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Handing down the immaterial.
Cremation themes for funerary architecture

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how the practice of cremation can contribute to the configuration and resemanticization of places intended for the cult of the dead. We will identify those architectural features that are linked to the burial and the dispersion of ashes, capable of giving meaningful form to the impalpable matter of memory. Even though there is no longer a body to testify to human existence, we intend to demonstrate, through the concrete answers offered by architectural practice, how the burial of ashes can inform or modify the character of the modern cemetery, allowing a typological analysis rooted in compositional principles and archetypal images.

Keywords

Funerary architecture — Cremation — Typological characteristics — City-Cemetery — Nature-Cemetery

The three images that open this text densify the echo of time in the silence and immortalize the transience of life in the stillness of the camera (Fig. 1). It is the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu¹, and the film sequence marks the three ritual moments of cremation² – the burning of the body, the farewell of the funeral procession, the burial of the ashes – defining the horizon within which to investigate a funeral practice that aids reflection on the resemanticization of places intended for the cult of the dead.

Under the pressure of multi-religious and secular trends, of a changing Catholic sensitivity³ and recent health emergencies, cremation is gaining more and more drive also in the West, placing particular typological-formal themes on the modern cemetery.

Where there is no longer a body to testify to human existence (Bachelard 1989, Sozzi 2004), it is the place itself that offers the physicality useful for transforming *absence* into *presence* (Schama 1997; Ricoeur 2004). Landscapes of ashes, new forms of memory, recover and renew the spatiality of the cemetery tradition⁴. The conservation within urns, apart from clear dimensional differences, finds imagery firmly anchored in the nineteenth-century and Mediterranean tradition of the city-cemetery (Ariès 1998), linked to the practice of burial in the ground creating holy-fields, and of burial in columbaria, generating walls and fences. In this way the dispersion of the ashes opens up ideas close to the Northern European tradition of the nature-cemetery, exploring the expressive potential offered by a domesticated vegetation to accompany the cult of the dead (Morin 2002; Grimal 2005), within spatialities modelled on the relationship to forest-clearing or on the rural dimension of the landscape. Places destined for the ashes in which the typical elements of the architectural

**Fig. 1**

Frames from the film 'Kohayagawa Family Autumn' (Kohayagawa-ke no aki), directed by Yasujiro Ozu, 1961. Three ritual moments: the crematorium, the funeral procession, the burial of the ashes.

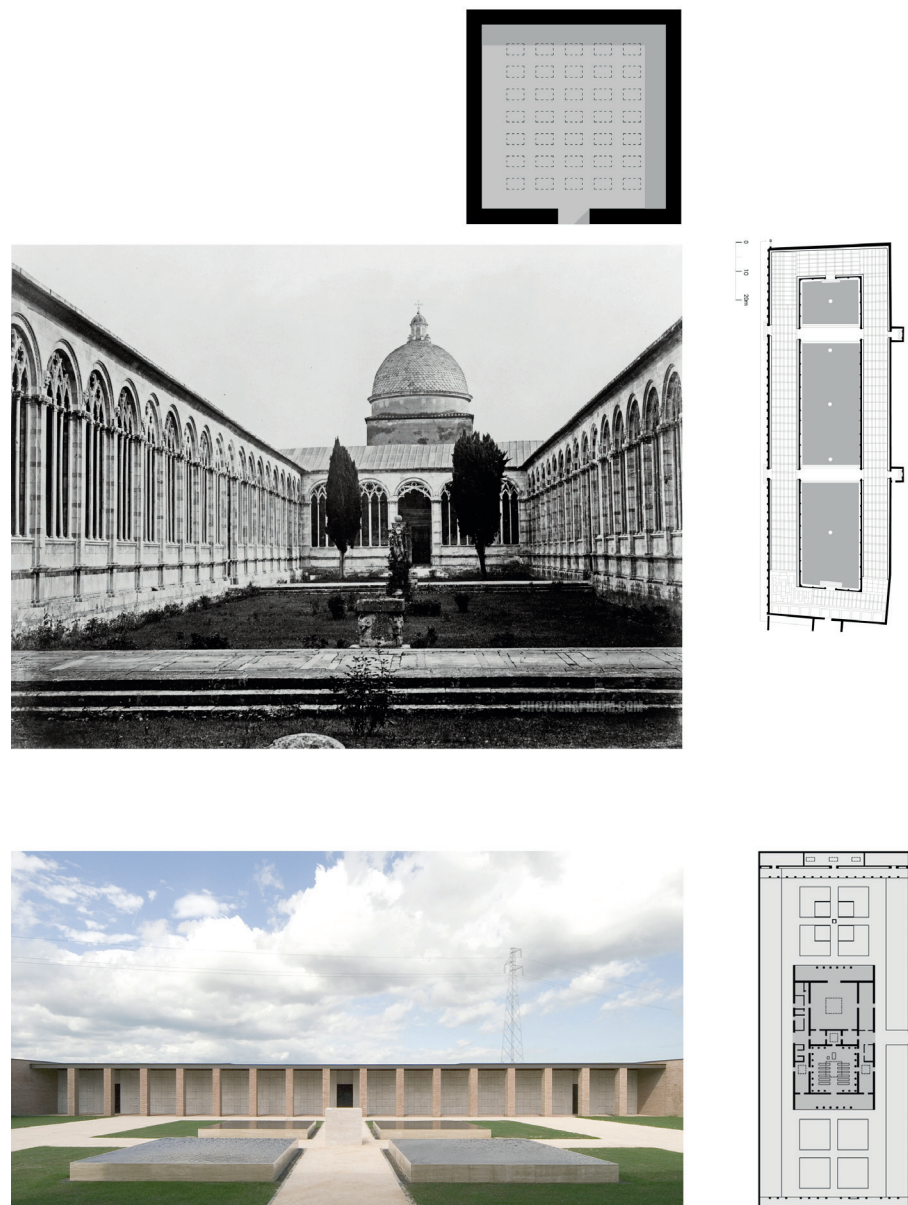
composition – collect / disperse, enclose / diffuse, thresholds to mediate and clarify, order of movement to orient and hierarchize – can still contribute to defining identity values and spatial characteristics of these new cemetery divisions.

Cremation and «work of the memory»⁵

If, as anthropologists affirm, funerary practices serve to distance the inevitable disintegration of the body from the gaze (Morin 2002; Bachelard 2006, 2007) and the architectural manifestation of mourning expresses the containment of anguish in the face of death (Giedion 1969; Ariès 1998), cremation and the landscapes generated by the burial of the ashes present some particularities.

Firstly, in the practice of cremation the purifying fire acts on a still intact, uncorrupted matter, freeing what is perishable – the flesh (Morin 2002) – from the process of decomposition: cremation removes the connection between the matter of the *body* and the *matter of the memory* creating in relatives the fear of not being able to rely on the presence of a recognizable place capable of passing on the memory (Sozzi 2004, Urbain 1998). This change in scale, from the body to the ashes (Hintermeyer 2013), assigns a different value to the burial. The grave, which in the burial and entombment, is still a memory of the body that lies there, its measure and *monumentum* (Ariès 1984), loses its material consistency and, to assume the value of a sepulcher, is the very place that receives the ashes. As Edgar Morin (2002, p.139) observes «The apparent opposition between cremation and burial falls apart if we consider that cremation does not destroy the whole corpse: the ashes are in fact preserved».

If in the deposition of the urn a tangible trace can still be assumed to maintain the shape of the memory in space and time, in the scattering the ashes become one with the place of the dispersion, with the regenerative force of nature stretching out into a dimension without time. The aim of the architectural intervention then becomes what Simon Schama (1997, p.25) attributes to the patrimonial value of the landscape as a palimpsest in which «Memory [takes on] the shape of the landscape. [...] Absence [becomes] presence»⁶. The immaterial dimension inherent in the destiny of the ashes forces us into a «work of memory» (Ricoeur 2004) which is not satisfied with the mechanical reiteration of a memory fulfilled by the correspondence between tomb and buried body, but which must carry out, in time and space, a continuous exercise of remembrance. In this sense, the landscapes of the ashes increasingly renounce the strong individual characterization of the burial space, instead approaching the individual and collective dimension of the «work of memory» to keep together the recognition of the cemetery as a formal unit and the identification of the burial as a subordinate compositional variation, dominating the relationship between the parts and the whole.

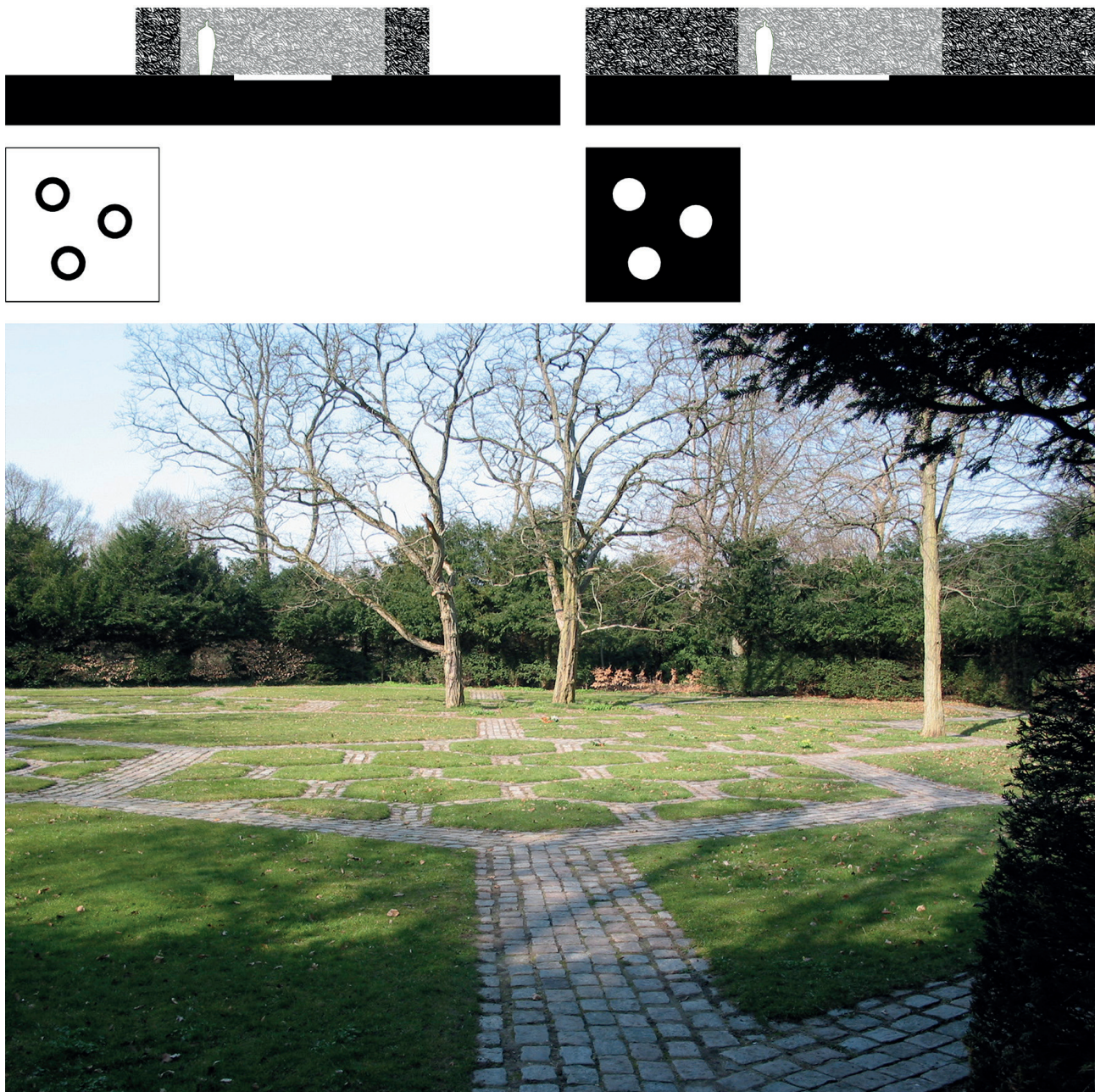
**Fig. 2**

Columbaria enclosures. Above: The Cemetery of Pisa (13th century) which serves as a model for the 19th-century and Mediterranean cemetery-city. Below: Crematorium temple of Parma, arch. P. Zermani with E. Tesson (2009). The wall enclosure houses dovetail systems intended to house the cinerary urns. Drawings by the author.

Fenced areas and woods for the deposition of urns.

In cultures that preserve the remains of cremation, urn and ashes have always been an inseparable unity. The object, the urn, transmits the memory both when it is placed in fenced areas, where the limit defines what is sacred (Ariès 1984), and when it is buried where nature itself is sacred and therefore indivisible (Eliade 2008).

In the first case, the evocative power of architecture is defined by the relationship between the funerary enclosure and the circumscribed space. It matters little whether the delimited and inward-looking space, destined to give meaningful form to mourning and memory, is anchored to a monumental or naturalistic setting; if it is a quadriporticus of urnariums that borders empty and sunny ground or if the definition of the open-air chamber is entrusted to topiary borders that embrace a lawn dotted with urns. In both cases, the act of defining a limit has ritualized a space, separating an interior governed by the laws of memory from an exterior, indistinct and free from memory; inside, so that mourning can find its most private dimension, the spatial tension is vertical, fusing the relationship between earth and

**Fig. 3**

Fences and clearings for the burial of ashes or for dispersal in nature: open rooms delimited by tree fences and clearings created within a continuous planting. Below: Mariebjerg Cemetery (Copenhagen, Denmark), arch. G. Brandt (1926-1936) (Photo © Gentofte Kommune). The ground for the burial of the urns is bordered by an intensive green border. Drawings by the author.

sky to remove the perception of life that flows around it. However, if the enclosure of the columbarium, proposed by Paolo Zermani for the Crematorium Temple of Parma⁷ (2006-09), is solidly rooted in the model of the nineteenth-century cemetery and in its archetype, the Camposanto di Pisa (XIII century), due to its spatial features obtained through the use of tree massing, the most direct references are to be found in the work of landscape architects such as Gudmund Brandt, Carl Theodor Sørensen, Palle Schimidt, Sven-Ingvar Andersson, in that aesthetic of green architecture which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, serves as a breeding ground for funerary applications in Northern Europe (Latini 1998) (Fig. 2 and 3).

When the act of enclosing no longer defines what is consecrated to memory, the deposit of the ashes finds, in the model of the necropolis in the woods⁸, the possibility of embodying a more intimate relationship with nature by drawing on a primordial landscape. The clear precedent is the Southern Cemetery of Stockholm (1920-61), *Skogskyrkogården* ("Cemetery of the Wood"), created by Erik Gunna Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz⁹: a manifesto, not written but modelled in the landscape to testify to

**Fig. 4**

Burials in the woods. Above: Stockholm South Cemetery, arch. G. Asplund and S. Lewrentz (1915). Study for the sepulchral area in a photomontage for a competition. Below: Berestein Cemetery, Graveland (Holland, 2000), arch. Sylvia Karres, Bart Brands, Marie-Laure Hoedemakers, Rudolf Zielinski. Cinerary stones strewn about the woods welcome the urns for the conservation of cremation ashes. Drawings by the author.

the equilibrium between artifice and nature, an expression of the mourning that takes place in the collectivity of remembrance. Recent burial experiments in nature (Berestein Cemetery¹⁰, Holland, Arch. Sylvia Karres & Bart Brands, 2000) take advantage of the size of the cinerary niches, much smaller than the coffin niche, to raise the urns inside memorial stones scattered in the indistinct space of the undergrowth, reaffirming the order of the multidirectional and undirected movement (Fig. 4). As often happens, the shapes date back time and, in the memory of the “already seen”, they are reminiscent of the image of ancient stones, planted in the ground to mark the place of burial and pass on the memory of the deceased.

Mounds, gardens and borders for the dispersion of ashes in nature

Choosing dispersion means manifesting a desire for direct reunion with nature. More than conservation in urns, the indistinct character of the scattering promotes a conception of death that finds relief in identification with the natural elements. It is to the evocative power of regeneration that the task of passing on the memory is entrusted (Fig. 5).

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) often underlines the continuous interventions that, in the history of religions, see fertility cults and funerary cults intertwined. «[Often] life manifests itself through a plant symbol. This is equivalent to saying that vegetation becomes a hierophany – it embodies and reveals the sacred. [...] A fragment (a tree, a plant) is worth everything (the Cosmos, Life)»¹¹.

When Sigurd Lewerentz builds the Malmö Cemetery¹² (Sweden, 1916 et seq.), a field sown with wheat is identified as a place suitable for the scattering of ashes. The agricultural landscape, in its cyclical change and seasonal renewal, becomes hierophany (Eliade 2008).

In the southern cemetery of Stockholm (Erik Gunna Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, 1920-61), a mound is raised in front of the crematorium and marked by a pine grove at the foot of which the ashes are scattered (Latini 1998). The cult of memory is accomplished through the evocative force of archetypal forms.

In Mariebjerg¹³ (Gudmund Brandt, 1926-33), tree screens, with varying degrees of visual permeability, distinguish public, semi-public, private spatial dimensions in which the relatives can realise the rite of dispersion without the risk of accidentally walking on the ashes, protected also from the winds that might otherwise disturb them. The process of mourning trusts in nature,



Fig. 5

Dispersion of ashes in nature: gardens, mounds, fences. From left: Malmö Cemetery (Sweden, Arch. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1916 et seq.); Cemetery South of Stockholm (Sweden, Arch. Erik Gunna Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, 1920-61); Mariebjerg Cemetery (Denmark, Arch. Gudmund Brandt, 1926-33).

in its capacity for the consolation of mortality (Schama 1997).

It is in these precedents that the best contemporary architectural practices find reason, in which the rite of scattering the ashes takes the form of gardens bounded by vegetable borders or raised earth that evokes monumental mounds (Neubiberg Cemetery¹⁴, Germany, Arch. Emanuela von Branca and Adelheid Countess Schönborn, 2000; Nieuwe Ooster Cemetery¹⁵, The Netherlands, Arch. Sylvia Karres & Bart Brands, 2005). Inside the *garden of remembrances*¹⁶ – the cemetery dedicated to accommodate the dispersion of the ashes – Water and Earth are the two elements that guide the farewell: water (sprays, streams, fountains) as a vehicle for accompanying the ashes and the earth (lawns, flower beds, cobblestones) as a matter of reunion with nature. An architecture that draws its own repertoire indifferently from primordial or domesticated nature (Grimal 2005), creating exemplary fragments of landscape quality that go beyond the limit of time and take on the meaning of burial in themselves (Eliade 2008).

Conclusions

In the sunny clearings or in the shade of the trees in the undergrowth; defined by the stereometric limits of the urnaries or surrounded by topiary borders, the new landscapes of the ashes offer places capable of giving shape to memory, accompanying the unfolding of memory in space and time. Burying the ashes in urns gives rise to columbaria, grounds, memorial stones configured as ancient funerary signs, or it is nature itself that offers itself to dispersion, contrasting clearings from continuous planting and arboreal enclosures carved in the vegetation, conforming signs of water, bushes, grass and cobblestones. Models consolidated in architectural culture as well as more recent experiments outline a reference landscape capable of averting the risk of interventions resolved as a banal municipal service and reactivating architectural research in favor of alternative configurations to the intensive cemetery, in which the individuality of the burial is extinguished within the idea of collectivity.

Starting from what remains of a centuries-old idea and drawing from the deposit of history embodied in place, it is perhaps possible to imagine spaces for memory in which two dimensions can coexist: the collective one, the social identification of a community, its traditions, its long duration, and the individual one, linked to the intimacy of personal memory. As has already happened in history, rethinking burial places means renewing the cultural values of the community that creates them. «If every modern city presupposes a cemetery, every time an ancient cemetery is discovered, there is proof that there is a vanished city nearby.

The necropolis is the inverse of the city, depending on the case, the reverse or the obverse, since it, the idealized double of the city, is the perfect reproduction of the socio-economic order of the living». The sentence with which Michel Ragon (1986, p.45) opens the second chapter of *The space of death*, appears, for contemporary architectural culture, as a warning and, at the same time, an inspiration.

Notes

¹ Frames from the film *The autumn of the Kohayagawa family* (*Kohayagawa-ke no aki. The End of Summer*. 1961), directed by Yasujirō Ozu (1903-63).

² Cremation is a funeral practice that involves the cremation of the coffin. In Italy, the adoption of Law 130 of 2001, in addition to regulating the construction of crematoria and redefining the methods of burial of ashes, removes the prohibition of dispersal in nature. Inside the cemeteries the following methods of burial of the ashes can therefore be envisaged: placing of the cinerary urns in columbaria or urnariums or inside niches on the ground; dispersion of ashes in nature in specially identified and configured spaces, known as *grounds for scattering ashes*, *gardens of remembrance* or *of meditation*.

³ In countries with a Catholic tradition, cremation finds concrete possibilities of significantly intervening in the conformation of the cemetery landscape starting from 1963, when the Second Vatican Council issued the Instruction called *De Cadaverum Cremation: Piam et constantem* with which it is established that cremation is not in contrast with the Christian religion. Further significant steps in the direction of a wider acceptance of the practice of cremation occurred in 2007, when the Italian Bishops Conference, through the Episcopal Commission for the Liturgy, published a pastoral aid that integrates the fundamental ritual for the funeral. The subsidiary *We proclaim your resurrection* foresees, in the IV chapter, particular liturgies for funerals in case of cremation.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the typological-formal characteristics of the Nature-Cemetery and the City-Cemetery, see: (Franciosini 2011), (Lotus 38 1983), (Carbonara 1958).

⁵ Starting from two Freudian essays (*Remember, rework, repeat* of 1914 and *Mourning and melancholy* of 1918) the formula of the «work of memory» is used by Paul Ricoeur (2004) to express the distance between the mechanical operation of memory experienced as a compulsion to repeat, and the experience of memory lived as an exercise of *remembrance*. For an in-depth analysis of the theme, see in particular the third aporia of his treatment on the problem of memory (*Wounded memory and history*, pp. 71-98).

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the theme, see also Paul Ricoeur (2004), in particular the second aporia of his treatment on the problem of memory (*Imagination and memory*, pp. 63-70).

⁷ Ferrari M. (2010) - *Figures in the fog*. Casabella, 791, 26-33.

⁸ The model of burial in the bosom of nature is anticipated by the iconography of the tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the Isle of Poplars in Ermenonville. For an in-depth analysis of the theme, see (Teyssot 1983).

⁹ There is ample literature on the project for the Southern Cemetery in Stockholm. See, in particular: Porphyrios D. (1983) - *Classic, Christian, Social Democrat. The*

- funeral architecture of Asplund and Lewerentz*. Lotus, 38, 71-78; Constant C. (1994) - *The Woodland Cemetery: Toward a Spiritual Landscape*. Byggförlaget, Stockholm; Johansson B. (1996) - *Tallum. Gunnar Asplund's & Sigurd Lewerentz's Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm*. Byggförlaget, Stockholm; Flora N., Giardiello P. and Postiglione G. (2001) - *Sigurd Lewerentz 1885-1975*, Electa, Milan; Torricelli C. (2012) - *Death as a passage. Sacred and archaic in the architecture of Sigurd Lewerentz*. IN_BO Research and projects for the territory, the city and architecture, [e-journal] 4.
- ¹⁰ A description of the cemetery is contained in: De Leo E. (2006) - *European Cemetery Landscapes*. Mancosu Editore, Rome.
- ¹¹ Eliade M., *Treaty of history of religions*, pp. 183-184
- ¹² For an in-depth analysis of the East Cemetery of Malmö see: Constant C. (1998) - *Malmö East Cemetery: The slow discovery of the absolute value of simplicity*. Casabella, 659, 40-65; Flora N., Giardiello P. and Postiglione G. (2001) - *Sigurd Lewerentz 1885-1975*, Electa, Milan; Torricelli C. (2015) - *Urban inserts and landscape visions. The tension between project and place in the cemeteries of Sigurd Lewerentz*. IN_BO Research and projects for the territory, the city and architecture, [e-journal] 8.
- ¹³ For an in-depth study of the Mariebjerg cemetery (Gudmund Brandt, 1926-33) see: (Latini 1998); Arkitektur DK, 4 (1990).
- ¹⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the Neubiberg cemetery see: Von Schonbörn A. (2005) - "Munich: the Neubiberg cemetery". In: Felicori M. (edited by), *The spaces of memory*. Luca Sessella publisher, Rome.
- ¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the Nieuwe Ooster cemetery see: (Franciosi 2011).
- ¹⁶ Also notice how *gardens of remembrance* or *of meditation*, or how *grounds for spreading ashes*, are introduced into Italian legislation by Law 130 of 2001.

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