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The form of absence.

Reflections on the city, memory, and monuments, starting from Luigi Snozzi's project for Brunswick, Germany

Abstract

When architecture is called to give shape to what is no longer there, the art of building faces the challenge of transposing the emptiness of loss into an image. It then finds itself having to fix a certain temporal segment within the dynamic flow of collective memory, to root the event it has been asked to represent within the specific character of a place, to define a precise image – among the many possible ones – which contributes to locating that trauma within the choral narrative it is a part of. By questioning the potential implicit in the intimate link that exists between construction and destruction, we come face to face with a reflection on the relationship between memory and the city, starting from an investigation around a project in which an erased urban reality is reconstructed in the negative in the ground, like an imprint, while it itself is translated into a monument.

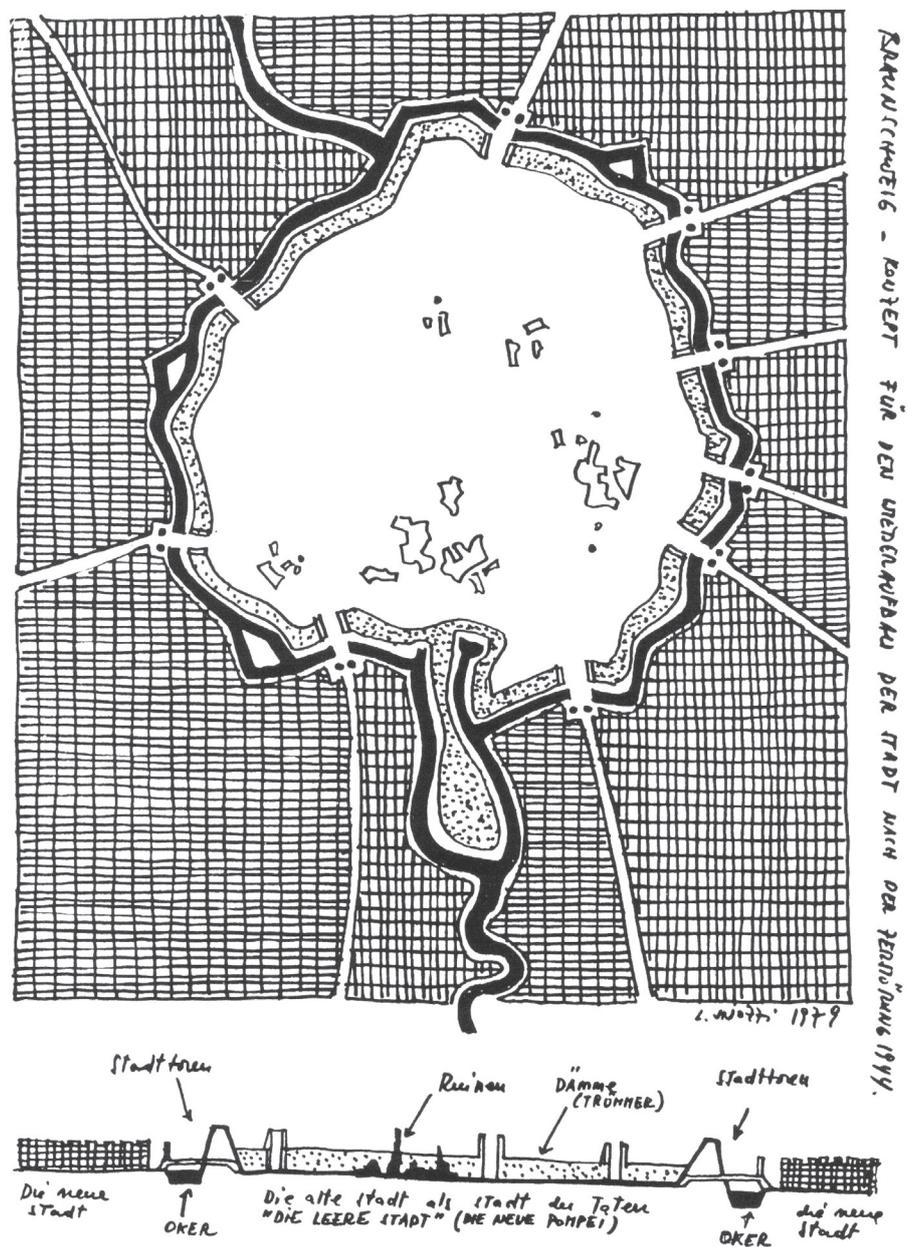
Keywords

Figuration — Monument — Heterotopia

Quand sur l'abîme un soleil se repose,
Ouvrages purs d'une éternelle cause,
Le Temps scintille et le Songe est savoir.
(Valéry 1920)

Upon reasoning over the theme of representing absence, the idea starts to emerge that, ultimately, thinking is nothing more than returning to the origins. Pursuing this logic, an investigation of the project of spaces dedicated to the passage from life to death, or of places appointed to pass on the memory of a traumatic event – but more precisely to represent the civilization that was affected by it – becomes an opportunity for a reflection on the relationship between architecture, city, and monument. And, at the same time, a point of synthesis in the dialectic between time and memory in architecture. When architecture is called upon to give shape to what is no longer there, insoluble aporias become evident. In the tension between rooting and transformation, between experimentation and denial of form, the art of building collides with its powerlessness to transpose the emptiness of loss into an image. This condition should not be interpreted as a limit, but as an opportunity for reflection on the symbolic and evocative potential of the architectural project, seen as the rewriting of a place through a montage of heterogeneous times capable of questioning the “eternal present”.

During the first lockdown of 2020 – an instrument for containing the health emergency due to the spread of COVID-19 – the urban form, so neglected – not to say denied – in the debate which prevails in the contemporary world, involuntarily found itself at the centre of reflections from different sectors of culture.

**Fig. 1**

Luigi Snozzi, Braunschweig [Brunswick] *Konzept für den Wiederaufbau der Stadt nach der Zerstörung 1944, "Die leere Stadt - das neue Pompei"*, 1979

Photographers and artists documented our deserted cities, with images of empty public spaces, ghostly, yet at the same time extraordinarily eloquent, given that they had been restored to their nature of space, measure, and form. The space of the community, as a pure system of relationships, declares the metaphysical nature of architecture, which translates the dimension of absence into a figure. The heritage value of the public space became tragically affirmed when people were unable to live it. At the same time, death returned to being a part of everyday life, in a society which no longer recognized it as «a defined place or space/time» (Baudrillard J. 2009, p. 139), a fact which profoundly undermined the capacity for a collective reaction.

Meanwhile, the ongoing health emergency has made us completely blasé to the daily victim count. Elias Canetti (2014, p.11) recognized the inhumanity implicit in the act of counting itself, as the annulment of the dignity of a single death: «It all begins with the counting of the dead... A dead man and another dead man are not two deaths».



Fig. 2
Luigi Snozzi, Braunschweig
[Brunswick], model, 1979.

If, therefore, the pandemic has urgently reintroduced reflection on the tension between individual memory and collective memory, the investigation of a project manifesto in which the urban form, when empty, crystallizes into a monument, is absolutely up-to-the-minute. Nor does it seem immaterial that its author, Luigi Snozzi, has only recently passed away.¹

In 1979, this architect from the Canton of Ticino designed a proposal to reconstruct the Old Town of Brunswick, a city in Lower Saxony reduced to a pile of rubble by the Allied powers towards the end of the Second World War. The project envisioned using the huge amount of debris as a building material to define an enclosure which would reproduce the layout of the Baroque city walls, surrounded by the waters of the Oker River; inside, it would leave a large empty space, where it would be possible to read the imprint of the historical city on a 1:1 scale, which the architect himself (Snozzi L., 1984, p.34). defined an “urban X-ray”. Accordingly, the design of the ancient city would be visible thanks to the trace of the foundations of the built fabric which once gave a form to this urban setting. In this negative morphology, only the volumes of the main civil and religious buildings would emerge, among which the figure of the Braunschweiger Schloss would stand out, which was instead entirely demolished in 1960 and reconfigured in 2005 into a new organism which has retained only the ancient style of the façade, unlike other historic buildings patiently rebuilt from what had escaped destruction. In his model, we can recognize the churches with their fronts crowned by towers, which in various historical engravings represent one of the characterizing elements of this townscape. Brunswick was the capital of a duchy twice, first in the 12th century, during the reign of Heinrich der Löwe [better known in English as “Henry the Lion”, t/n], then from 1671 when it belonged to the Dukes of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, who, by choosing to reside there from 1753, transformed it into a lively centre of Enlightenment culture.

What remains of that condensed architecture and culture after the air raids of the night between 14 and 15 October 1944 most probably resembled a lunar landscape, and the death toll, in this case, verged on the extreme. As described by Kurt Vonnegut (2007, pp. 164-65), who witnessed first-hand another extreme destruction:



Fig. 3
Alberto Burri, *Grande Cretto Gibellina*, aerial view

[...] the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighbourhood was dead [...] Their wood had been consumed, and their stones had crashed down, had tumbled against one another until they locked at last in low and graceful curves [...] the survivors, if they were going to continue to survive, were going to have to climb over curve after curve on the face of the moon.

With life cancelled, Snozzi chose to freeze the atrocity of the tragedy in a mineral mould: «The ancient city as a city of the dead. The empty city (the new Pompeii)», as we find written on one of his project drawings. The central void, the space of the community, declares the metaphysical dimension of architecture which translates destruction into a monument, without reconciliation.

In other words, it is the celebration of the end of a civilization, of which this monument – conceived thirty-five years after the event, in the midst of the debate on the role of urban design in relation to history and places – represents the sepulchre: an international and secular memorial. Indeed, in funeral rites, as Alessandro del Bufalo wrote (1992, p. 15), sepulchres «are called upon to play the role of lasting and unequivocal survival certificates, of memories in stone». In this sense, the project does not raise the problem of passing on the memory of the victims, the losers or the winners, but is partisan of a single cause, namely, that of the city as a collective work.

In this same regard, it is interesting to remember that Luigi Snozzi, speaking of the reasons which inspired him to undertake the profession of architect, declared (Croset P. A., Peghin G., Snozzi L., 2016, p.43) the importance which a famous statement of Carlo Cattaneo had during the

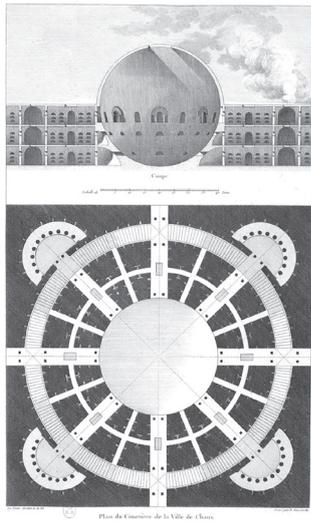


Fig. 4

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *Le cimetière de la ville de Chaux*. Plan and section. In *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*. Tome 1, 1804. Source: Gallica.BnF.Fr/BnF.

years of his training at Zurich Polytechnic: «A region distinguishes itself from wilderness by the following: it is a huge deposit of human fatigue [...] this earth therefore is no longer the work of nature, it is the oeuvre of our hands, it is an artificial homeland»². With this awareness, the architect assumes the act of modification implicit in the project as a determining fatality, going beyond the vision of those who, believing themselves champions in safeguarding historical and environmental heritage, understand it as a definitive fact, while actually decreeing its death. Snozzi did not imagine a celebration of the return to nature as a memorial, but a descent into the origins of this artificial homeland, whose genetic heritage is engraved in the urban structure revealed by its foundations.

At the same time, however, Snozzi's proposal did recognize the mourning of the historic city and sought to celebrate its rite of passage, projecting the design invention towards the future. In an engineering spirit, around the void he built a colossal substructure, conceived as a barrier to separate the city of the living from that of the dead; in this way, the architect differentiated between the debris, which he used to build this new border, and the rubble which shaped the memory of ancient urban artefacts. This new enclosure was marked by a sequence of urban gates, connected to the road network which defined the grid of the new settlement, in line with the figure of the walled city, as a composition of regular geometries with differing orientations; these traced and reinterpreted the pattern of the cultivated fields, as it appeared in historical representations attached to the preparatory drawings.

The built fabric of the new city was to be located entirely outside the moat surrounding the walls, in a dialectical tension with the ancient city to which it is connected via a system of bridges. The bridge is the element which demonstrates the multi-scale value of the architecture, which summarizes the entire urban solution in the detail of a single device. The design choice condensed the sacredness of the rite of foundation of the new city in the regular layout governing the new settlement, measuring the territory and projecting the dimension of the new urban nature onto the geographical scale; while, at the same time, the dimension of absence was moulded in the material forming the ground for the central void, through signs which evoke the figures to which the community attaches a heritage value.

Significantly, the title of the article with which Snozzi (1984, p. 34) presented his project in the magazine *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* is *Ein neues Stadtkonzept - Denkmal der Zerstörung*, embedding the new vision in the monument to cancellation which makes it necessary. In the last line of the short text we read: «Every human intervention presupposes a destruction», and the architect takes full responsibility for this, reversing this inseparable link in a positive way.

It is the desire to cancel the opposition between birth and death that makes the project a crystalline affirmation, not only on architectural and urban levels, but also of a social and political nature. In an interview (Gambaro M., Snozzi L., 2015, p. 310), Snozzi stated: «It would have been the first European city with an empty city centre, the dream of my ideal city. Obviously, the project has not been approved. I think the essence of the public space and in particular of the square is right in this metaphysical dimension in which architecture defines and circumscribes an empty space».

The form of absence, therefore, celebrates in a single figure the memory of what has been lost and, at the same time, the foundation rite of what

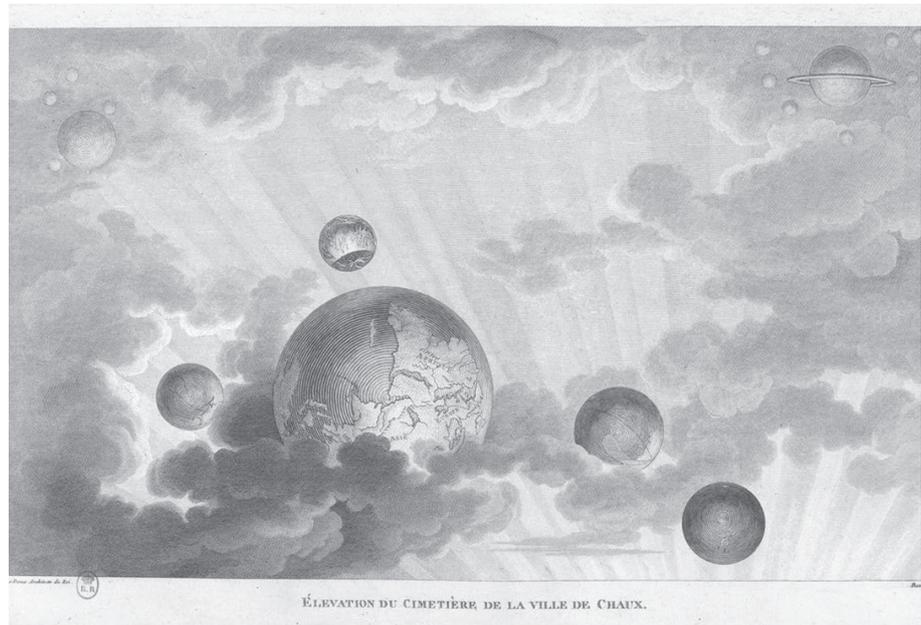


Fig. 5

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *Élévation du Cimetière de la ville de Chaux*.

In *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs et de la législation. Tome 1*, 1804.
Source: Gallica.BnF.Fr/BnF

is to come, in a sort of circular movement. According to Jean Baudrillard (2009, pp. 145-146) our culture, in the progressive deepening of its rationality, has come to 'de-socialize' death, while the primitives carried out the symbolic operation of initiation which «does not aim to avoid death nor to 'overcome it', but to articulate it socially», in a reciprocal exchange, thereby avoiding the division between birth and death, while transcending the disorder implicit in passing away. In the same essay, published in 1976 in Paris, the philosopher identified the moment of extradition of the dead as one of the crisis points of Western urban culture, which reserves for them neither fiscal nor mental space: «The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function... » (Baudrillard J., 2009, p.139).

A few years after Snozzi's project, a major artist, Alberto Burri, conceived a work which amplified, in both a physical and conceptual sense, the experiment he had previously carried out in his works *Cretti*, capable of crowding the memory and raising multiple echoes, as if they were prehistoric works built by the hands of giants. It is the way of being of the work of art, without limitation of time, both far-off and nearby, which Cesare Brandi defined as "abstention", «a full presence, a dynamic presence, a real unreality» (Brandi C., 1979, p.947).

The *Grande Cretto Gibellina* (1981-1984-2015) is a landscape artwork, whose historical-civil significance consists in veiling and, at the same time, highlighting the memory of the city destroyed by the Belice earthquake back in 1968. The pedestrian routes criss-crossing the old city – 20km from the new one – built by compacting and covering the rubble with concrete at a constant height, conjure up both the catastrophe and the inextinguishable memory of it.

The image of the empty sacred enclosure made from rubble as designed by Snozzi, reread in this interpretation, recalls another powerful representation of the drama of modern humans and their relationship with death. Is this not architecture in stone, one of the various versions that have been designed for the famous pagan rite – sacrificial, propitiatory or initiation – as represented by Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, conceived and composed between 1911 and 1913 for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company?

On the 3rd of December 1975, at the Opera House in Wuppertal, in North Rhine-Westphalia – a city which, incidentally, from the occurrence of the bombings saw destruction of “only” 40% of its buildings – the German choreographer Pina Bausch sent her whole company, half women and half men, all barefooted, onto a stage completely covered with earth. There was no other scenery, and for almost forty minutes the bodies of the dancers traced the movements of a dance obligated by death on this irregular dusty surface, while on the floor lay a red cloth, the only symbol of the sacrifice which must necessarily be made. In the fourth episode of the first part, *Spring Rounds*, the men and women drew a circle, using their bodies to trace out the archetypal figure of every ancestral dance, but also of the primitive shelter or of the first home of humanity, as well as its first funerary mound. In this epic vision, birth and death renewed each other, until their opposition was resolved in the primeval dimension. On the contrary, the masculine and the feminine remained clearly separate and in dialectic opposition – but this is the subject of other musings. The recovery of the archaic dimension which had animated Stravinsky at the beginning of the twentieth century, was radicalized by the German choreographer, who reinterpreted it as a necessary rite for contemporary humans to re-establish their culture and find a place for the demons who populate it.

Stravinsky – whose *Poetics of Music* was one of the fundamental texts on which Luigi Snozzi based his teaching – was not the only one to perceive the demand for a return to the origins in the first two decades of the twentieth century. All the avant-garde movements born in the most vital season of European culture shared this necessity, each interpreting it in diverse ways, while raising the problem of the conflict between life and death which modern humans, and the metropolis which represents them, are unable to find a place for.

In the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, André Breton (2003) wrote: «Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions». Yet, the atrocity of the totalitarian regimes which would soon put an end to this intense moment of international exchange of artistic sensibilities, together with the barbarism of the ensuing Second World War, were indeed to overturn these values, but in a different direction, that of the annihilation of mankind. In the tension of this watershed, Luigi Snozzi planned the rite of a return to the origins and, at the same time, a passage towards a future which his design still had the will and ability to aspire to, laying the groundwork for it.

Which brings us back to thinking about the rhythm of our progress as architects, governed by a complex dynamic made up of fractures and conflicts, but also of the possibility of intertwining the fibres of time, eluding chronology, giving rise to distant dialogues, references, and returns. It can happen that projects and theories contain more future than the contemporaries observing them can read. At which point, it is the present that can bring to attention the relevance of a distant experience, providing new keys to interpretation.

In conclusion, then, how might we define this urban vision for Brunswick? On several occasions it has been considered a utopian project. Analysing in depth the logic on which it is built, however, it is clear that it can more properly be defined as a heterotopia. In saying *heterotopia*, direct reference is made to the definition given in 1966 by Foucault (1980, pp. 7-8):

The utopias console: because even though they do not have a real place, they unfold into a wonderful and even space [...] also if their access is chimerical. The heterotopias are disturbing, no doubt because they secretly undermine the language, because they prevent naming this and that, because they break down the common names or they entangle them, because they 'syntax' is broken up beforehand and not only that which constructs the phrase – but also that which is less obvious which makes words and things 'stay together' (some on the other side or others facing them).

In other words, this is a project which unhinges the categories, subverts the relationship between city and memorial, between necropolis and polis and, starting from the archetypal figure of the enclosure, asks questions about the future of the city, about the rites which pass on its memory. Snozzi recovered an archaic dimension in which the sacred space, the place of the dead, was separate from the urban body, but inseparable from it.

In the conflict between the city of the living and the city of the dead, urban contexts have steered their process of transformation in numerous ways, and innumerable responses have been built upon this dialectic which, in turn, have oriented architectural practices in diverse ways. Since the end of the 18th century,³ the Age of Enlightenment, reasons of a cultural nature and, at the same time, of a hygienic nature, banished burial places from the city, opening up a vast problem of codification and planning, but reconstructing that separation which had characterized the ancient city in certain cultures, for example those of the Etruscans, where, as Paolo Portoghesi wrote: «The city of the dead acquires a value which almost doubles the city of the living, with characteristics which make necropolises resemble cities and tombs resemble houses»⁴.

It therefore appears pertinent, in conclusion, to see similarities in the project under investigation with the choice which Claude-Nicolas Ledoux made regarding the cemetery in his project for the ideal city of Chaux (1780-1804). In his project for the burial site of the Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans, the architect expressed a secular visionary quality based on physiocratic thinking, which led to him imagining a reorganized and rarefied city, as part a large-scale reorganization – as we would say today – of the territory and a rationalization of its design in both formal and production terms.

Three orders of underground tunnels, according to the model of the Roman catacombs,⁵ are distributed by radial paths which lead, through a set of arched and Serlian openings, to a large, completely empty, spherical space of approximately 73 metres in diameter.⁶ The upper hemisphere is above ground and has no openings or decorations. The nakedness of the surface, together with the absence of hierarchy implicit in the chosen geometry, declare the egalitarian implications on which the architect based the project, where the use of cremation informed the idea of the continuous regeneration of life in death. Only an oculus positioned at the top frames a portion of the sky. This space was not born as a place for ceremonies,⁷ we cannot recognize within it a place where we might remain, nor a clear access point. Those who look down from the openings in the immense vault can contemplate the void inside and the movement of the ray of light which enters from the oculus. Even the choice of the site has a strongly symbolic character: the cemetery is located outside the urban fabric, in the quarries from which the building material to build the city of the living was extracted. The mass of the cemetery saturates the void left by the mining activities, closing the plain with a new artificial ground layer, over which towers

the upper part of the gigantic globe which Emil Kaufmann (p. 300) defined as “an austere symbol of infinity”: «Around the edifice there is nothing but a wide empty space. No tree, no lawn, no lively stream relieves the gloom. Whoever approaches it shall face an image of nothingness, a vision of the void – ‘*l’image du néant*’».

The pure geometry within which the dimension of absence is inscribed is counterbalanced by an enigmatic drawing, to which Ledoux assigned the title *Élevation du Cimetière de la Ville de Chaux*. This represents the infinite space of the universe, with the earth in the centre and the motion of the planets that surround it, illuminated by a ray of sunshine. The astronomical image may represent the universal sublime in which the dead will be reabsorbed after their passing away, but certainly, since it is included in an architectural treatise, it implies for it the extension of its field of action to unexplored imageries.

For us, as contemporary architects, all that remains is to tie together the threads of the way of working represented here by Snozzi’s project for Brunswick, and by the many other artistic experiences which have been juxtaposed to it, thanks to the analogical process. To transpose the evocation of memory into form – going beyond the duality between density and rarefaction of the urban fabric – the void asserts itself as an iconic and representative space of an established community, only if it is itself understood as a structured form, one working from within the fractures, one which thrives on the tension – again in Brandi’s words – between “abstention” and “flagrancy”. In this opposition there yet lies the possibility of giving a form to absence in the construction of a monument.

Notes

¹ For this article, use has been made of the images of the project to reconstruct Brunswick [Braunschweig, Germany] which the architect authorized for use in the volume by Rakowitz G. and Torricelli C. (2018).

² The original quote is contained in a report on “Industry and Morals” (presented by Carlo Cattaneo at the SIAM [Association to Promote Arts and Crafts] of Milan, in 1845) and can be found in: Cattaneo C. (1972), p.472.

³ This request was sanctioned by Napoleon in 1804 with the so-called Edict of Saint-Cloud (*Décret Impérial sur les Sépultures*), in which the previous fragmentary rules on cemeteries were systematically gathered, establishing that tombs were to be placed outside the defensive walls of the city, and that they were all to be identical.

⁴ The quote from Paolo Portoghesi is contained in the Presentation of the volume by Bertolaccini L. (2004), p. 6.

⁵ The thesis of using quarries as burial sites was at the centre of the Parisian debate at that time, given that discussions were ongoing regarding the relocation of the remains kept in the *Cimetière des Innocents* to the quarries of Montrouge, south of the city.

⁶ It is impossible not to see similarities between this spherical space and the equally famous one of the project developed by Étienne-Louis Boullée for Newton’s Cenotaph in 1784. The studies cited in the bibliography take a closer look at their similarities and differences.

⁷ In his description of the project, Ledoux endeavoured to illustrate its use by declaring that religious services would take place at the centre of the building. In reality, however, we do not find any horizontal plane inside the sphere that would allow us to envisage the carrying out of such activities, as if the section wished to emphasize the image of emptiness as far as possible.

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