889*

⁷⁶ Op. Cit., Valentijn and Verhoeven, *Goodbye Architecture*, 263

For all of the efforts made during the French Revolution, no ‘progress’ was made regarding *cremation*, and it was only in the middle of the nineteenth century CE that the *cremation* movement finally found its place, initially in Germany, Italy and Switzerland.⁷³ Made possible by the loss of authority of the Church, the industrialization of the nineteenth century, and the fight against infectious diseases, the first public *cremation* in Milan took place in 1876 [fig. 19], and the burning of corpses in ‘modern’ crematoria was legalized throughout Italy a year later. Culturally, cremation was perceived positively, largely due to Romanticism, argues Zemp, with the light, fleeting metaphor of cremation contrasting with the rotting, decomposing process of the corpse in the earth.⁷⁴

*“Purified by fire, the memory lives in the heights as a beautiful idea; and death is naught but an immortal birth cradled in flames.”*⁷⁵

Maurice Maeterlinck

Whilst the various wars across Europe – particularly the First and Second World Wars – stifled the growth of cremation due to rising fuel costs and negative parallels drawn to the horrific destruction of the Holocaust, the popularity of cremation has risen to become the most popular form of corpse disposal in many Western European countries today.⁷⁶

A Crematory Critique

The most important distinction between burial and cremation is perhaps a spatial consideration – in terms of the dispersion versus

the concentration of death – where typically cremation causes an eventual dispersion of the body, through fire, and burial is a precise act of concentration in one place, underground.⁷⁷ It is also a consideration of speed of bodily disintegration or disappearance, where the body buried in the earth takes time to decompose and lose its spatial presence, in contrast to the cremated body, which is turned into ‘ashes’ through the burning of the corpse and crushing of bones, in mere moments. Cremation is a radical parting.⁷⁸

*“[...] the dead body is something that falls apart, it rots. And the fact of rotting is actually a way of living. It is eaten by insects, by worms [...]. Of course, we have an image of something very disgusting, and it is very disgusting. [...] But hygiene is not the solution when thinking about death. So, the crematorium is the [human made] space to deal with death and to exclude it very quickly. In a very short time, the dead body that arrives is reduced to something that you can put in a cup, and that is powder, which is harmless.”*⁷⁹

*“[...] the problem with cremation to me is the fact that it excludes, or that it makes death such a short moment and that there is no spatial – or not much spatial – presence anymore after death.”*⁸⁰

Wim Cuyvers

It has been argued, with the *continuing bonds approach*, that we are better off, as survivors of the deceased, to hold on to an ongoing attachment to the dead for a certain period of time, rather than to accept a sharp severance.⁸¹ Whilst *cremation* can be

⁷⁷ Op. Cit., Cuyvers, Interview at Les Montavoies, 00:04:28-00:10:42

⁷⁸ Laura Cramwinckel, “The Fire In Our Imagination,” in *Goodbye Architecture: The Architecture of Crematoria in Europe*, 2018, 245

⁷⁹ Op. Cit., Cuyvers, Interview at Les Montavoies, 01:45:03-01:50:34

⁸⁰ Cuyvers, Interview, 00:20:01-00:24:27

⁸¹ Luigi Bartolomei, “Ideals Into Ashes,” in *Goodbye Architecture*, 2018, 223

⁸² Bartolomei, “Ideals Into Ashes,” 230

⁸³ Tom Wilkinson, “Typology: Crematorium,” in *The Architectural Review - Death*, November 2016

⁸⁴ Op. Cit., Worpole, *Last Landscapes*, 184

⁸⁵ Op. Cit., Rugg, “Body Count”

viewed as the immediate ‘destruction’ of the form of the human body – which removes the need to think about the process of *cremation* following its completion and instead gives more focus to the person as they were – it can also be argued that the way in which the *cremation* ceremony or ritual is carried out can significantly affect the severity of the procedure.⁸² To ensure a level of emotional adequacy during a *cremation*, it may be important to witness the body being committed into the furnace in its physical state, to directly see and understand the final physical resting place of said body.⁸³ Very often, a funeral for *cremation* is entirely separated from the act of committal into the *cremation* oven, and is also distinctly lacking in any kind of further territorial or landscape connection: between the funeral ceremony, the burning of the corpse, and the eventual treatment of ashes, a lack of continuation and involvement by the deceased’s family and loved ones, and a lack of transparency of what the *cremation* professionals are doing, is prevalent. Due to this, there exists an important disconnect between the living and the deceased: the procession to a final resting place should remain a vital principle of the funerary rite.⁸⁴

Even though the drastic transformation from the body to ashes can be deemed violent or destructive to the corpse, that which is physically left behind – the ashes – can be dealt with in a variety of ways. From interment in an urn, an urn placed in a columbarium or at home, the scattering of ashes into the air, the earth, or in water, or even flying the ashes to the moon, it is interesting that although evermore people are choosing to be *cremated*, the *cremated* remains are being buried more often: the living feel the need to have a grave to visit, and the body (or what is left of it) must be in the location of the grave.⁸⁵

The Crematorium as a Memorial

Given the variety of spaces in which the ashes may be placed or scattered, it may also be important for the bereaved to be able to identify with a physical space, the *crematorium* itself, where the moment of parting of the deceased to the world of the dead occurs and is marked in memory.⁸⁶

Distanced from the previous dominance of the Church on cemeteries – successful architectural responses to *cremation* have proved challenging, both in terms of *crematorium* buildings and their corresponding landscapes, which “rarely rise above the functional.”⁸⁷ Although many monumental and imposing *crematorium* buildings exist, Heathcote argues that “a real architecture specific to crematoria never arose,” and that in Scandinavia we can find the only “consistent development of thoughtful and meaningful crematorium architecture,” most notably in Asplund and Lewerentz’s designs for the Skogskyrkogården complex in Stockholm, [fig. 21], discussed in the next chapter.⁸⁸ The lack of a strongly pre-defined *cremation* ritual means that typologies of *crematoria* are not particularly consistent. However, this can be perceived as a strength, in that *crematorium* architecture can be uniquely considered depending on where the *crematorium* is located, and the rituals and processes expected to occur within. Furthermore, the rituals themselves can (and should be) easily personalized, rather than pre-defined.

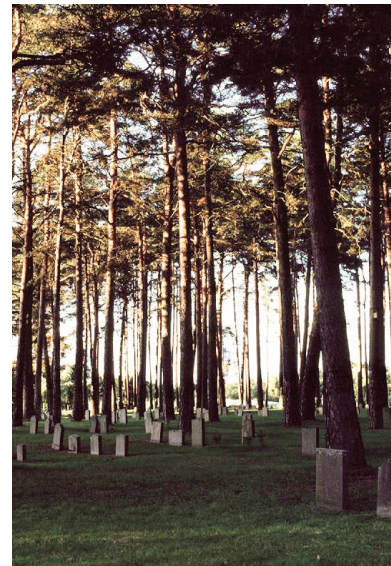
I discuss examples of *crematoria* in more detail in the next chapter, *III. Contemporary Spaces of Death*.

⁸⁶ Op. Cit., Valentijn and Verhoeven, *Goodbye Architecture*, 177

⁸⁷ Op. Cit., Worpole, “Housing the Dead”

⁸⁸ Edwin Heathcote, *Monument Builders: Modern Architecture and Death*, 1999, 36

[Fig. 21] Skogskyrkogården Woodland Cemetery





[Fig. 22]
The funeral of Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus (63 BCE - 14CE)

⁸⁹David Noy, “Building a Roman Funeral Pyre,” in *Antichthon* 34, 2000

⁹⁰Qamariya Nasrullah, “Generations of Family Members Found Cremated...” in *Cosmos Magazine*, 2022

FUNERAL PYRES

I would like, here, to highlight a particular form of cremation, which is that of the *funeral pyre*. As an ancient form of cremation preceding the use of ovens – in which the deceased is placed upon or under a burning structure usually made of wood – cremation on the pyre often takes on a strong ritual form. An elite practice in Gaul at the time of the Roman Empire up to around the second century CE, ending up on a funeral pyre was for some time the most common way to dispose of the body in the Roman Empire.⁸⁹ Whilst the connotations surrounding the *funeral pyre* varied regionally and through time, cremation on a pyre was a common practice across central Europe and the Italian peninsula for around 2000 years.⁹⁰

VARANASI CREMATION GHATS

Let us then explore the funeral pyres of Varanasi (also known as Banāras or Kāshī) in India, where they still form an integral part of life and death today. Situated along the holy Ganges River, the holy city of Varanasi is famous for its death practices and is sometimes referred to as ‘the Great Cremation Ground.’⁹¹ In Hinduism, the Ganges River is the natural embodiment of the Hindu Goddess Ganga, often referred to as the mother to humanity and the goddess of purification and forgiveness. As the holiest of all rivers, she performs a vital role in the purification of bodily remains following death and cremation.

People from across India travel to die and be cremated in Varanasi. It is “the final stop on a pilgrimage that has lasted for

many lives, through birth and death and birth again.”⁹² Varanasi ends the pilgrimage of all life through the bestowing of *moksha*, the liberation or the breaking from the cycle of life and death in reincarnation, after which eternal salvation is to be expected. ‘Salvation homes’ set up across the city, often funded by charities or local businesses, cater to people who wish to live in Varanasi before their imminent death.⁹³ These ‘homes’ are spaces in which those who are near death can spend time with their families – who have journeyed with them to ease the path into death – and to pray alongside the priests based in the home, [fig. 23].

The salvation homes are based near the *ghats*: a series of steps leading to the *Ganges River*, in this case, which lead onto spaces for bathing or for cremation. Most important of course, is their proximity to the cremation *ghats*, the two main ones of which are called *Manikarnikā ghat* and *Harishchandra ghat*, [fig. 24 and 25]. Eck describes *Manikarnikā* as “the sanctuary of death, with its ceaselessly smoking cremation pyres,” and its sacred fire.⁹⁴ The deceased’s body arrives at the cremation ground after a procession through the streets of Varanasi, after which it is given a last bodily contact with the holy water of the Ganges River. The body is decorated in colorful sheets and flower garlands, and *Doms* – the caretakers of the cremation grounds – hand flaming torches to the eldest son of the deceased, who is tasked with igniting his parent’s pyre. In Hindu mythology, *Doms* were cursed by Shiva, and agreed to be the keepers of the flame at Varanasi in exchange for forgiveness.⁹⁵ The cremation process necessitates the presence of a *Dom* for the deceased to be able to obtain *moksha*; eternal salvation. Once the burning of the corpse is complete, the deceased’s ashes are released into the Ganges River, for a final cleansing of the soul. The duality of the opposing *water* in the *Ganges* – mark-

⁹²Eck, “City of Death and Liberation”

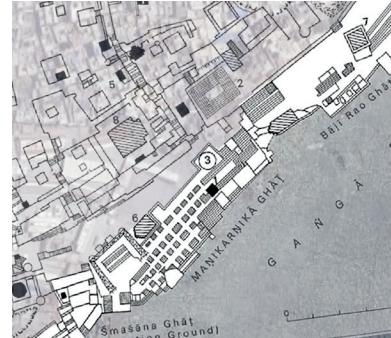
[Fig. 23]
A dying elderly person in a salvation home room

⁹³Romita Saluja, “India’s City Where People Come to Die,” in *BBC Travel*, 2019



[Fig. 24]
Sketch of Manikarnikā cremation ghat and its surrounding ghats along the Ganges River

⁹⁴Op. Cit., Eck, “City of Death and Liberation”



[Fig. 25]
Marnikarnikā ghat

⁹⁵Priyanka Shankar, “Doms of Varanasi Make a Living among the Dead,” in *Reuters*, 2017





[Fig. 26-29]
Screenshots from National Geographic short film



⁹⁶ s.v., “Escaping Death and Rebirth on Varanasi’s Sacred Riverbanks,” in *Phys.org*, 2018



⁹⁷ Pete McBride, “The Pyres of Varanasi: Breaking the Cycle of Death and Rebirth,” in *National Geographic*, 2014



⁹⁸ Jonathan P. Parry, “The Last Sacrifice,” in *Death in Banaras*, 1994, 151-188

ing life – and *fire* of the funeral pyres – marking death – highlights the relation of *fire* and *water* with the body and soul. The proximity of the two elements is of vital importance to the ritual.

Whilst electric crematoria have been implemented in Varanasi since 1989 in an attempt to reduce wood use, emissions, and the outdoor nature of cremations, people coming to Varanasi to die prefer to follow the historic rituals and burning on the funeral pyre.⁹⁶ The cremation ritual at *Manikarnikā* is one of intense rawness, simplicity and transparency, [fig. 26-29]. Families of the deceased are involved throughout the process, accompanying the dying through to death, lighting the funeral pyre on which they are cremated, and witnessing, hearing, and smelling the burning of their loved ones.

“When you step off a wooden boat onto the banks of the burning ghat in the oldest of India’s cities and you weave through a maze of funeral pyres hissing, steaming, and spitting orange embers into an inky night and you feel the metronome clang of bells vibrating inside your chest and a wave of furnace-like heat consuming everything in its reach, you realize how removed you truly are from the ritual of death.”⁹⁷

Pete McBride, National Geographic

The body, once dead, is said to have three physical outcomes:

1. It is eaten and turns into excrement,
2. It is buried and turns into maggots and worms,
3. It is burned and turns into ash.⁹⁸

The last of the three options is deemed the least “unpalatable,” and is seen as the most efficient way in which to return the body to nature. In some sense, the body and soul are not totally lost in death: both “extend into past and future persons.”⁹⁹

The people of Varanasi live within death and are comfortable around it. They celebrate death with hope, trusting in the holiness of the Ganges and Varanasi to deliver them their ultimate wish to break from the cycle of reincarnation and to end in salvation. For Hindus, death is a time of transition, a liminal space between life and life.¹⁰⁰ This belief in life after life leaves only the fear of obtaining a good life after death, for which they trust the ritual process at Varanasi will help them. “While death may be the final event in one life, it is also, in a sense, the first event in the life beyond.”¹⁰¹ The afterlife lives strongly in the people of Varanasi.

⁹⁹ Parry, “The Last Sacrifice”

¹⁰⁰ Op. Cit., Eck, “City of Death and Liberation”

¹⁰¹ Eck, “City of Death and Liberation”



[Fig. 30-32] Screenshots of the jhator ritual from the short film, Vultures of Tibet



¹⁰² Christopher James Botham, “Verticality, Part II: The Seeds of Verticality,” in *On Verticality*, 2023



¹⁰³ James A. Wren, “Tibetan Sky Burial,” in *The Himalayas: An Encyclopedia*, 2018, 251-52

¹⁰⁴ Turrell Wylie, “Mortuary Customs at Sa-Skya, Tibet,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25, 1964, 229-42

¹⁰⁵ Edwin Heathcote, *Monument Builders: Modern Architecture and Death*, 1999

¹⁰⁶ Niema Ash, “The Sky Burial,” in *Touching Tibet*, 2011

AIR

There exists another realm of so-called burial, in which the deceased is given to the *sky* rather than the earth, raised above the ground to attain verticality. The *sky* is not necessarily a space, but the idea of what is up in the infinite ‘heavens’ inspires a human interest of that which lies above the surface of the Earth. The *air* “offers the possibility of expansion,” and mountains are perhaps the primal earthly surface on which we can experience this.¹⁰² Rather than a burial or interment, in which the body is placed underground or is covered up, here the body is placed as high into the *air* as possible, to reach towards the heavens.

TIBETAN SKY ‘BURIAL’

The first of these so-called sky burials I would like to explore is the Tibetan Sky Burial, or *jhator*, the Tibetan name for a funeral practice translating to “giving alms to the birds,” [fig. 30-32].¹⁰³ In the mountain ranges of Tibet, the ritual of *jhator* – dating back to the end of the tenth century CE – is still in practice, where the dead are exposed to the elements on mountaintop plateaus to be fed to the vultures.¹⁰⁴ The mountain, “the image at the centre of the cosmos, [is] the place where height allows communion with the gods in the heavens.”¹⁰⁵

The day before the *jhator* ritual, the corpse is washed for the first time since birth, interestingly, and is wrapped in cloth in a fetal position. When the ritual begins, the corpse is placed on a small rocky plateau of flat stones on the mountain, within which lies the ‘altar’, “a large flat rock with bowl-like depressions,” [fig. 33].¹⁰⁶ Atop this ‘altar’, the deceased’s body is dismembered with knives and stones to separate bone from flesh.

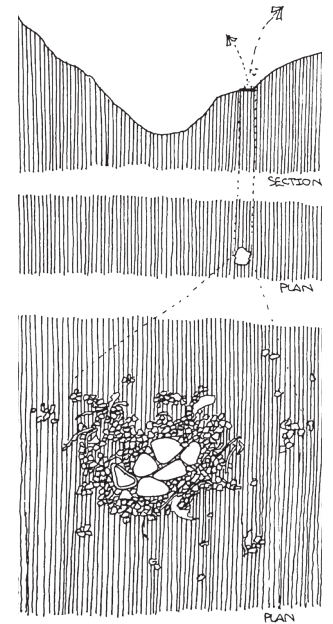
“The man in charge drags her body over the rock and lays it face down in the centre. He begins without ceremony by pulling off the woman’s blouse and flinging it into the gully. He yanks a large knife from his belt and with surgical precision cuts a slit down her spine. Starting from the shoulder blade he strips the flesh away down the left side of her back... This done, he neatly hacks off her left arm with his knife. The severed arm is tossed to the young boy who, squatting on his haunches, pounds it to a pulp with something which looks like the back of an axe, using one of the depressions in the rock as a container.

...

*By now, the rock looks like a butcher’s shop, bloody with tattered flesh and strewn limbs, and the woman, like a butchered carcass...Some vultures fly off the mountains and begin circling the altar rock, gliding over our heads. The man in charge continues working. He flips over what remains of the body, a torso with no back or limbs. He chops hard, with one resounding blow, through the chest cavity, and reaching inside pulls out the heart. Holding it up, he shouts something to the two Tibetans by the fire. They nod. He chops the heart to bits...”*¹⁰⁷

Vultures know the ritual well and are attracted by the burning of incense. The corpse’s bones are served to the vultures first, followed by the organs and then the flesh. These “angel-like figures who transport the soul into the heavens and facilitate its reincarnation,” go into a feeding frenzy, which makes for a very visceral returning to nature.¹⁰⁸

[Fig. 33] Sketch diagrams of a typical Tibetan Sky Burial space



¹⁰⁷ Ash, “The Sky Burial”

¹⁰⁸ Op. Cit., Wren, “Tibetan Sky Burial”

“The vultures eat greedily, fighting over scraps of flesh, slipping off the rock, pushing each other in their haste to consume. The ravens join the feast cautiously; uninvited guests...”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Op. Cit., Ash, “The Sky Burial”

¹¹⁰ *Vultures of Tibet*, Short Film, 2011

¹¹¹ Op. Cit., Wren, “Tibetan Sky Burial”

¹¹² Robert E. Klass, “Tibetan Buddhism and the Resolution of Grief...” in *Death Studies* 21, 1997, 377-95

For Tibetan Buddhists (or Vajrayana Buddhists), the body is just flesh, blood and bone, body and consciousness entirely separated.¹¹⁰ The body no longer possesses its soul and there is therefore no need to preserve the body. The ‘disposal’ ritual “facilitates the transmigration of souls” such that the devoured remains ascend to the heavens “into a realm where reincarnation is far more likely,”¹¹¹ allowing the grief of survivors to be managed due to the aid in passing from this life to the next.¹¹² Those elements not carried away and consumed by vultures – bone and cartilage, mainly – are crushed and burned to equally disperse into the heavens. The lack of any kind of spatial quality for the living survivors of the deceased to return to is an unusual concept in the modern, western world, but the consciousness of the soul passing to the heavens appears to be of enough reassurance to those practicing the sky ‘burial’. The return of all bodily material into nature, and the ‘transmigration of the soul’ to the heavens means that nature perhaps becomes the ‘space’ in which grief, contemplation and bereavement can occur.

ZOROASTRIAN EXPOSURE

Zoroastrian funeral customs – derived from Ancient Persia but found also in Parsi communities in India to this day, particularly in Mumbai – have been said to be related to the Tibetan Sky Burial, although this relation seems somewhat questionable.¹¹³

¹¹³ Op. Cit., Wylie, “Mortuary Customs...”

Whilst in both cases corpses are left exposed to the elements to be radically decomposed and cleaned by vultures (and potentially other wild animals in the Zoroastrian case), the ritual and spatial qualities of the process differ greatly.

According to Zoroastrian faith, a deceased body is possessed by the demon *nasu*, and the body should therefore not come into direct contact with any of the sacred elements, *fire*, *water* and *earth*, so as not to contaminate them.¹¹⁴ Two steps for the ritual are clear: the first and most important is the exposure of the deceased on a high and dry place – most likely a mountain top or exposed area on a mountain – to be devoured by vultures and wild dogs. The second is the treatment of the cleaned and sun-bleached bones once they are considered clean and non-polluting after a year of exposure. They are then either collected to be stored in bone receptacles or left on the exposure ground.¹¹⁵ A separation of the site of exposure and the site of storage of bones is clear.

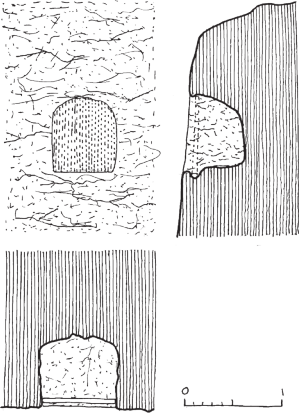
Ancient places of exposure were generally not significantly prepared, using the natural topography of the Iranian mountain landscape to good effect. Although archaeological remains of any spaces of exposure from this time are scarce, there exists evidence of bone receptacles – for instance *chamber dakhmas* – carved into the rocky cliffs and closed by stone slabs, [fig. 34]. The separation of the bodily remains of bones from the ground plain could be interpreted as the observance of the Zoroastrian belief not to pollute the earth, keeping the dead matter and the demon *nasu* from fertile soil.¹¹⁶ Raised above the ground and out of contact with any fertile soil, the only physical remainder of the human body is protected from any external factors.

¹¹⁴ Anton Zykov, “Zoroastrian Funeral Practices...” in *Threads of Continuity: Zoroastrian Life and Culture*, 2016

¹¹⁵ Dietrich Huff, “Archaeological Evidence of Zoroastrian Funerary Practices,” in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, 2004, 593-94

[Fig. 34]
Typical niche *dakhma*,
c. 6th century CE,
Hajiabad, Iran

¹¹⁶ Huff, “Archaeological Evidence...” 615





[Fig. 35] *Tomb of Darius I in Naqsh-i Rustam, Iran*

¹¹⁷ Huff, “Archaeological Evidence...” 602

¹¹⁸ James R. Russell, “BURIAL Iii. Zoroastrianism,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2000

¹¹⁹ A. Sh. Shahbazi, “ASTÖDÂN,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 1987, 851-53

¹²⁰ Op. Cit., Zykov, “Zoroastrian Funeral Practices...”

¹²¹ Zykov, “Zoroastrian Funeral Practices”

¹²² Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, “The Funeral Ceremonies of the Parsees: Their Origin and Explanation,” 1891

[Fig. 36] *Tower of Silence of Yazd, Iran*

Interestingly, the most ancient of the rock tombs in Iran are the royal Achaemenian rock tombs, which are also the largest and most ornamental, [fig. 35]. Although these are not interpreted to have been ossuaries and are rather sepulchral tombs, and were therefore not part of the exposure ritual, exposure certainly existed at the same time.¹¹⁷

Through time, however, architectural spaces combining exposure and bone treatment or storage arose, bearing the name ‘Towers of Silence’, or *dakhma*, [fig. 36]. Herodotus, an Ancient Greek historian, wrote about Zoroastrian exposure of the dead as far back as the fifth century BCE, although the first documented ‘Tower of Silence’ dates to the ninth century CE.¹¹⁸ The rise of the ‘Tower of Silence’ corresponds to the mid-seventh century Islamic conquest of Iran, which due to the persecution of Zoroastrian believers, led to the creation of combined spaces of exposure and bone preservation: walled spaces erected outside settlements, the ‘Towers of Silence’.¹¹⁹ Whilst these spaces lie disused in Iran since the 1960s, they are still used in the Parsi communities of India.¹²⁰

During the exposure ritual, the body is taken up a ‘Tower of Silence’ – or *dakhma* – after a cleansing ritual, far removed from the so-called pure elements: “thirty paces from fire, thirty paces from water..., three paces from the faithful.”¹²¹ Upon the round, stone structure, the corpse is placed, naked, and awaits the vultures that will strip it of its flesh within one or two hours.¹²²

In the more recent Parsi *dakhmas*, there are three concentric circles in which the bodies lay: the outer circle for men, the middle for women, and the inner for children, [fig. 37]. Here, on this slightly inward-leaning platform surrounded by great walls, the de-

ceased’s bodies lay exposed yet protected from the unwanted eye, first to be eaten, and then to be bleached in the harsh sun. After a year, the bones are deemed to be clean, and are thrown into the central well of the dakhma, “where they gradually crumble to dust.”¹²³ Inside the central well, underground drains (F) for rainwater lead to wells (G), where a thick layer of sand, pieces of charcoal and sandstone filter purify the rainwater that has passed over the bones. As such, the rainwater is said to be unpolluted as it re-enters the ground, the earth, “observing one of the tenets of the Zoroastrian religion that ‘the Mother Earth shall not be defiled.’”¹²⁴

The *dakhma* is generally not alone within its environment, with the most conspicuous other building nearby being a *kheileh*, in which various facilities are contained, such as a kitchen, stables, and spaces for religious performances.¹²⁵ Its most interesting space, perhaps, is the *atashsuz* – or *sagri* in India – a small structure or room where a candle or fire burns at the very least “during three nights after death, for consolation and support of the soul of the deceased.”¹²⁶ This space has an opening directly facing the Tower of Silence, which also has a perforation in its wall, such that the light theoretically directly shines into the tower.

“The idea that light is beneficial for the soul of the dead is certainly to be seen in context with the imagination of the importance which was attributed to light in general and especially to the sun in Zoroastrian religion.”¹²⁷

Whilst exposure of the dead has generally been replaced by cremation or burial in tombs closed off to the earth surrounding it amongst Zoroastrian believers in Iran, the notion of the *atashsuz* remains in modern-day cemeteries.

[Fig. 37] *Plan and Section of a Tower of Silence, Mumbai, India*

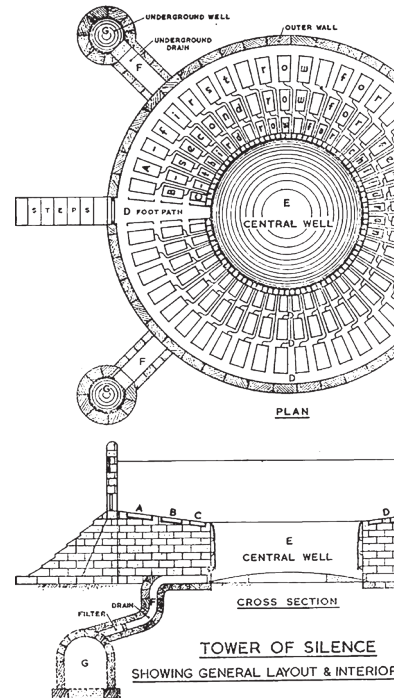
¹²³ Modi, “The Funeral Ceremonies of the Parsees”

¹²⁴ Modi, “The Funeral Ceremonies of the Parsees”

¹²⁵ Op. Cit., Huff, “Archaeological Evidence...,” 622-23

¹²⁶ Huff, “Archaeological Evidence,” 623

¹²⁷ Huff, “Archaeological Evidence,” 629



WATER

Water, like fire, is an active element, yet in contrast is grounded towards the center of the Earth. It is an element of life, flowing, crushing, caressing the body that enters it with its cold touch. *Water* is the element of the deepest imagination and of reverie, says Bachelard, its intimacy and uniformity relaying that which is hidden within us.¹²⁸ I think of sitting on a beach, at night, with the soothing sound of repetitive waves crashing onto the sand. And yet I also consider the stillness of a small mountain lake, its almost stagnant surface interrupted only by the occasional bubble of a fish, or the drop of a firefly onto its surface. Apparently contrasting enormously in strength, of violence, both bodies of water stimulate an inward thought-process; one of deep, intense reverie.

¹²⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, 1983

Water has a certain sense of nothingness, yet at the same time appears to us as a "complete being with body, soul and voice."¹²⁹ It is our life-source, without which no living thing could survive, and acts as a symbol of cleansing, of purity and purification.

¹²⁹ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 15

*"[Water] is the blood of the Earth. It is the life of the Earth. Water draws the entire countryside along towards its own destiny. As goes the water, so goes the valley."*¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 61

Gaston Bachelard

Water is often associated with death with regard to rituals – most often as a symbol of purification – like the Christian Holy water during Baptism or at Varanasi, which we saw in the previous section. In Hinduism, the *water* of the Ganges River is sacred and bathing in it is seen as a sacred ritual, a necessary act of purification before cremation.

As a space of death, however, *water* is rarely used as a final resting place. Whereas *earth* has an innate materiality that can be used for the disposal of a body, *fire* is a force enacting a radical departure, and *air* is the element to which most beliefs strive, towards the heavens, *water* does not have these qualities. As an element of life, *water* is perhaps too much in movement, too aligned with life, and as such relates least to death.

CANOE 'BURIAL'

There exists evidence of North American canoe burials, both in (1) placing corpses into canoes and setting them adrift on a body of *water*, [fig. 38], and (2) sinking the canoe and body immediately. These rituals, both of which involve a body of *water* as a final resting place for the deceased human body, was most likely caused by the belief that the "final abode of the dead [was] located beyond a water body which must be crossed by boat."¹³¹ As a physical interpretation of this passage into the afterlife, the setting adrift of a corpse may be interpreted as a reflective moment of letting go, of allowing the deceased to go on their final travels, to their final destination, completely by themselves. This is a striking farewell on water, yet the corpse still resides on and within the surface of the wooden vessel in which it lies, thus remaining sheltered – at least for some time – from the *water*.

What we see more often, however – possibly due to the increased evidence that burial in the *earth* provides – is the burial of a ship, canoe, or other aquatic vessel together with the deceased's body into the *earth*, either under the surface or in a *tumuli*. As a less physical interpretation of the passage into the afterlife, being

[Fig. 38]
Canoe 'burial' in
Dead Man, *Jim Jarmush*



¹³¹ Alberto E. Perez, et. al., "A Pre-Hispanic Canoe or Wampo Burial in Northwestern Patagonia, Argentina," *PLoS One*, 2022.



¹³² Perez., et. al., "A Pre-Hispanic Canoe or Wampo Burial in Northwestern Patagonia, Argentina," 2022.

[Fig. 39]
Excavation of the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, 1939

buried in or alongside a canoe – like the *Mapuche* people of South America, for example – reveals the importance of *water* in the belief systems surrounding death, yet simultaneously highlights a lack of spatial relevance of *water* in the treatment of the dead.¹³²

Another example of ship burial can be found at *Sutton Hoo* [fig. 39], where the burial of a 27 meter long ship, probably reserved for the most important person/people of the seventh century Anglo-Saxon society, suggests an important societal relation with *water*. However, it does of course remain a burial in *earth*.

'BURIAL AT SEA'

A true '*burial at sea*' is perhaps the most *water*-intensive mode of burial. Although an option for civilians in various countries around the world, this mode of corpse disposal is primarily used for those on long expeditions or voyages, such as the Navy, [fig. 40]. Here, the body is directly dropped into the sea from a ship, often weighed-down to ensure sinking rather than floating adrift to an undesired location.

WATER CREMATION

Water cremation – otherwise known as resomation or aquamation – is an act of corpse disposal through liquification of all organic material. Bones are fully dried in an oven and crushed into fine particles to disperse in the same way as cremation ashes. Pushed as a more environmentally friendly alternative to standard cremation, it generally occurs in very industrial, factory-like settings.



[Fig. 40]
Burial at sea on the USS Intrepid, a US warship, 1944

REFLECTIONS

Exploring these aforementioned ways in which to deal with the dead, ritually, spiritually and with regard to their physical disposal, I have found it an interesting undertaking to do so through the lens of the four classical elements. As part of some of the most primitive, elementary ways in which to consider our make-up and relation to nature and the other life surrounding us, a relation to the elements, in death, expresses our primal desire to return to nature.

The elements in their most pure, natural forms are perhaps that which give us the most powerful sensation of being truly alive, of being a part of this place we call Earth. From early childhood, we remember digging holes in the ground or forts on the beach; an early fascination with the *earth* and what lies beneath it. We feel as if we belong around a campfire and are thoughtful by the fireplace, staring into the depths of the flickering flames and crackling bursts from the slightly damp wood. In early winter mornings on the way to school, the cold, dry *air* following fresh snowfall, gives us energy for the day ahead. And the warmth of the encompassing *water* of a hot bath calms us down after a busy day.

Reflecting upon what we have seen in this chapter, the importance of the elements in the treatment and placement of the dead is evident. Yet, as a rapidly-evolving, globalized society, natural ways of dealing with the dead are being replaced by efficient, industrialized methods, disregarding our metaphysical relation to the Earth.

It would be difficult to argue against the perception that the *earth* is the element to which we are most inclined, as the surface on which we reside and come into contact with each day of our lives. Whilst *air* and the sky are perhaps a realm to which we

would like to part towards upon our death – as the spiritually heightened unknown – the physical impossibility of truly, physically being of the *air* makes this impossible. *Air* remains a vital element of the metaphysics of death as a resting place for the soul and the spirit rather than of any physical remains, and as such is expressed spatially with more difficulty: if there exist any physical bodily remains following death, the *earth* will retain an important role in spaces of death, even those more associated with *air*. *Fire* and *water*, as active, alive elements, perhaps play more ritualistic and process-based roles. Again, like *air*, both elements are more aligned to our ways of processing the dead, rather than defining the physical spaces to which they are served.

I have also started to explore, in this chapter, the ways in which spaces – and the rituals occurring within these spaces – involve both the living and the dead. The spaces administered to death and the dead, and the spaces that exist within each culture's territorial setting, have a profound impact on the ways in which the dead are dealt with, alongside the more obvious belief systems, and ideas concerning the afterlife.

It now becomes important to question how we can try to bridge the gap between ourselves –in life and death – and the four elements, whilst simultaneously bringing the worlds of the dead and the living closer together. Having explored some of the alternative treatments to those we have now, can these act as inspiration towards a re-modelling of our relationship with the elements and with death? Can we find a universal way to deal with death, that encompasses belief systems and cultural and territorial concerns? Being too close to death can be distressing or desensitizing, but death remaining hidden is infinitely worse.

III. CONTEMPORARY SPACES OF DEATH

Uitzicht Crematorium & Cemetery, Kortrijk BE

Centre Funéraire de Montoie, Lausanne CH

Polderbos Crematorium, Oostende BE

Friedhof & Crematorium Sihlfeld, Zürich CH

Stiva da Morts, Vrin CH

Skogskyrkogården Cemetery, Stockholm SE

Igualada Cemetery, Barcelona ESP

San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena IT

Baumschulenweg Crematorium, Berlin, DE

Reflections

Having explored perceptions around death alongside existing and historic ways of dealing with the dead, this third chapter explores various *contemporary spaces of death*, in the form of a short 'catalogue' of projects. The first five projects are ones that I have visited – the first four of which are recorded on film – and I therefore give my personal experience of these spaces. The four others are projects of particular merit for various reasons, explained throughout the chapter.



Overleaf [Fig. 01]
*Close-up of a cremation
oven at the old Sihlfeld
crematorium*

CONTEMPORARY SPACES OF DEATH

The *contemporary spaces of death* that we are most accustomed to are most likely cemeteries, and potentially the parts of a crematorium accessible to visitors for ceremonial activities, and the rooms in a mortuary given for the viewing of a corpse. This is as far as these spaces tend to go, and most often, they seem to be neglected, or designed for the dead body as waste, rather than as the physical remains of someone who was alive mere days before.

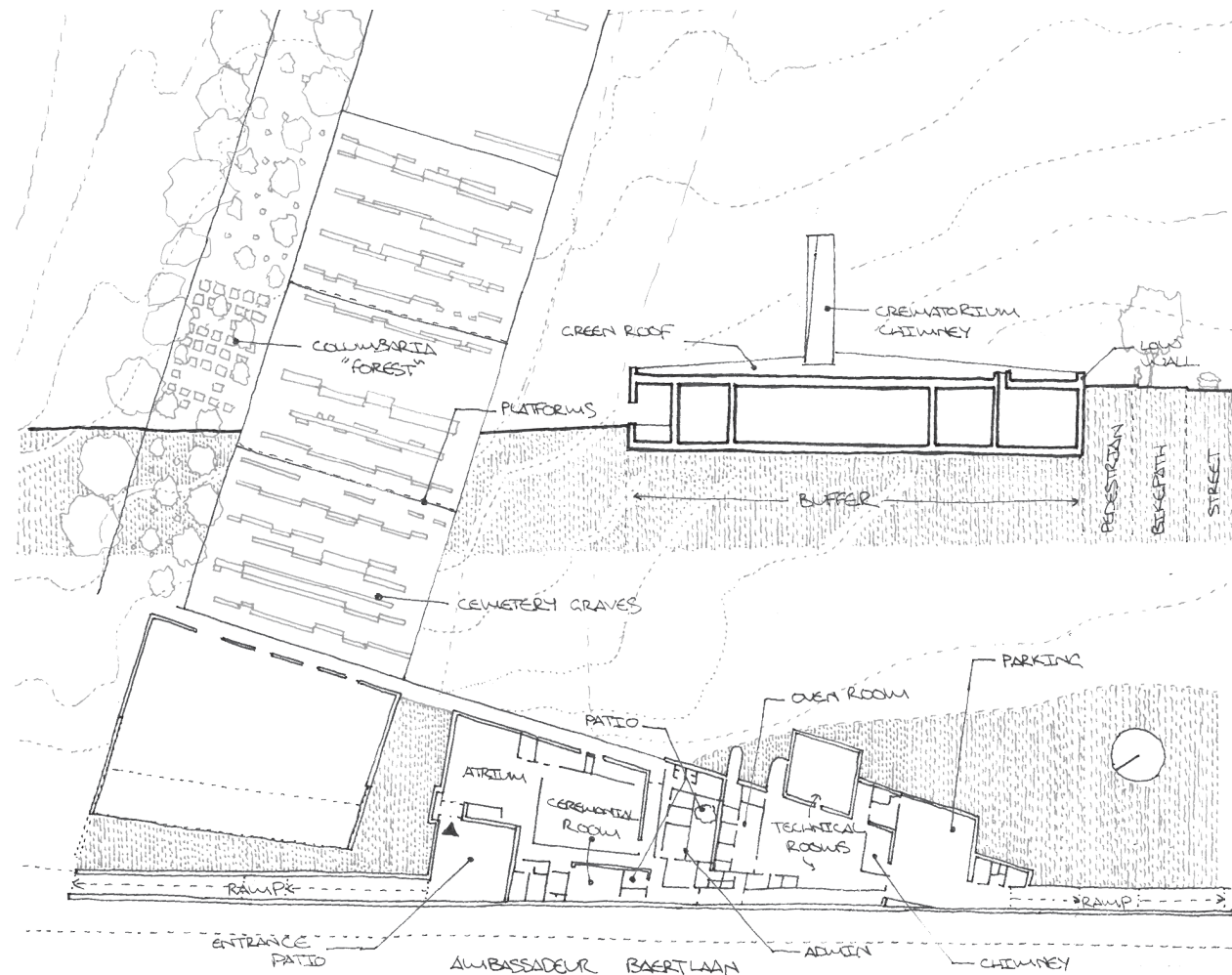
This chapter aims to provide a short overview – in the form of a 'catalogue' of projects – describing the projects and their particularities, alongside my personal experience of them where applicable.

The first four *spaces of death* are places I visited and filmed, attempting to capture the essence of my experience of said spaces through audiovisual material and voiceovers of my on-site journal entries. Selected for their temporal variety, different functions, and familiar environments (Switzerland and Belgium), the four buildings documented in film were selected for, in order: [1] their landscaping, recession into the *earth*, and integration into the territory (Kortrijk), [2] their humane landscaped and architectural design (Montoie), [3] their sequential treatment, play with form and artistic elements (Oostende), and [4] their history, scale and monumentality (Sihlfeld). The fifth visited project – not filmed – is the *Stiva da Morts*, which is particularly interesting for its community-oriented approach to death.

The four other selected projects are well-known Western European examples of contemporary spaces of death, chosen to complete this short catalogue and to collect a wider range of existing approaches.

[Scan QR Code
for link to video,
"Spaces of Death: Visits"]





UITZICHT CEMETERY & CREMATORIUM

BERNARDO SECCHI, PAOLA VIGANÒ
& EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA
KORTRIJK, BELGIUM
2000 / 2011

EARTH & FIRE

The project consists of a cemetery designed by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò in 2000, alongside a crematorium designed in 2011 by Eduardo Souto de Moura. Located just south of *Hoog Kortrijk's* historic center, a low-density area with a lightly hilly topography, the city underwent an urban development in the early 1990's, which was a project won in competition by Secchi and Viganò. This project was followed by the design of the cemetery, gently rolling down the natural landscape as a set of twelve distinct platforms out of the adjacent ceremonial building. Souto de Moura's crematorium, added more than 10 years later, is an imposing yet equally subtle building seamlessly integrated into the landscape and with Secchi and Viganò's existing building, which consolidates the act of cremation, of gathering, of resting and of spiritual ceremony under one roof.

As I approach the funerary complex on a fresh, late October evening, I recognize it first by its sculptural concrete chimney, [fig. 06, p. 89]. As a functional symbol of that which happens inside – the burning of the deceased – it is a beacon for those who know the building and its function, but a sculptural object for those who do not. With its low concrete wall adjacent to the pavement and street, the crematorium building is embedded into the earth from the street side, and acts as a visual barrier and protective shield to the cemetery below, [fig. 03].

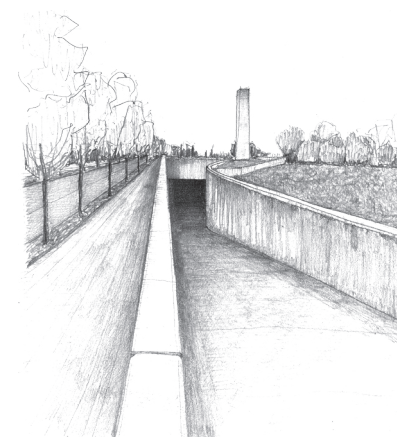
View *Spaces of Death: Visits* film through the DVD or QR code on p. 83

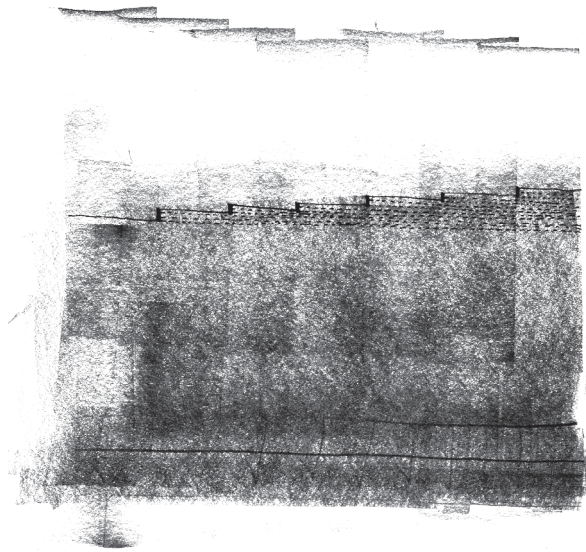
Uitzicht Crematorium
00:23-04:02

[Fig. 02, adjacent]
Site plan and embedded ground floor of the crematorium, alongside the stepped cemetery

[Fig. 03, adjacent]
Diagrammatic section, showing the crematorium as a protective wall between the street and the cemetery

[Fig. 04]
Sketch of the crematorium and its chimney, looking down the recessed services and parking





[Fig. 05, above]
The intensity of the earth
underneath the stepped
cemetery plains, sheltered from
external forces

I park the car nearby and walk along the concrete wall, appreciating the beautiful undulating landscape and setting sun, [fig. 08], with a small crescent moon appearing in the dusky sky. The crematorium has already closed for the day, and though I venture into the two recessed entrances [fig. 04, p.87], I am most attracted to the wonderfully landscaped cemetery below.

The gently downward sloping cemetery levels feel like a natural part of the landscape [fig. 05], like something that has always been there: the low walls separating each level allow me to sit, to contemplate, and to appreciate the moment I am living in, alongside the dead around me. More densely populated nearer the crematorium and ceremonial buildings, the cemetery becomes increasingly sparse; ending on dispersal fields for those who wish to return to the earth and air. Although I was unable to experience the interior, the buildings' integration into the site alongside its resulting exterior space is beautifully considered. Allowing for interment, dispersal, and placement into the columbarium 'forest' [fig. 09], the choice for post-cremation treatment is free to be made individually.

I am sheltered from the street by the crematorium and ceremonial buildings, and from the adjacent fields and sports centre by an earth mound [fig. 07] and columbarium forest. The earth mound, formed by the earth displaced for the creation of the stepped cemeteries, almost appears as a burial mound – a tumulus. Whilst I remain within the world of the living through the sounds I hear from the cars passing by and people on the sports fields next to me, I am visually disconnected from all but the cemetery itself and the nature surrounding it. I remain within the realm of the living, of course, because I am still alive, for now, yet I feel that I am also within the space of the dead. This is an effective liminal space, where the living and the dead come together meticulously.



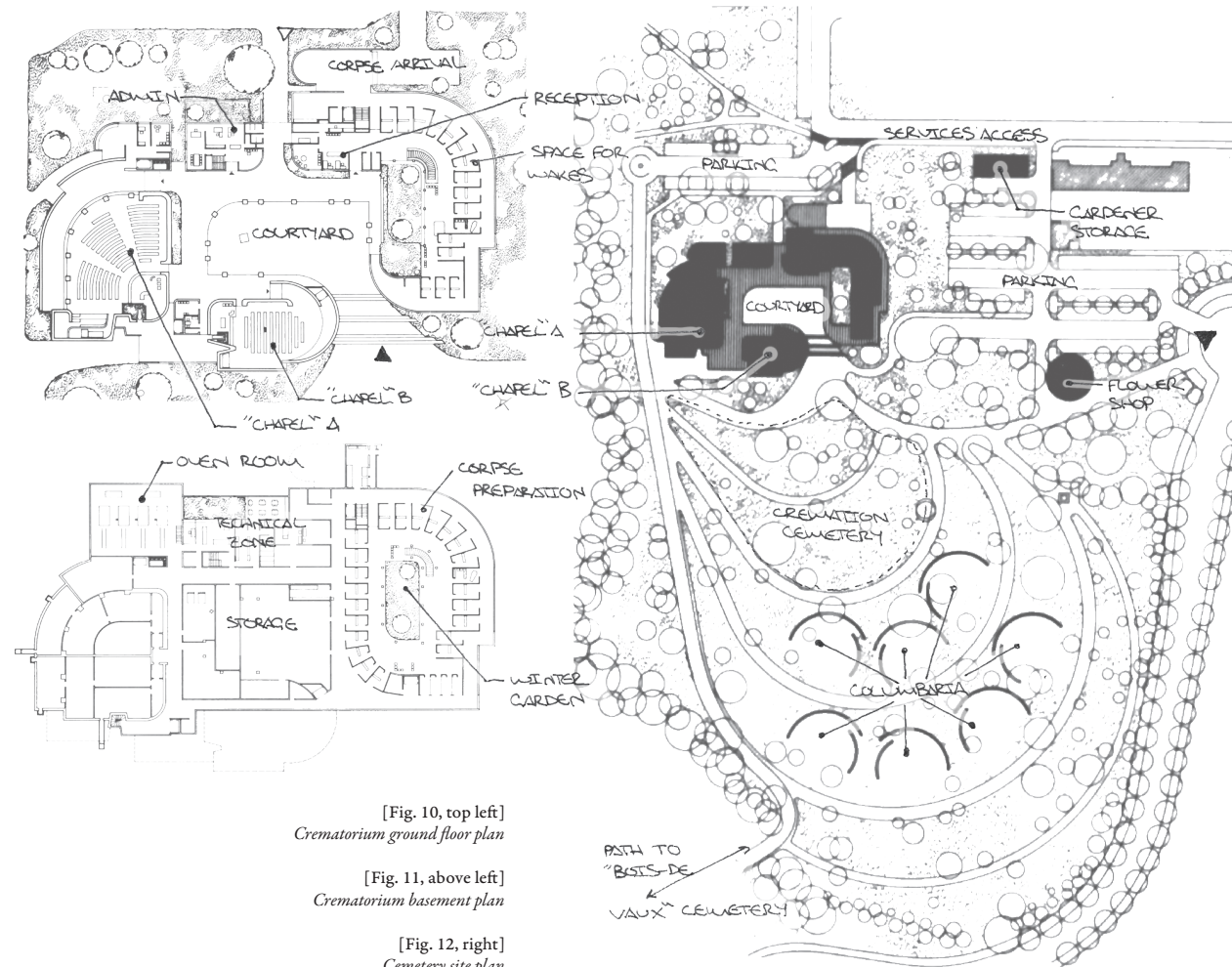
[Fig. 06, left]
The chimney, as seen from the street

[Fig. 07, top]
A recently-dug grave next to a
levelling wall and earth mound

[Fig. 08, above]
The Kortrijk landscape, as seen
from the street

[Fig. 09, right]
The columbarium forest





[Fig. 10, top left]
Crematorium ground floor plan

[Fig. 11, above left]
Crematorium basement plan

[Fig. 12, right]
Cemetery site plan

CIMETIÈRE & CENTRE FUNÉRAIRE DE MONTTOIE

FRÉDÉRIC BRUGGER
LAUSANNE, SWITZERLAND
1972

EARTH & FIRE

Replacing Lausanne's old temple-like crematorium – built in 1909 and demolished in 1973 – is Brugger's 1972 design for the cemetery and crematorium building, still in use to this day. Situated in a park with winding paths on a gradient [fig. 12], the crematorium building – organized around a courtyard – consists of three main volumes; two of which are so-called *chapels*, or ceremonial spaces, whilst the other is both administrative and for support activities, such as the mortuary, [fig. 10 and 11]. All cremation activities are hidden away in the basement, with just a chimney relaying the building's true purpose, visible from within the courtyard.

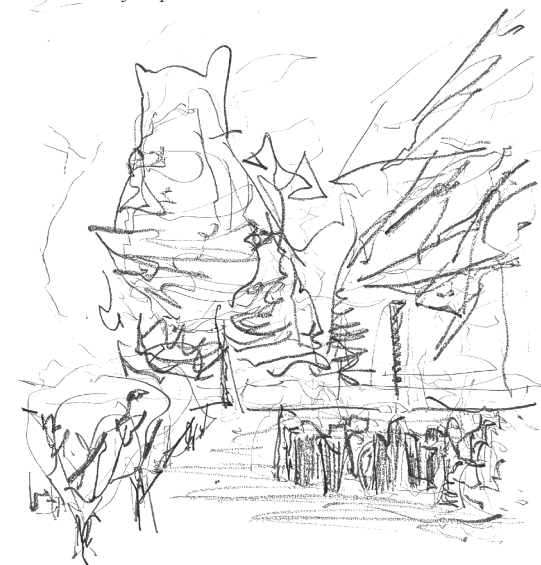
Upon entering the funerary complex, I am at first confronted by a round flower shop, standing proudly between the park's entrance, the crematorium, and the cemetery.

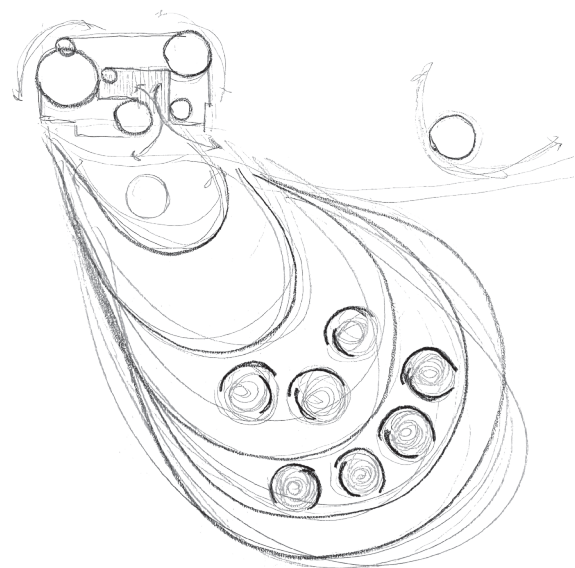
Walking down the meandering path towards the building, I am struck by the scale of the place: although not particularly big in terms of surface area, the dense vegetation and old, large trees render the edges of the space imperceptible, [fig. 13]. Although clearly identifiable through the sounds emanating from the 'outside' world of the living – the drone of cars, construction and roadworks – the park simultaneously feels as if it has no end: the relatively steep topography and concentric paths allow for many different passages through the landscape.

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through the DVD or QR code on p. 83

Centre Funéraire de Montoie
04:03-07:22

[Fig. 13, below]
*Sketch of the density of vegetation
and the imperceptible edges
of the space*





[Fig. 14, above]
Hugged by the building's curvature, meandering paths lead to protective columbaria

I find that, although it is confidently situated within the natural terrain, the complex is not particularly in line with any of the four classical elements. Whilst earth is perhaps the element with which we are able to identify most, neither the building nor the cemetery feel particularly ingrained within it. The graves, which are all buried cremated remains, no longer hold a body in its physical form, and as such feel less a part of the earth. Equally, fire is of course present during the act of cremation, yet is virtually unperceived by visitors and mourners: the basement technical area is inaccessible to the general public, and opens only to mourners, although how often this happens I would question. My father was probably cremated here, although we do not know for certain as we were never told by the funeral directors. There was no indication, at the time, of where and when the cremation was taking place, let alone that we even had the possibility of taking part in the final cremation committal.

Most successful in the space, I find, is the curvature inherent in the landscape [fig. 14], the building itself, and the columbaria, which present themselves as semi-circular walls in the sloping terrain, [fig. 16]. The winding paths are soothing and completative, whilst the building gently guides you to within its courtyard, almost hugging you as you walk past. The columbaria are intimate and recessed, providing semi-private spaces amongst nature, in which to reflect and spend some time amongst the dead.

I enjoy my time in the cemetery and its protective columbaria zones, and the 'chapels' are equally soothing, although containing religious symbolism is perhaps not so much of the times we live in. The indirect light within the chapels is appealing, helping to create an introspective state within, [fig. 17]. A bell in the landscape announces, symbolically, each passing of the dead into their new realm.



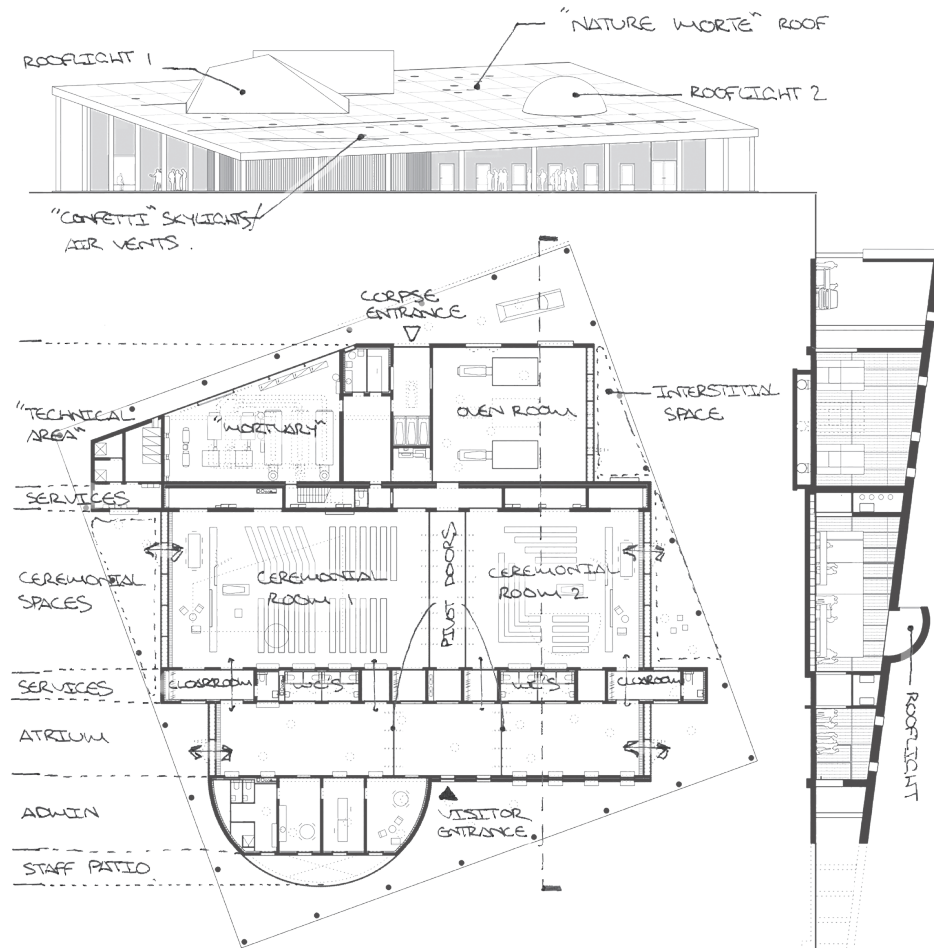
[Fig. 15, top left]
Meandering paths amidst a densely vegetated, grand park



[Fig. 16, bottom left]
A columbarium wall, hugging its visitors and sheltering from external forces



[Fig. 17, top right]
Interior of one of the 'chapel' spaces, with its organic 'altar' and indirect light from above



[Fig. 18, top]
Crematorium elevation
front entrance

[Fig. 19, right]
Crematorium plan

[Fig. 20, far right]
Crematorium section

POLDERBOS CREMATORIUM, OOSTENDE, BE

OFFICE KGDVS, RICHARD VENLET & BUREAU BAS SMETS
OOSTENDE, BELGIUM
2021

FIRE & WATER

In the polder landscape of Oostende, lies this crematorium by OFFICE KGDVS, in collaboration with the artist Richard Venlet and landscape architect Bas Smets. Finished in 2021, the building seeks to find a middle ground within the tension between the building's technical vocation and its equally important ceremonial character, a task found to be a challenge in many crematorium designs.

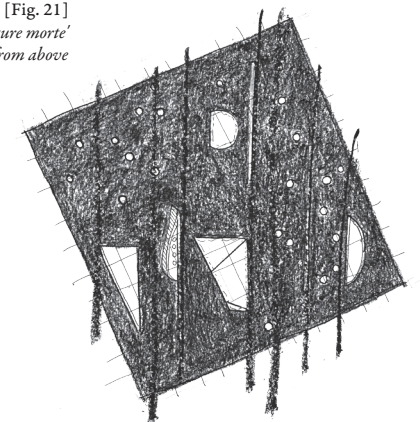
Inspired by the landscaped rows of trees surrounding it, the building's plan is organized as a system of seven strips of varying widths, depending on the function contained within, [fig. 19]. The form, a perfect square, is oriented to align with the adjacent road, such that the external form and grid of the plan collide. A planar roof sloping up from its lowest point at the main entrance to its highest point in the technical zone [fig. 18 and 20], displays what the architects call a 'nature morte' – a still life – which both displays certain goings-on of the interior with its two large skylights and smaller, so-called 'confetti' rooflights, yet also serves as a way in which to 'hide' the functional crematorium chimney (and air vents) in plain sight, [fig. 21].

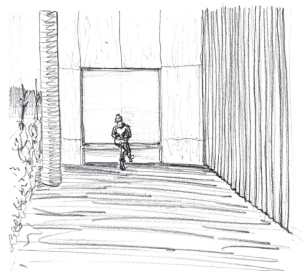
A building primarily defined by its outward expression, it sits within the flat wetlands as quite a foreign object, from some angles, at least until the landscaped trees have had some more time to grow, [fig. 26, p. 97]. Entering through a tree-lined path next to a giant parking lot, the building is elegant and somewhat mystical, largely

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through the DVD or QR code on p. 83

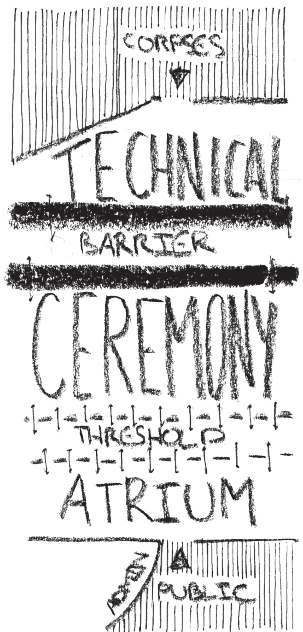
Polderbos Crematorium
07:25-11:49

[Fig. 21]
Sketch of roof 'nature morte'
as seen from above





[Fig. 22]
Sketch of interstitial spaces



[Fig. 23]
Diagram of spatial sequence
(Read in conjunction with plan)

due to its symbolic roof and its metallic façade, which carefully mediates that which is seen and that which is not: the outer skin ensures privacy and a sense of enclosure within, yet equally provides views from inside out onto the natural landscape, [fig. 27]. The roof, which is the dominant architectural form, is a symbolic and playful expression of particular individual functions, which works very well.

The parts of the building I enjoy most are the interstitial spaces created by the collision of the two distinct forms of the rotated square and functional strips, which provide areas around the building to sit, look out onto the polder, and to take a moment away from the ceremonial happenings surrounding the deceased, [fig. 22]. These covered, but outdoor areas, help to anchor the building into the earth, allowing visitors moments of silence, contemplation and fresh air.

Inside, the space is organized along a ceremonial route, with each space defined and separated from the next by functional 'walls', which are loadbearing, [fig. 23]. Upon entering, a large foyer with adjacent administrative spaces leads onto a services strip for cloakrooms, toilets, and the entrance space for each of the two ceremonial rooms. This liminal space is important for the purity of the central spaces, and the diffuse light admitted through the large, sculptural skylights helps to create a carefully considered atmosphere, [fig. 29]. For most, the journey ends here, with visitors being guided outside after a ceremony; the technical cremation spaces remaining behind closed doors.

Primarily a space for the living to remember the dead, death remains hidden within the depths of the carefully choreographed building. Whilst the space for the act of cremation and its ceremony are beautiful, and so is the landscape, the dispersal field is quite a sad final resting place; a small, fenced, mowed grass lawn.



[Fig. 24]
The 'back of house' entrance to the technical area, with its adjacent pond



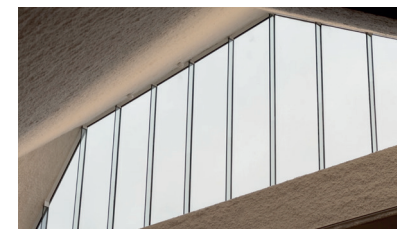
[Fig. 25]
The building disappearing behind the polder landscape

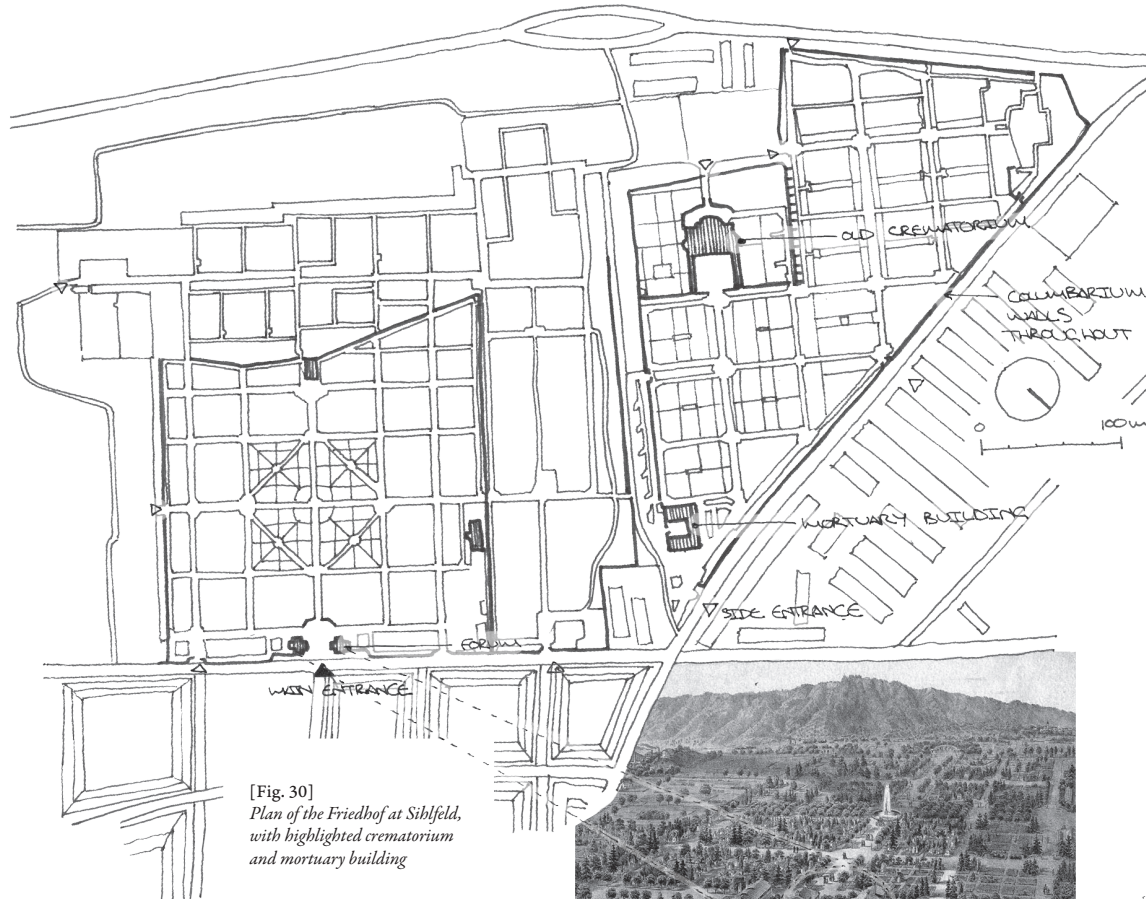
[Fig. 26]
The crematorium, lined by recently planted trees, as seen along the entrance sequence

[Fig. 27]
Metal skin façade, with cremation ovens just perceivable

[Fig. 28]
A ceremonial room skylight, confetti skylights, and technical outlet behind

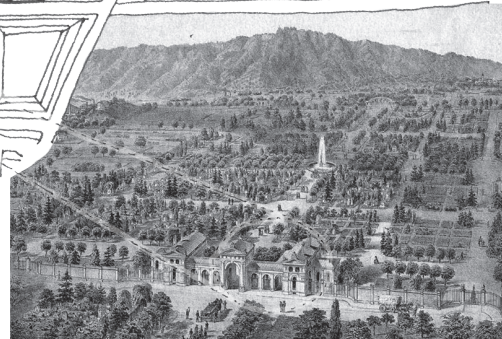
[Fig. 29]
The same skylight, as seen from inside the ceremonial room





[Fig. 30]
Plan of the Friedhof at Sihlfeld,
with highlighted crematorium
and mortuary building

[Fig. 31]
Overhead view of the Friedhof
and its monumental front
entrance



SIHLFELD CEMETERY, MORTUARY & CREMATORIUM

ARNOLD GEISER, ALBERT FROELICH,
FRIEDRICH FISSLER / BOSSHARD VAQUER ARCHITEKTEN
ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND
1877 / 1915 / 2007

EARTH & FIRE

Friedhof Sihlfeld was opened in 1877 as Zürich's first central cemetery following the transfer of funeral services from the Church to the State. Designed by Zürich's city architect at the time, Arnold Geiser, it is now both the largest cemetery and park in the city, at 288,000 m². Whilst at the periphery when first opened, the cemetery is now truly incorporated within the city of Zürich following its incorporation of various surrounding municipalities. Divided into five different zones, the monumental cemetery incorporates traditional burial, urn burial and columbaria, alongside an old crematorium and mortuary building, both of which are no longer in use.

When I enter the Friedhof through its monumental front gate, [fig. 31], I am immediately impressed by its immensity. A true city of the dead in scale, it feels strange to see a very large amount of empty plots of land, and people going on their morning runs or walks with their baby strollers. Encircled by a relatively low columbarium wall in comparison to the scale of the cemetery itself, the world of the living remains visible on all sides, [fig. 32, p. 101]. Not a true liminal sanctuary within the city, it is nevertheless a green haven for its inhabitants.

The mortuary and services building, initially designed by Friedrich Fissler in 1915 and renovated by Bosshard Vaquer in 2007, no longer functions as a mortuary, and has instead seemingly be-

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through the DVD or QR code on p. 83

Sihlfeld Cemetery, Mortuary & Crematorium
11:50-18:10

come a storage space for the city's coffins. Still used occasionally for some viewings, it is a building harking back to its 'Jugendstil' days, with a leaf-like motif running throughout the space, symbolizing the coming and going of life. Although the catafalques in which the dead bodies are rested for a few days are beautifully simple, they only serve to highlight the overbearing nature of the rest of the interior; [fig. 33]. The space is not at all calming, and although quiet as nobody else is there, I prefer not to imagine the noise – both acoustic and visual – of the space when filled with visitors.

Also opened in 1915 and in operation until 1992, the old crematorium by Albert Froelich is even more disconcerting, with a strange variety of styles and array of inexplicable symbolism. During my visit, I quickly skip over the spaces that are publicly accessible, and make my way down to the technical spaces in the basement; my first time in a crematorium's technical rooms – albeit no longer functioning. Whilst clearly outdated and no longer in use, it is a powerful feeling to finally see the inner workings of such a space, [fig. 36]. Hidden away, buried into the earth underneath the grand crematorium reaching towards the sky [seen in background, fig. 34], work in the basement must have been dark and hot, with the heat of the cremation ovens and stench of cigarette smoke streaming through the air. I appreciate the hatch doors leading the coffin to the 'other side' adjacent to the cremation space, allowing for final farewells, [fig. 35].

Although spatial and functional requirements for both the crematorium and mortuary building have undoubtedly changed over the years, I imagine their complete disuse also has something to do with the location of the cemetery. A newer crematorium – Krematorium Nordheim – has been opened further on the outskirts of the city, thus re-distancing death from the living.



[Fig. 32]
A columbarium wall with
surrounding context of the living



[Fig. 33]
Waiting hall for wakes in the
mortuary building



[Fig. 34]
Monumental gate and tree-lined
road leading to the crematorium



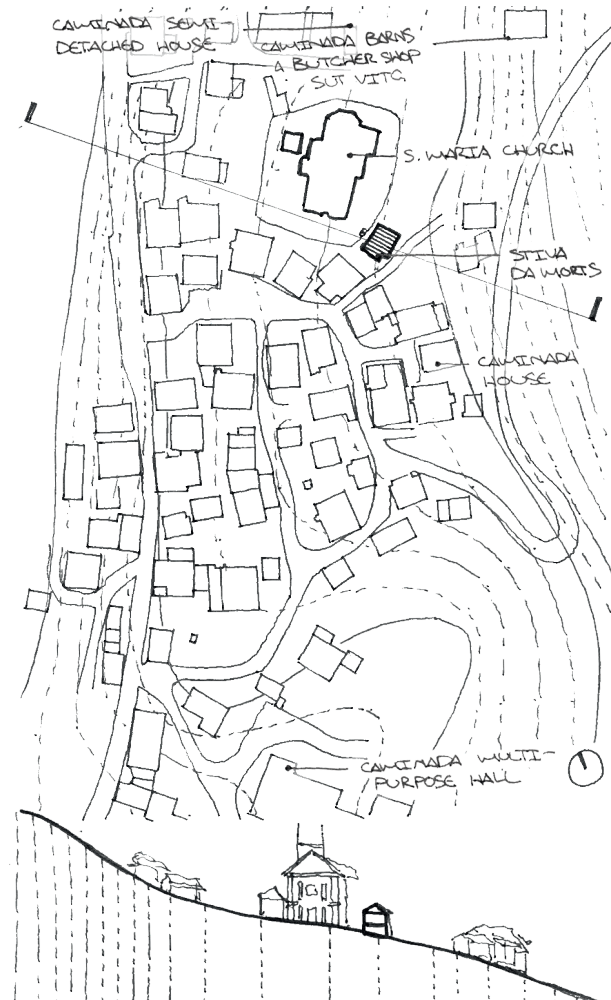
[Fig. 35]
Crematorium catafalque and
hatch door



[Fig. 36]
Crematorium technical
basement: an old oven



[Fig. 37, above]
*Stiva da Morts in its context
 (top right) in Vrin. The church is
 directly to its right, out of shot.*



[Fig. 38, right]
Sketched site plan and section

STIVA DA MORTS

GION A. CAMINADA
 VRIN, SWITZERLAND
 2002

EARTH & AIR

Gion Caminada – the son of a farmer from the Swiss mountain village of Vrin – is known for his many works in his place of birth, of which the most well-known is perhaps the *Stiva da Morts*: a 'room for the dead'. Situated adjacent to the local church, cemetery and ossuary (with its distinct *memento mori*, [fig. 43, p. 105], this community mortuary building provides a space for the dead and their mourning relatives, away from the home, yet in the village in which they want to be forever kept.

As funerary proceedings and death are ever-distanced from the rest of the living, the *Stiva da Morts* acts as a place of rest for those who do not want to remain or be viewed at home, or those who have died in hospitals or care homes outside of Vrin. Those who may no longer have a home in Vrin, but who may still like to be buried there, are also welcomed. In fact, the building is completely opened to the public for alternative uses or visits as long as no corpse lies within: the key can be found in the church next door.

When approaching the village of Vrin, with Caminada books by my side, it was striking to see how many projects he has conceived in his place of birth. Walking along the road into the center of the village, I see short glimpses of the mortuary building from behind the church. Although of similar construction to many of Caminada's other projects with its modern conception

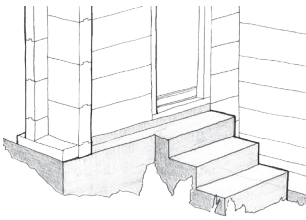
of 'strickbau', and prominent corner details, it is unique in its white-painted colouring. As a timber building, it stands out from its constructive equals around it through its distinct colour, yet fits seamlessly into the setting of the church. Standing atop a stepped concrete platform following the steep topography, both entrances have a pronounced threshold [fig. 39, 40 and 45], which helps the building to obtain an 'other' presence: no longer fully within the world of the living, this liminal space, albeit temporarily, allows close contact between the living and the dead.

The building has two floors, of which the lower floor is accessible and oriented towards the village, and has an open space taking up most of the floor area to view the corpse. The upper floor has a toilet and a more intimate room, to which both family members and visitors can disappear to for a moment of silence, or discussion away from the dead body. In contrast to the outside painted finish, the interior expresses its 'strickbau' construction with the same vigour, yet with a shellac coating, giving it a familiar, yet more sophisticated presence than the usual Vrin house interior, [fig. 44]. Various large windows provide views out onto the beautiful natural scenery, yet the interior does not feel overly open to the intrusive eye due to the deep recesses through the construction system.

Death in Vrin remains a community affair, with the church bells tolling to announce the death of a villager. Many villagers will visit the Stiva da Morts during the deceased's three-day-long wake, to say a final farewell and to pay respects and reminisce with those left behind. The Stiva is thus a vessel for the continued proximity to death in Vrin: in a society where everyone knows each other and has done for a long time, traditions, specifically those around death, are better maintained.



[Fig. 39]
Upper entry threshold



[Fig. 40]
Lower entry threshold



[Fig. 41]
Stiva da Morts in front of the church and amidst residential buildings



[Fig. 42]
Back access to the lower entrance



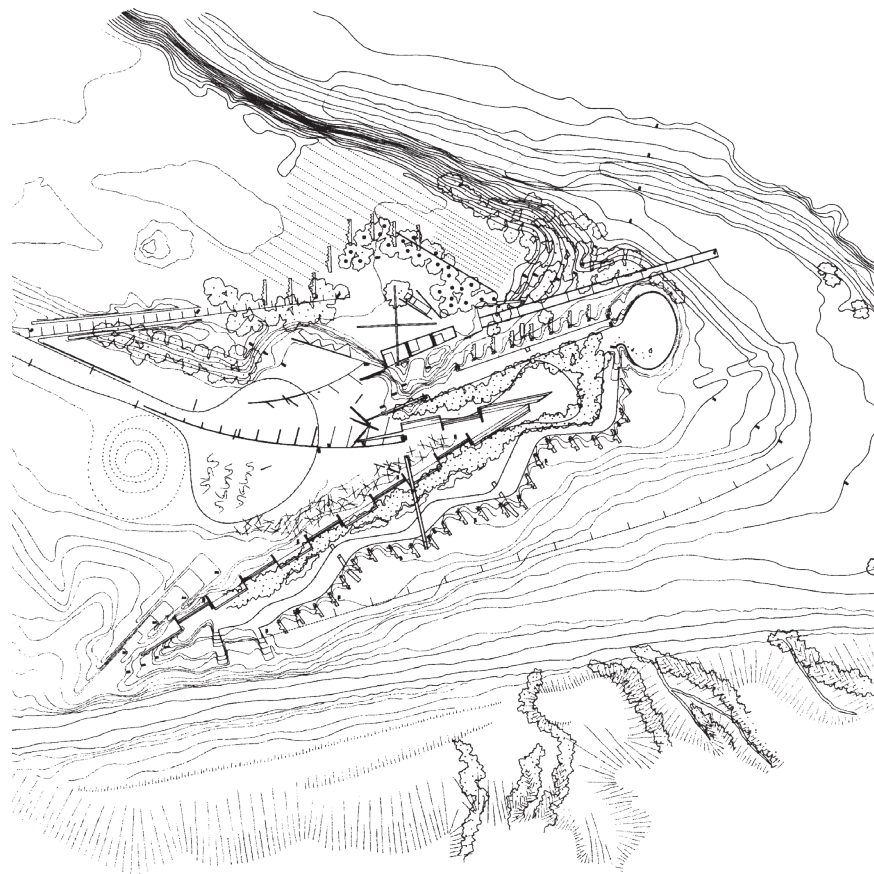
[Fig. 43, far left]
The church ossuary: vivid memento mori, reminding us of our inevitable destiny



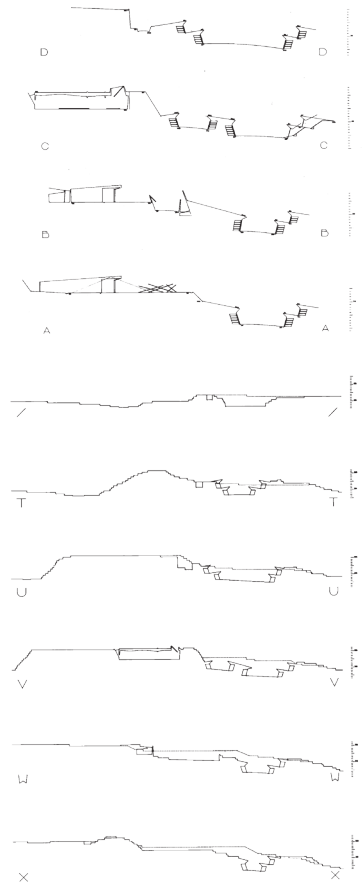
[Fig. 44]
Interior of the upper floor



[Fig. 45]
Lower entrance with its distinct threshold, concrete pedestal, and 'strickbau' corner detailing



[Fig. 46]
Site plan of the Igualada
cemetery complex



[Fig. 47]
A series of sections through the
processional cemetery route

IGUALADA CEMETERY

ENRIC MIRALLES & CARMÉ PINÓS
BARCELONA, SPAIN
1994

EARTH

Miralles and Pinós' competition-winning project has a strong architectural language, conceived as an earthworks embedded seamlessly into the Catalan hills, [fig. 46-48]. As a single, fluid progression up and down the terrain, the architects viewed the cemetery as a 'city of the dead', a place for the dead to rest and for visitors to come to terms with the cycles of life and death, and past, present and future.

The route is lined with dry stone walls and concrete *loculi*; above-ground tombs for the dead. Both the materiality and the way in which the route lies embedded into the landscape, relate closely to the classical element of *earth*. As mourners descend down into the landscape, they enter an in-between place, where the dead and the living are brought closer together. Although corpses are not directly placed into the soil, the *loculi* form cave-like niches dimensioned to the size of the human body, into what is almost perceived as the natural walls of the place, [fig. 48-50]. With its natural materials and earthy tones, the materiality of the cemetery further blends into its surroundings.

As a true architecture of the land, or the *earth*, the dead and bereaved are not only brought together, but are also closer to the nature that lives inside us. The memories embedded within us, as humans, persist until our own deaths, whilst the memory of the land persists significantly longer.

[Fig. 48]
Overview of the
cemetery complex



[Fig. 49]
The dry stone wall and
timber railway sleepers
set into the concrete
ground surface



[Fig. 50]
Detailed view of
loculi





[Fig. 51]
Plan of the Woodland Cemetery
for the initial 1915
competition entry

SKOGSKYRKOGÅRDEN WOODLAND CEMETERY

GUNNAR ASPLUND & SIGURD LEWERENTZ
ENSKEDE, SWEDEN
1917-1940

EARTH & FIRE

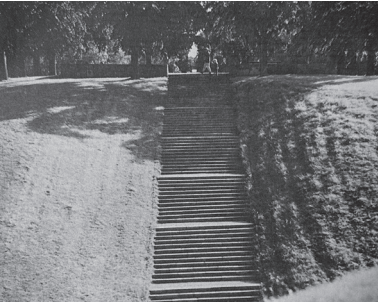
Having had a profound influence on cemetery design throughout the world, Asplund and Lewerentz's collaboration for the competition-winning project *Tallum* in 1915 started a 25-year-long work on the cemetery and its buildings, [fig. 51]. The competition emphasized the importance of the existing landscape's existing character, which Asplund and Lewerentz dutifully retained. Whilst working together on the masterplan, the architects often worked separately for the chapels, crematorium and service buildings.

Described as a 'tragic and sublime' landscape, visitors are taken on a journey when entering the cemetery, through grassy mounds and birch forests, [fig. 53-54]. The seemingly natural mounds were in fact designed by Asplund and Lewerentz as landscaped features, built up with material from the old quarry on the site. The magic of the site lies in its interplay between landscape and architecture – of nature, interspersed with subtly integrated buildings and graves.

Although significantly different in style and character, Asplund's *Woodland Chapel* and *Woodland Crematorium*, built around 20 years apart, are perhaps the most accomplished buildings in the landscape. Whilst the chapel remains "modestly subordinate" to its forest surroundings, the crematorium and its three chapels stand proudly, yet modestly, in plain sight and on the *Way of the Holy Cross*, [fig. 52].



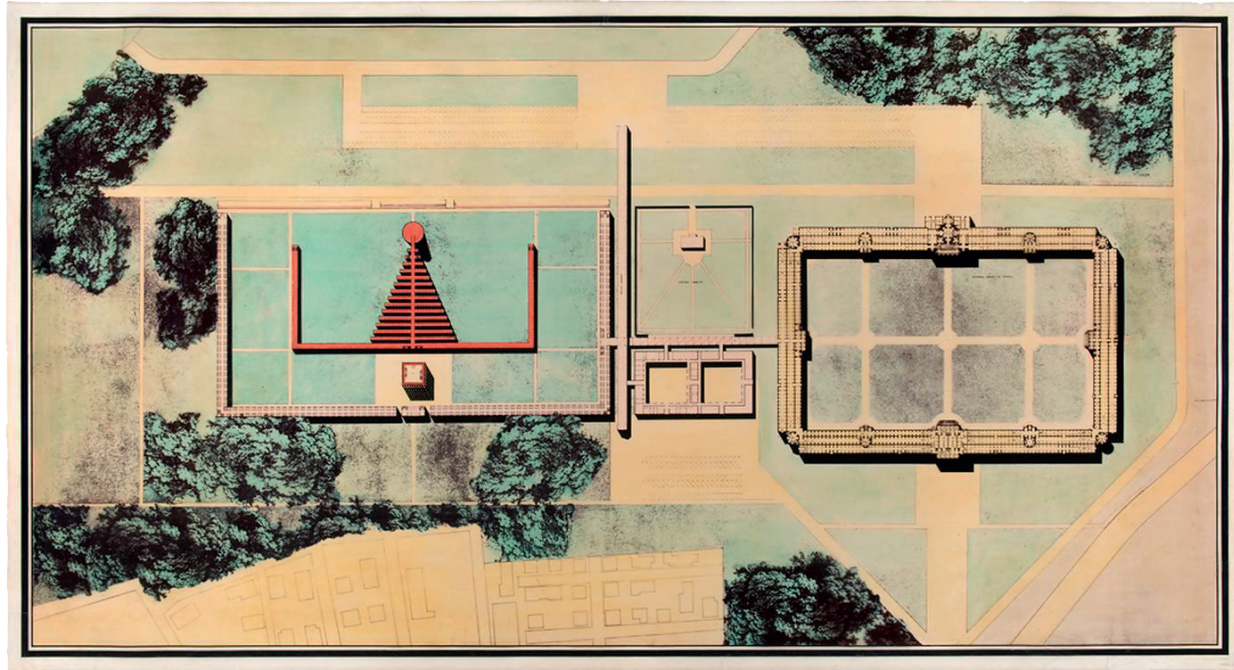
[Fig. 52]
*The Way of the Cross, with the
Woodland Crematorium
by Asplund behind*



[Fig. 53]
*Stairway up to the 'Grove of
Remembrance' and its mound*



[Fig. 54]
*The Woodland Cemetery:
a natural burial*



[Fig. 55]
Plan drawing of the San Cataldo cemetery next to the existing by Cesare Costa

SAN CATALDO CEMETERY

ALDO ROSSI & GIANNI BRAGHIERI
 MODENA, ITALY
 1971

EARTH & AIR

Responding to a national competition for the extension of an existing, neoclassical mid-nineteenth-century cemetery by Cesare Costa, Rossi and Braghieri chose to continue the existing cemetery's peripheral enclosure, placing their own design just beside, [fig. 55].

In plan and in Rossi's many drawings of the project, the cemetery is perceived as an enclosed rectangle in which a circle, triangle and square take their place in the center. The square – or cubic – structure is an ossuary; an empty structure with stairs and walkways along the inside. The triangular columbaria structures are mostly unbuilt, and so is the communal grave cone, or circle.

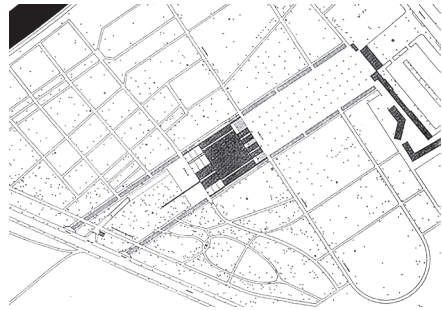
Although the cemetery is in use, empty space predominates, in part due to its design and in part for its being unfinished. Both the unfinished nature and the purity of forms relay a thoughtful consideration to its visitor, of contemplating the cycles of life and death; both those of the building and those of the human. Rossi has said that there is no distinction between architectures for the living and those for the dead, which is demonstrated by his seemingly domestic structures for housing the deceased. Through its incompletion, the project will never fall into ruin, as in a sense it has always been one. A timeless place for the dead to reside, this is perhaps unusually a better space for the dead than for the living. Reaching towards the sky through its vertical storing of remains, the dead are in a way removed from the usual ground plane.



[Fig. 56]
The cubic ossuary next to suburban apartment-like columbaria

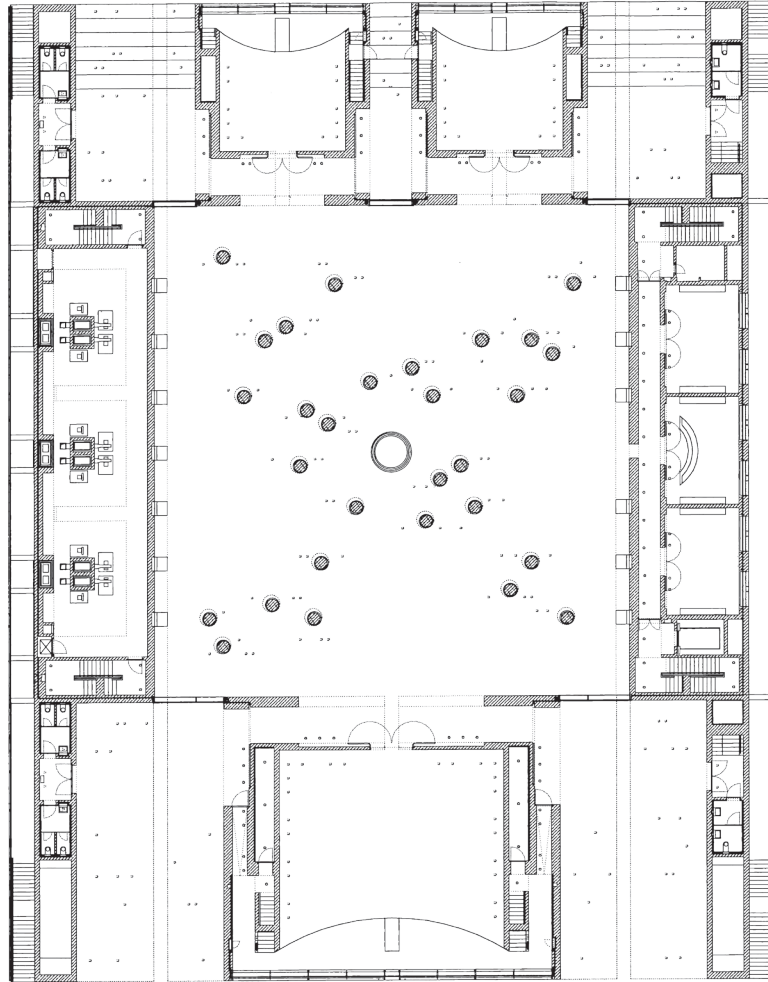


[Fig. 57]
View on the peripheral columbaria, from an elevated position in the ossuary



[Fig. 58, above]
Site planshowing
the crematorium within
its cemetery context

[Fig. 59, right]
Ground floor plan,
with central atrium, auditoria,
ovens and family rooms



BAUMSCHULENWEG CREMATORIUM

SHULTES FRANK ARCHITEKTEN
BERLIN, GERMANY
1999

AIR

The enormous Baumschulenweg crematorium in Berlin stands within the Baumschulenweg cemetery, which is relatively small in comparison to the building. Symmetrical about its longitudinal axis, the building is entered through one of two sliding doors, after which one enters into a magnificent atrium that appears to be a concrete forest with the dimensions of an urban square, [fig. 60-61]. The 29 'trees' – or round columns – bare the concrete roof and are attached by small brackets such that the roof almost seems to float, with the 'trees' piercing through its skin. The openings around each column allow rays of light to pierce into the space, changing constantly with the time of day and forming a symbolic pointing towards the sky. Like a forest with natural shafts of light, the columns organize the space into manageable 'clearings' for separate groups to congregate, organically separated.

Along with the *air* and the light that comes with it, a shallow circular fountain marks the center of the building, symbolically placing *water* inside. This fountain acts as a reflection pool, stimulating a sense of calmness and repose within, which together with the carefully selected sources of natural light, make of an interior space one with clear elements of the natural world. Three ceremonial rooms line the outside perimeter of the atrium, along with all other administration and technical spaces, which are kept out of view of the visitor. The 652 storage units in the mortuary below and the six cremation ovens are virtually imperceptible to the public.

[Fig. 60]
Central atrium
with wall split and
small water well



[Fig. 61]
Central atrium columns



[Fig. 62]
Auditorium with large
back window and light shaft



REFLECTIONS

Spaces of death are perhaps most important to the dying and the bereaved – the living – rather than the dead. For the dead themselves, the final resting place may be perceived as not so vital since either (1) we may have some kind of idea or belief about an after-life to which we will go, which means either a physical or spiritual parting from the body and where it lays, or (2) we may consider that death is the absolute cessation of life and is the end of our story on Earth, both as a physical and spiritual being. As such, the space to which our body is given after we die could be deemed as totally irrelevant, except for those who survive the dead.

Following up on the research in chapters I and II about the ways in which we perceive and treat death now and in the past, the 'catalogue' analyses existing contemporary spaces of death through these two lenses. Whilst it is evident that death and the processing of the dead body is often hidden in these examples, it also becomes clear that many projects are lacking a strong elemental connection to the world in which we live. Due to this, I see a clear division between the examples, not just in relation to their effectiveness regarding the elements, but rather as three different types:

(1) The first are spaces in which the body is treated and prepared for viewings and for removal from the world of the living. The examples are morgues and community wake spaces, like *Stiva da Morts* and the mortuary at Sihlfeld.

(2) The second are spaces in which the physical remains of a dead person are laid to rest, which here take the form of cemeteries, ossuaries, *loculi*, columbaria, and dispersal fields.

(3) And third, spaces that perform an act of processing of the physical body, to remove its physical and spatial presence. In the previous examples these are all crematoria.

Within these three subgroups of the contemporary examples examined here – all of which pertain to a Western European culture – we see that the first – in which bodies are prepared – in general lacks any notion of the elements. As a hygienic space completely inside the realm of the living, cleanliness and pure functionality are perhaps favoured over determining a closer connection to nature, the outside, and our innate sense of being. The second subgroup – the spaces in which physical remains are kept – relate most often to the *earth* and sometimes to the sky; the *air*. As the two *spatial* elements, it would make sense that these spaces of 'permanent' rest lie within these two categories. And finally, the third subgroup – in which the physical presence of the body is changed – relates in the examples solely to *fire* as the element of destruction and change, but may also at times relate to *water*: both the *active* elements.

The spaces in which the physical remains of the dead body are laid to rest are perhaps the most visceral and tangible way in which to relate the dead to the world of the living. In the cemetery, for example, we may see a small mound of earth above a grave for a short while following inhumation. This is usually quickly planted over with flowers, however, or covered with a gravestone or other monument to the deceased. Whilst this loses a part of its elemental character, the monumental act is one of permanence. In fact, permanence is what we would generally hope it would be, yet this is no longer the case: due to spatial

shortages, the monuments to the dead are often removed after 20-30 years, making space for a new, 'permanent' monument for the next corpse, and so the cycle continues.

In Vrin, *Stiva da Morts* – a space specifically designed for the gathering of people around a corpse – works well within its context as a community building, with its primary function being the treatment of the dead and their public viewing. However, this only works in a community where people know each other, where they still talk to each other in the streets and come together for community gatherings. Whilst not particularly in line, directly, with any of the elements, its seamless integration into its territory as an object or a space that makes sense – in its setting and for who it was designed – makes it truly successful. In contrast though, in more globalised cities where many different cultures and ways of dealing with the dead come together, how can we obtain the same kind of relationships and spatial responses to the dead? How can our contemporary spaces of death – those for burial or cremation, for example – be designed for a return to an elemental worldview, one tied to nature, that respects and allows varied processes, rituals, and requirements for the dead? Would current views and priorities in our living arrangements even allow this?

The crematoria – particularly those of OFFICE and Schultes Frank Architekten in Oostende and Berlin – use light, powerful artistic conception and play with natural symbolism to create functional spaces in which the dead can be remembered. Although hiding away their primary function – that of cremation – this is due to a societal fear of death, the dead, and the processes with which we change their physical form, rather than any con-

ceptional faults. The buildings respond to the societal norms of today's Western Europe, which are to avoid, as much as possible, death and the emotions that come with it. Many people probably would prefer not to think too much about their loved one being burned to ashes in an oven, yet there must be some further connection to this act to obtain a more complete understanding of the realities surrounding death. How can architecture enhance the rituals surrounding the processing of the dead, to become more accustomed to these practices as a community, and consequently as a society?

CONCLUSION

(Re)Defining Architectures of Death



Overleaf [Fig. 01]
*Dropping a Wall, from
the construction of Lower
Manhattan, 1967*

(RE)DEFINING ARCHITECTURES OF DEATH

Connecting the worlds of the dead and the living is an act of accepting our mortality, allowing space for mourning, for acknowledgement, and for the deep existential thinking required to make life meaningful and death acceptable. Questioning our mortality thus inherently leads to the existential, to a questioning of life itself. What is the point of life, and how do we reach a point of contentedness, such that death becomes acceptable? Is it possible to reach a point in life where we can say we have done everything we wanted to do, where the people around us can accept our death?

This work is an exploration of the ways in which we approach death now and have done throughout history: psychologically, metaphysically, and spatially. It investigates various ways in which we deal with the dead globally, in line with the four classical elements – which can explain, in some sense our place within nature – before moving to a brief overview of various contemporary Western European spaces of death and the issues around these responses to the question of the dead body and its processing.

Death is the cessation of life: the human body is a machine that ceases to exist when it breaks, physically. That which remains – the corpse – needs to be dealt with in some way, to remove it from the day-to-day life of the living. This act of removal is done in such a way that it relates to the beliefs held by the communities doing the ‘removal’, such that the deceased is respectfully dealt with in a way that they, and the other parties involved, are content with.

We fear dying too soon and are perhaps affected most by the death of a loved one and the void that is left behind. Death is more difficult for the living than for the dead because the dead are inherently dead and can no longer contemplate their lack of

existence. The void they leave behind is felt by those who survive them. Although in some way they may never leave, through memories, genetic offspring, videos, or taught ideals, for example, their personal being is no longer present, even though their physical body often remains in some capacity. The fear of dying too soon, therefore, is the reason for our ever-present desire to extend life, through technology, medicine, and the conception of immortality projects like the afterlife. Our increasing secularity and consequent decrease in the beliefs of an immortality project perhaps evermore increase our fear of dying too soon, such that we often choose to ignore it.

In order to regain a wider understanding of our meaning in life and our place on Earth, we must re-admit death, grief and mourning into the world of the living. Sacred space, not pertaining to a religion but rather as an in-between space – an alternate reality – provides this ‘other’ space with a distinctly ‘other’ relation with time.

Over time and throughout the world, dealing with the dead has been a question of cultural, religious, and territorial reasoning. All approaches play in some way with the separation of the dead body from the world of the living into an ‘outside’ realm, most often with a ritual marking the passage from the world of the living to that of the dead. Whether the body remains as a physical marker in the earth, or is totally dispersed in the air or water, through the effects of fire or animalistic desire, is dependent on the beliefs and traditions of particular communities. The four classical elements can help us to classify and understand into which realm the deceased enters upon death, and to what particularities said communities are most attached.

The two most common ways of dealing with the dead in our Western European society are burial and cremation. Burial, as the oldest of the funerary traditions, is perhaps the most straightforward, in that we dig a human-sized hole into the earth, place the body inside, and place all the displaced earth back on top of the corpse. In this way, all that remains is a small mound of earth of the same rough volume of the human body. The deceased is out of view and protected from all surface-dwelling creatures, and all that happens underneath the soil is imperceptible so does not need to be worried about. We dispose of the corpse in its physical form, requiring space to do so. We monumentalize the body and the space it uses, which ideally will never be used again for anyone else.

In many Western European countries, like in Switzerland, cremation has overtaken burial as the most often chosen method of corpse ‘disposal’, by a significant margin. As a more industrialized, more space-efficient, and apparently more hygienic way of dealing with the dead, the physical body and the space left behind with it, is disappearing rapidly. As a response to an apparent need for radical efficiency and spatial prioritizing (towards the living), cremation is a violent act of spatial eradication. As if by magic, the physical remains of a body disappear within a few hours.

As our world is forever striving for efficiency, hygiene, standardization, and artificiality, we are disregarding our metaphysical relation to the Earth, from which we stem. This exploration thus gives rise to the following questions, which are only partially resolved here, and require perhaps a physical, architectural exploration:

1. *How can we bridge the gap between ourselves and the elements, in life and death? How can our spaces of death be designed for a return to a more elemental worldview?*
2. *In the globalized cities of today, where many cultures and ways of dealing with the dead come together, (how) can we ensure a positive all-encompassing spatial response to the dead?*
3. *And finally, how can architecture help to bring the worlds of the dead and the world of the living closer together?*

To respond to these questions, I feel it is necessary to consider the following factors as vital to our spaces of death, for a more intertwined existence within life and death:

1. *Being 'outside': a return to nature and the four elements.*
2. *Transparency: death must be less hidden.*
3. *A liminal quality: neither purely of the living nor the dead.*
4. *A monumental quality: provoking existential thinking.*

Wim Cuyvers, whom I met at his refuge at *Les Montavoies*, defines architecture in opposition to being 'just a building,' as spaces that provoke the existential within us; that make us reflect.¹ In order for this to happen, he says, architecture must be space that allows us to 'be outside', amongst the elements: space

¹ Cuyvers, Wim.
Interview at Les Montavoies.
24 October, 2023.

that has aspects of both animality and of the sublime, and where we go to look for an essence, and to be conscious. Within such spaces, we can obtain moments of existential being, and eventually this has the potential of becoming a more permanent acceptance of our mortality.² To be able to die, therefore, it is the elemental 'outside' that we need, and for spaces to be architecture, they must engage with the problem of our mortality. Within this are included buildings that engage with nature but do not pervert it, as true nature also renders the passing of time more visible. The passing of time every day, the changing seasons, and the growing or dying of trees over many long years, all bring us towards a greater relation with time. Ruins, deserted buildings or quarries, or other spaces which may have been maintained but express their passing of time, are further potential examples of structures that help us to consider the existential. The monument, as something that is frequently returned to, also has the potential to emphasize the passing of time through our experience of it at different stages of its – and our – life.

*"...it is my contention that the moment of architecture is that moment when architecture is life and death at the same time, when the experience of space becomes its own concept. In the paradox of architecture, the contradiction between architectural concept and sensual experience of space resolves itself at one point of tangency: the rotten point, the very point that taboos and culture have always rejected. This metaphorical rot is where architecture lies. Rot bridges sensory pleasure and reason."*³

Bernard Tschumi

² Cuyvers, Wim. *DE-AD*.
Kasterlee: Frans Masereel
Centrum, 2022.

³ Tschumi, Bernard.
Architecture and Disjunction.
Cambridge, Massachussets:
The MIT Press, 1996. 74-76.

⁴Verschaffel, Bart.
"The Monumental: On the
Meaning of a Form."
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4, no. 4 (1999): 334.

Spaces of death must be less hidden within the world of the living, such that we live metaphorically closer to the dead. These spaces must be sacred, however, in that they must neither be a part of the world of the living nor of the dead, but rather a liminal space in which we appreciate time in a more conscious state. We notice the passing of time via movement or change, in comparison to that which is slow or heavy: We must therefore be able to obtain some kind of monumentalisation of both individual and collective spaces of death, related strongly to the natural, animalistic, and spiritual world, to make explicit the connection between the dead and the living.⁴ What is more monumental than nature itself?

There exists not one, single response to how we can bring the living closer to the dead, or the dead closer to the living, as this must be determined on an individual basis. Spaces of death should be liminal between the living and the dead, places withdrawing themselves from further use. They must, however, have a spatial presence in our everyday lives, diverting our attention away from the banalities of life to provoke continuous clarity about that which is truly important: living existentially with a distinct awareness of our mortality.

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