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A dialectic in a state of rest.

The project for a new Pesaro cemetery by Luciano Semerani and Gigetta Tamaro.

Abstract

This essay proposes an interpretation of the project for a new Pesaro cemetery developed by Luciano Semerani and Gigetta Tamaro in 1979. The fundamental reason why it is considered important to reflect on this unrealized project lies in the exemplary way in which the two architects conceived and developed the project's forms, pursuing an analogy between those of the "city of the living" and those of the "city of the dead". This analogy defines the project's metahistorical space, favouring, in other words, the conception of a symbolic space to which the political task of passing on the common learning on death is entrusted to the life of the city, while each individual is guaranteed a spiritual request which allows him or her to keep a dialogue with the deceased alive.

Keywords

Cemetery Architecture — City by Parts — Urban Memory — Experience of the Symbol — Cult of the Dead

We have been educated in the cult of the dead at least in the forms that our Catholic cemetery of Saint Anna allows. Another spirit (other spirits?) hover/s over the Jewish cemetery, or the nearby Muslim cemetery, the Protestant one, and even the Greek Orthodox one. [...] Perhaps also for this reason we thought of a cemetery like that of Pesaro as an imitation of a walled city, those immobilized, eternal simulacra which are in the arms of saints or nobles, patrons and protectors of Medieval and Renaissance cities. There is no other kind of architecture which finds its *raison d'être* in memory, as much as a cemetery does. Our cemetery has been built by assembling finished models, prototypes. Built through references to our other works of architecture, but inside the layouts of different cities. [...] The cemetery is thus the synthesis of all the works of architecture and all the cities that we know (Semerani, Tamaro 1983, p.113).

These words by Semerani and Tamaro were written with the intention of explaining the underlying reasons and forms of the Pesaro cemetery project and they highlight at least two fundamental issues which influence the relationship between architecture and burial places. The first question directly concerns the representation of the project idea. In this case, the idea of the cult of the dead. How should this idea be represented? The second question is one inherent to the theme of memory, or rather, the choice of cultural materials necessary to develop the project. In other words: how did our two architects deal with the relationship between memory and their cemetery project?

On the theme of memory as a reservoir of images and forms to draw on for a new design configuration, Semerani and Tamaro are crystal clear, as can also be deduced from their words above. Their purpose was to compose, within a single recognizable form, a group of figures drawn from their own repertoire, together with other figures found in urban history and in that of Pesaro in particular.

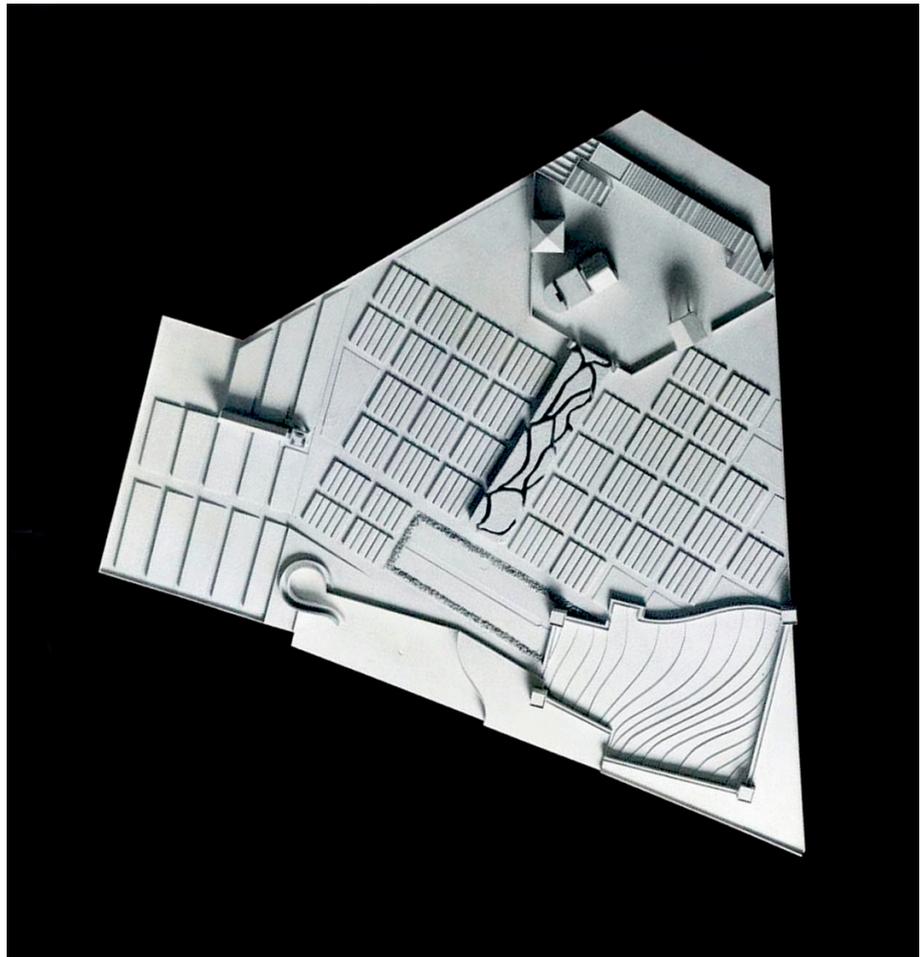


Fig. 1
Project for a new Pesaro cemetery,
model.

In Pesaro, Semerani wrote in *Progetti per una Città*,

«the morphology of the built-up area is given by the juxtaposition of residential villages with characteristic elongated blocks on the quadrilateral layout of the Roman city. The pentagon of the walled city dates back to the construction programme of Della Rovere; at one vertex of the pentagon lies the Malatesta fortress. The ancient city is also cut asymmetrically by a *cardo* and a *decumanus*, upon which the Roman *insulae* stand.» (Semerani 1980, p. 74)

This juxtaposition of urban forms is transfigured in the cemetery project, in which the shape of the sacred enclosure recalls the pentagonal figure of the Renaissance city.

The following figures are *juxtaposed* within the *sacred enclosure*: a monumental entrance, it too enclosed in a further enclosure, in which 4 main volumes gather and onto which a *linear wood* has been grafted which stretches northwards to the centre of the cemetery.

To the east and west of the *linear wood* are arranged, in serial groupings, the buildings for burial in *columbaria*. Their ground plan follows the idea of the foundation of those Hellenistic cities known as “settlements in rows”, with the monotonous repetition of residential *insulae* on a Hippodamian Plan. But it is in a reference to the bourgeois city of Trieste, with its Borgo Teresiano and the axis of its Grand Canal, that this urban layout draws its morphological and figurative peculiarity from.

The *linear wood* leads north towards the area for the *children's graves*: a *city of childhood* denied with a *fountain of life* at the centre. Further north, immediately after the *city of children*, an area for the burial of people who have died of infectious diseases is arranged. To the west a *city of the rich*

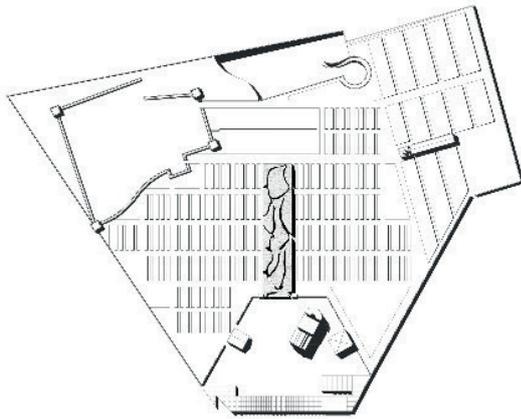


Fig. 2
Project for a new Pesaro cemetery,
plan.

has been designed, identified in an enclosure resembling a *castle town*, in which areas for the tombs of aristocrats and the wealthy with their own private chapels are laid out. On the opposite side, to the east, lies the *city of the poor*, with burials underground. A crematorium is located more or less in the centre of this area. Here «the burial fields gently sloping towards the sun are terraces alternating with rows of fruit trees (the leaves will fall in winter; the colours will alternate) here and there a cypress as on the hills leading from Pesaro to Urbino.» (Semerani Tamaro 1983, p. 113)

As a whole, therefore, the ground plan evokes a walled city, consisting of parts contained within a recognizable form, interlocking and grafted onto the traces of an imaginary Roman layout from which unwind, along hypothetical roads of development, the areas of expansion which are reminiscent of real urban villages and rural landscapes. In other words, the overall image of the cemetery imposes itself on our gaze as a composition of urban figures similar to a *città per parti*.

We know that the Pesaro cemetery project was born within the relations which Luciano Semerani entertained with the political administrations of this city of The Marches since the early 1970s. These relations were born and grew with the development of a *Detailed Plan for Pesaro Old Town* drawn up in those same years by the Gruppo Architettura.¹

The cultural orientation in which the cemetery project is inserted is therefore that of urban studies. A cultural position which, since the 1960s, had posed the theme of the re-foundation of architecture starting from an analysis of urban phenomena as material for architectural design.² As is known, the richness of this cultural orientation consists in providing architects with solid theoretical support for their design practices, and at the same time nurturing aspirations for authorship of their inventions. In this cultural orientation, the relationship between city, theory and design rediscovers, in the studying of monuments, an unexpected speculative force which springs from a fresh contact with reality. The monument is seen as the most authentic testimony of permanence in an urban reality, a symbolic dimension capable of sublimating the dialectic of the forms of life which gradually settle within the city's form, restoring a heterogeneous, rich, and complex image. Consequently, the monument is seen as a symbol of collective memory and the continuity within which a city changes over time.



Fig. 3
Giorgio De Chirico, *The Archaeologists*, 1968 .

Furthermore, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had already shown in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, architecture is an eminently symbolic fact and as such is intrinsically intertwined with the practices of memory (Hegel 2012, pp. 1589-1652). Architecture means making monuments. And the monument, as is well known, always has to do with warnings and exhortations and above all, as Adolf Loos wrote, with a memory of the past and with death (Loos 1999, pp. 241-256).

From a study of urban phenomena to a search for the deep reasons of architecture in Semerani and Tamaro's *theoretical project*, the *transition* to the project of the cemetery as an urban monument with a clear heterogeneous imprint is therefore obligatory. We can now return to the initial questions: how did our two architects deal with the relationship between memory and design? How should the cult of the dead be represented?

When asked about the relationship between memory and design, Luciano Semerani tried to indicate some possible answers – as well as through the design practice shared with Gigetta Tamaro – in *Progetto Eloquent*, a book published in 1981. We must first of all remember that, in this context – and more generally in the reflections of Semerani and Tamaro's projects – memory is poetically understood as an implacable laboriousness of thought, the fruit of a gift given to the human race by the gods.

In fact, as Aeschylus recounted, to free humans from their condition of perennial poverty, Prometheus gave them *logos* and *techne*, thereby triggering industriousness and a desire for redemption in their minds. And above all thanks to the links between thought and *techne* – as Monica Centanni explained when commenting on *Prometheus Bound* – humans are now able to activate the «fruitfulness of memory and therefore the constructive faculty of poetry» (Centanni, 2007, pp. 930-931). Therefore, memory constitutes the web of experiences already unfurled in the past which allow the present to be transformed by means of new ideas with a poetic content. This is equivalent to saying, in Plato's words, that «knowing is remembering» and that memory, as Umberto Galimberti explained, is «above all a *re-agreement* which generates *unity* from dispersion and in unity traces that subjective and objective *identity* which Western reason has called *Me* and *World*. Neither are facts of reality, but constructions of memory.» (Galimberti, 2005, p. 76).

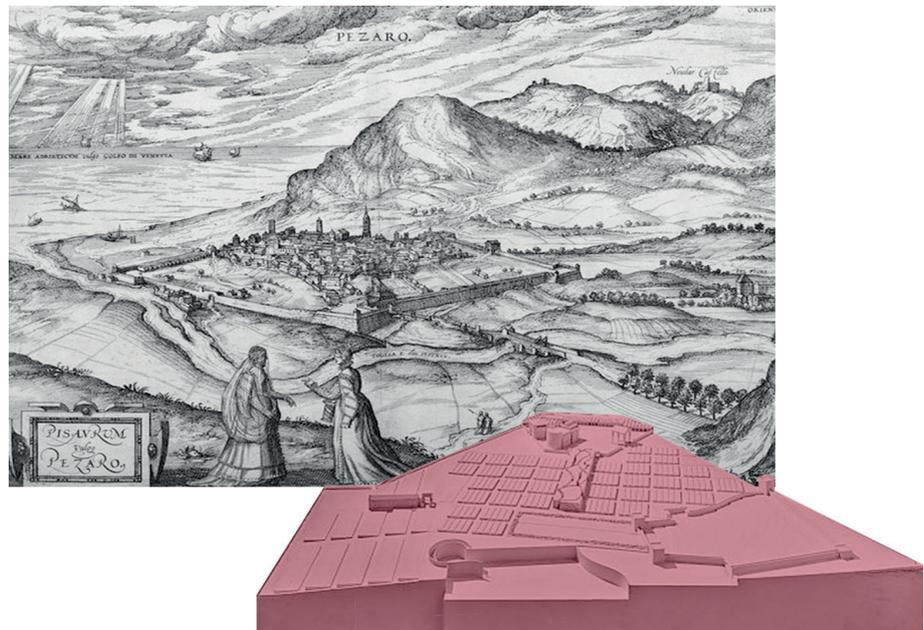


Fig. 4
Project for a new Pesaro cemetery,
model.

When in *Fiducia nella Retorica* Semerani wrote that architects operate using «architectural facts, which pre-exist, in a new design operation» (Semerani 1981, p. 7) he is in fact reaffirming the ancient Platonic *admonition*. But how do they operate? Going to extremes on reasoning, according to Semerani there are two possibilities which this operation of referring to the memory of what has *already been done* allows:

«On the one hand an autobiographical reassembly (or recycling), which the individual artist carries out by re-manipulating his own production and on the other, the resumption using very different operations (the “out-of-scale” or “*contaminatio*” for example) of decoded but recognizable phrases for the historical urban code of belonging.» (Semerani 1981, p. 9).

As is well known, in the indefinite interval between two extremes, multiple compositions can develop, characterized by a different proportion of the parts involved. Semerani and Tamaro, while explicitly declaring their interest in the operations of recovering the materials of the memory belonging to the second operating mode, nevertheless did not hesitate to overlap and intertwine the two design methods in planning their cemetery. Despite this, the associative links which the two design methods are able to evoke – and therefore to pass on – through the figures of the project, can easily provoke misunderstandings. In fact, associative links very often continually drive us to search for similarities between the forms involved, which are certainly important and testify to the *extent* of the project, but risk weakening the deeper connections which underlie them. What are these deeper connections? One thing is certain. If we now look at the project as a whole, we see that figures of historical origin have been pushed and brought together side by side in a *sacred enclosure* to keep the memory of something else alive and at the same time express a symbolic tension with respect to the theme.

With this montage of recognizable figures, within the enclosure and by means of the enclosure, Semerani and Tamaro *shape images of cities* which – to use the language of Walter Benjamin – *halt* their ephemeral content in the eternity of an ambiguous but living image, be it adorable, melancholy or cruel (Benjamin 2007).



Fig. 5
Piero della Francesca, Resurrection, 1465.

The tension between these two worlds – *historical* and *symbolic* – becomes even deeper if we reflect on the fact that we are dealing with *figures* which are the progeny of a historical, political and personal order, *gathered* within a *sacred enclosure*, which presupposes the end of every historical event and the opening of a metahistorical space of eternal salvation. Borrowing a famous expression of Adorno, we could say that the figures of the project, like Benjamin's thought-images, are locked within a «dialectic in a state of rest» (Adorno 1972, p. 239) capable of composing a relationship between different yet coexistent temporalities. An impossible composition?

«To articulate the past historically» Benjamin wrote, «does not mean knowing it as it really was. It means taking possession of a memory as it flashes in the instant of danger.» (Benjamin 1995, p. 79) Therefore, the gaze that demands the assembly of forms of this *camposanto* is that of *pietas*, the same one which the angel of Benjamin's story poses on the ruins of the past for which he «would like to restrain himself, raise the dead and mend what is broken.» (Benjamin 1995, p. 80) As for Walter Benjamin, so too for Semerani and Tamaro: testimonies which carry forms within them will never be safe. Only a revolutionary action «has the gift of igniting the spark of hope in the past, which is penetrated by the idea that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy should he win. And this enemy has never stopped winning.» (Benjamin 1995, p. 78)

Only a revolutionary action – a revolutionary project – can attempt to knit together, as the Pesaro cemetery project does, the historical and conflictual occurrence in which the forms of architecture and the aspiration to eternity that these same forms claim in the presence of a *progress* without *tradition* that wants to reduce them to shreds without hope. Revolutionary are the

«energies that appear in aged things» (Benjamin 1973, p. 15). Forms of the past simply ask, like deceased loved ones, not to be forgotten.

In terms of the space of salvation we must also read the allegorical words of Semerani and Tamaro when they say: «This large cemetery, all located on the slope of a hill in Central Italy, is a small walled city in the hands of a saint.» (Semerani Tamaro 1983, p.113)

Thus, in the end, the overall image does not appear as a simple assembly of parts resulting from a significant additive process. It appears as an image with its own theoretical armour and its own poetic intentionality. A bit like the archaeologists of De Chirico, who impressed Ernesto Nathan Rogers for their «chest full of landscapes – and in which his face – is erased like theirs to become an impersonal meditation.» (Rogers 1997, p. 47)

At this point, if we return to the overall image of the cemetery, we can see that it is organized by means of two main images: the large *sacred enclosure* and a *profane enclosure*. We have already talked about the *sacred enclosure*. The *profane enclosure*, on the other hand, is what defines the monumental entrance to the cemetery. Within it are 4 volumes: the actual entrance building is a re-presentation of the body of outpatient structures, illumined with industrial sheds, of Cattinara hospital in Trieste; the building for Catholic worship, on a basilica plan, and the building for the worship of other religions and for non-believers, square in shape, are both drawn from the project to fit out the San Giobbe area in Venice;³ the Famedio, where the illustrious names of the community are reported, is «an idea drawn from a painting attributed to Domenico Veneziano kept at the Pesaro Art Gallery» (Semerani Tamaro 1983, p. 113).

The two *enclosures* define two conformations of space, but must be understood as two *Worlds*, separate and united at the same time. The *sacred enclosure* is organized through a bilateral spatial configuration, with a central axis, defined by the *linear wood*. This *wood*, located at the centre of the cemetery, recalls Dante's metaphor of the *dark wood*, an archetype lodged in the collective memory. A labyrinth in which sooner or later «we all find ourselves in the middle of the journey of our life – and we all feel to a greater or lesser extent as an experience – exceptional and alive within us from the direct memories of our childhood as a typical condition of disorientation, terror, anguish and indecipherability.» (Semerani 1981, p. 28)

The *profane enclosure*, on the other hand, alludes to a spatial configuration of a radial type with an empty centre and defined elements surrounding it. A central void which alludes, at the same time, to the foundation of a spatial, religious and political order.

In identifying the *sacred enclosure* and the *profane enclosure* we can recognize the primordial spatial experiences with which Leroi-Gourhan identified the *origins* of humankind's tendency to spatialize the places of domestic life in a bilateral sense, and the organization of community places in a radial sense (Leroi-Gourhan 2018, pp. 364-406). The same primordial logic is transfigured to the cemetery project through an archaeology of figures characterized by a powerful ideal geometry.

And, in this context, this mental archaeology cannot fail to evoke the *Resurrection* of Piero della Francesca. We can thus return to the theme of representing the cult of the dead.

The idea of the cult of the dead that this project wishes to represent is contained in the revolutionary idea of the *Resurrection* of the dead. From the iconic suggestion of the Risen One, the project draws the central axis of the fresco that springs from a spatial void. *Axis renovatio mundi*, this is

how the Risen One rises icastically over the edge of the now empty Roman tomb, unexpected, disorienting, and, as Roberto Longhi wrote, with a *sylvan* face. In Catholic worship, the death of Christ indicates access to eternal life. In the project it is the *sylvan wood* which opens up to the *camposanto* – the cemetery, a prelude to the Garden of Eternity.

Notes

¹ The Gruppo Architettura was formed in 1968 and broke up in 1975. Its members included Carlo Aymonino, Costantino Dardi, Luciano Semerani, Gianugo Polesello, Gianni Fabbri, Raffaele Panella and Mauro Lena. Luciano Semerani focused on the project for the *Detailed Plan for Pesaro Old Town* in 1971, also in relation to the theory of the city by parts, in his book *Progetti per una città*, Franco Angeli 1980.

² Urban studies found a neat summary, an expression of research shared by a group of architects, in the theoretical writings of Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi.

³ The project for a new Pesaro cemetery by Luciano Semerani and Gigetta Tamaro dates back to 1979. From the point of view of production and design inventions, 1978 and 1979 were two particularly fertile and important years for these two architects from Trieste. In fact, during the same period, they finalized a project for a new hospital of SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, a project for the San Giobbe area in Cannaregio, also in Venice, and a project for the town hall of Osoppo in the province of Udine. As we know, out of this tetralogy of projects, only those for the hospital in Venice and the town hall of Osoppo were ever built.

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