

Libero Carlo Palazzolo

**Deep memories. The Parque Cementiri Nou at Igualada
by Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós**

Abstract

At Igualada Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós give form to a landscape of pitiless poetry where death is evoked with solemn gravity. A trail descends between ruins and detritus along what seems like the dried bed of a river in flood as far as the final space where gaping tombs await. The fate that is in store for each of us is displayed without veils in an image worthy of Baroque theatre. The themes of the descent to the underworld, of the decomposition of the body and of the resurrection are not evoked by figurative devices but by an architecture suspended between construction and dilapidation. As in the Skogskirkogården, personal and collective memories are layered to give life to a landscape that is not simply geographical but also cultural, a landscape that more than any other represents the spirit of Catalonia as it exits forty years of dictatorship.

Keywords

Miralles-Pinós — Baroque — Landscape

Un cementerio no es una tumba...

no es esa relación con el paisaje y con el olvido [...]¹.

The Cementiri Nou at Igualada by Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós is a geological landscape, an architecture of excavation consisting of sections stratified as in a *frottage*, but above all it is a cultural landscape pregnant with references and meanings. The absence of the boundary wall that had typified cemeteries since the nineteenth century assimilates it to the land art creations that nourished its genesis. Miralles and Pinós were already familiar with the works of Richard Long, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and James Turrell and the Urbino cemetery by Arnaldo Pomodoro. The project for the competition (1985) proposed a deep Z-shaped slash in the ground, recalling Heizer's Monumental City, a sign that dilated the path that led from the chapel to the burials and on to a little stream before losing itself in the landscape. It was a city dug into the earth as declared by its section resembling a urban street². The project was characterised by a zig-zag path and by a cross that hints at the presence of the underground chapel. An idea encapsulated by the motto *Zemen+iri*: in the Catalan word Cementiri the Z (the path) had taken the place of the C, while the T was replaced by a cross (the chapel). The theme of the path is central not only because it makes it possible to annihilate the perception of the cemetery boundary, but also because «ese signo es un modo de pensar lo natural, siguiendo la noción de precisión que comporta un camino. Corta como lo hace un sendero. Separando a los fluidos a su paso»³ and especially because it allows «alejarnos de los aspectos narrativos a los que los caminos en los jardines están acompañados»⁴.



Fig. 1
Cementiri Nou Igualada. The entrance (C. Palazzolo 1996).

However the link between cemetery and landscape brings to mind the Nordic Waldfriedhof, in particular Stockholm's Skogskirkogården. Miralles himself points out the importance that that project had for them: «Dedicamos la mayoría del dinero que ganamos del premio del concurso del cementerio de Igualada en visitar los cementerios de Asplund y Lewerentz y sus obras, que me impresionaron mucho»⁵. During that journey he and Carme also visited the minor cemeteries of Lewerentz such as the one in Valdemarsvik: here the space is constructed by intervening with minimal – but essential – gestures on the topography while there is the flavour of an apparition about the little chapel with a star of hope glittering on its spire above the trees. But above all they were able to see how the masters of Nordic Classicism – whose exhibition catalogue Miralles almost knew off by heart⁶ – are able to speak: of themselves, of the place and of the society to which they belong. An ability that Architecture always possessed and which seems to have side-lined today.

What the Skogskirkogården and the Cementiri Nou have in common is not just the path (initiatory? redemptive?) that, by focussing attention on the single stations, blurs perception of the cemetery boundaries or the shaping of the earth, but the desire that both reveal to progressively absorb collective signs and meanings in order to shape a cultural landscape. The architectures of Asplund and Lewerentz communicate their role thanks to iconographic apparatuses entrusted to painters, sculptors or extraordinary artisans. The signs are not always explicit, like the skull that serves as the lock for the Woodland Chapel, but each element contributes to allowing the architectural elements to “speak”: the lamps of the Göteborg Law Courts recall scales, those of the State Bacteriological Laboratories are like solidified droplets, and then of course is the inexorable clock beside the Crematorium. Miralles and Pinós, on the other hand, draw on the figurative heritage of contemporary art to evoke more profound languages and times and transform those signs into Architecture. As was the case with Asplund⁷, the journey also induced Miralles and Pinós to rethink the project; while maintaining the initial principles, what also according to Enric had been more of a proposal than a project, transformed itself after the Swedish trip – it became profoundly contextual. A place of memory takes shape, measuring itself against that “critical regionalism” which informed a large part of the architectural culture of those years, even if it was more regionalism than critical in many Catalan iterations. The paths are multiplied in the 1987 draft, while the abstract signs of land art are enriched by the enveloping curves of Catalan Modernism and of the rocks of Monserrat: the slash becomes a straight line – inexorable – and the urban section is transformed into a garden space⁸, while the few rectangular spaces are replaced by lots of triangles. Recognition of the dialogue between the curved public spaces and the individual lots that characterised the original Park Güell project is immediate, even the section of the vaults seems to spring from the fracture of one of Gaudí's *terravacuos*⁹. In order not to reveal the deception, the Z used for taking possession of the site and giving order to the project must remain hidden in the deepest layers of the *frottage*, like the triangles that are necessary in order to «acotar un croissant»¹⁰.

The possibility of a double descent and re-ascent pathway also offers different images of the mystery of life after death depending on the way followed through the park-cemetery: descent into the underworld, ascent to Calvary or beckoning to the heavens; in procession or alone ...

**Fig. 2**

Cementiri Nou Igualada. The deep cut leads to the burial space (C. Palazzolo 1996).

But there is none of the serenity of the Nordic woodland cemeteries at Igualada. Everything at Stockholm leads towards the Elysian Fields and death is not elaborated, but organised and removed. It is only necessary to read Asplund's text on the Crematorium to understand how much attention he dedicated to this end¹¹. Instead, at Igualada death is evoked with Iberian gravity. The fate that awaits us all is displayed without veils: lifeless corpses accumulate at the edge of an industrial area, in a sort of dump in which a river in flood has dragged every type of detritus. Only the wooden sleepers sunk into the ground recall how many they are, a memory destined to consume itself like every worldly thing; and the hollow that their consumption produces resounds beneath the feet of the visitors retracing that impetuous river towards the final space. There is no escape from that *cul de sac* where the gaping burials await.

The cultural voracity¹² of Miralles is nourished not only with architectural or figurative references but also draws on artistic literature. The uncovered tombs that await at the end of the path are inspired by Beato Angelico's Last Judgements, by Giacometti's sculptures, by Heizer's matches ... the apparently randomly placed slabs also recall the abandoned Källa cemetery. But rather than evoking the moment in which the bodies rise again, are a terrible and unsettling architectural *memento mori* like the two pictures in Seville's Ospedale della Caridad by Juan Valdéz Leal inspired by don Miguel Mañara. The decay of the bodies and the death that our society has removed are before our eyes. This work that is «dura en una época *light*»¹³ evokes the words of André Chastel when he recalls that «uno dei grandi gesti dell'arte barocca fu [...] l'azione insieme teatrale e minacciosa che consiste nell'«aprire un sarcofago davanti alla corte»»¹⁴.

W. J. R. Curtis writes that at Igualada the characteristic features of its authors' language become the story of the feelings triggered when passing through that space¹⁵. In reality, the comparison with their previous architectural works reveals that in this project, perhaps specifically thanks to the specific function, Miralles and Pinós fine-tune their highly personal language. The *pathos* produced by the encounter with the decay, with the flow of things and with their wear and tear, leads them to investigating the mystery of the buildings' life, from ruin to the material that has yet

**Fig. 3**

The building elements that make these spaces materialise remain autonomous, they exhibit their own nature and their own dimensions scientifically, as do the individual constructive elements (C. Palazzolo 1996).

to make itself into Architecture, like the stones in the crypt of the Güell Colony that are waiting to be erected to become columns – one of the talismans of Miralles. The building elements that render those spaces material remain autonomous, they are their author's «objectos que se llevan en el bolsillo»¹⁶; once that pocket has been emptied, they scientifically exhibit their nature and their dimensions: ramps, steps, walkways ... are limited to crossing the different levels that they link together without being confused with them, without touching them; it is the same with the individual construction elements (bricks, beams, prefabricated panels ...). The joints between them dilate, giving a dramatic character to the whole that increasingly resembles a ruin, and not just because the vegetation insinuates itself into them. The times for the completion of the cemetery seem to obey Enric's admonition that the sole way of conserving a project is never to finish it, but this also augments the idea of architecture that offers the image of its own ruination.

Rather than Brutalism, the way the building elements are displayed recalls Giuliano da Sangallo's drawings of Antiquity, where buildings are depicted as ruins in precarious equilibrium in order to reveal how they were constructed. Their architecture, indebted to the forms of Constructivism or of Gimnasio Maravillas, leaves space for a highly personal language: from now on the projects of Miralles and Pinós would be the architectural equivalent of a page from Vesalius. In Igualada too «non abbiamo il simbolo della morte preparato da un predicatore per distogliere dalla vita terrena, bensì una illustrazione inventata da un artista fantasioso al servizio dello scienziato [...] per accompagnare una indagine inconfutabile sul mistero della vita»¹⁷. The life of buildings too.

The body that is subjected to anatomical investigation is not so much that of the works of Gaudí rather than that of the buildings of Catalan Minimalism – whose figures are the subject of unprejudiced dissection. In this way, in the place where everything compels reflection on death, what comes to life is the language that best represents the spirit of a Catalonia that can reaffirm its identity after forty years of dictatorship.

The accumulation of signs from the meanings and memories of every kind is such that years later Miralles will ask himself

**Fig. 4**

Juan de Valdés Leal, *Finis Gloriarum Mundi*, from *Jeroglíficos de la Muerte* (Hieroglyphics of death), Hospital de la Caridad, Seville, 1672.

Fig. 5

A river in flood has entrained every kind of detritus, accumulating lifeless bodies too. Only the wooden sleepers sunk into the paving recall their number, a memory destined to consume itself like every worldly thing; and the hollow that their consumption produces resounds beneath the feet of the visitor following that impetuous river towards the final space. (C. Palazzolo 1996).



quáles serían aquellas piezas que hubiera sido suficiente construir. Hay una parte del proyecto, que es seguramente menos conocida, que es muy importante. Son estas pequeñas losas que están cubriendo una pequeña colina que hay en la entrada, donde se colocó parte del movimiento de tierras proveniente del corte, donde hay un dibujo en espiral absolutamente irreconocible – su propia dimensión lo hace irreconocible. A lo mejor empezando por estas cosas hubiera sido suficiente para construir un cementerio»¹⁸.

Despite adding «Seguramente no es verdad. Lo que estoy diciendo son seguramente comentarios a todo pasado»¹⁹, is *verdad* which in the project for enlarging the Venice cemetery in 1998 it is a precise geometrical spiral that guides the pathway that invades the lagoon. For the extension of the island of San Michele, Enric – by now separated from Carme – again designed a “topography” intended not as a mere description of a place but as actually shaping it: rising from the water is an orography surrounded by a thin cement curtain, a petrified Running Fence that conceals the city and creates a place of meditation which, as poetically summarised by the motto, has «Per pavimento il mare e per tetto il cielo»²⁰. Words that touch the Venice’s very nature but that did not convince a jury that was more inclined to espouse the «filosofía de la caseta i l’hortet»²¹. Miralles had noticed that a maze is drawn on the floor of the main chapel in the Asplund Crematorium, in from the places reserved for the family of the defunct: allowing the eye to lead the mind around its coils it is possible for a moment to forget the pain being felt and allowing space to be found for memory.

*translation Michael Friel

Notes

¹ «A cemetery is not a tomb ... the relationship with the landscape and with forgetting is not the same...» wrote Enric Miralles in a letter to Josep Lluís Mateo quoted in an article by Almalé Artal E. (2014), which also reproduces a large part of the competition drawings.

² Useful for the sections is Almalé Artal E. (2014), <https://homenajeaenricmiralles.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/seccion.jpg>

³ «that sign is a form of thinking naturally, following the notion of precision that makes a path. It cuts across like a trail, dividing the fluids as it goes», Miralles E. (1994a), p. 41; collected later with other writings in Miralles E. (2009b), p. 34.

⁴ «distancing ourselves from the narrative aspects that accompany garden paths», Miralles E. (1994a) and Miralles (2009b), *ibid.*

⁵ «We spent a large part of the winnings from the Igualada cemetery competition on visiting the cemeteries and works of Asplund and Lewerentz and I was greatly impressed by them.», Wiesner T. (1992).

⁶ Wiesner T. (1992).

⁷ For the final project of the Woodland Chapel Asplund reworked the Liselund pavilion which he had visited during his honeymoon. See Wrede, S. (1980) and Constant C. (1994).

⁸ It is useful to compare the sections published in Almalé Artal E. (2014), <https://homenajeaenricmiralles.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/seccion.jpg> with those of Zabala-beascoa A. (1996), p. 52.

⁹ Lahuerta J. J. (1996), p. 22.

¹⁰ «to lay out a croissant», Miralles E. and Prats E. (1994).

¹¹ Asplund E. G. (1940).

¹² Pinós (2009), p.79.

¹³ Vázquez Montalbán M. (1987), p. 218. This is how he described Barcelona's Plaça de Sants, to the project for which Miralles himself had contributed when he worked in the Piñon and Viaplana office: «it is a hard square in a light age, opposed by the people and by the press, both steeped in the age-old principle of injecting nature into the city» and that «bears witness and pays homage to the truth of the urban look and makes no concession to the philosophy of the cottage and of the small garden».

¹⁴ «one of the great gestures of Baroque art was [...] the action both theatrical and threatening that consists of 'opening a sarcophagus before the court'», Chastel A. (1954), p. 231.

¹⁵ Curtis W. J. R. (1994).

¹⁶ «objects in your pocket», Miralles E. (1994b), p. 111.

¹⁷ «we do not get symbols of death prepared by a preacher as distractions from earthly life, but rather an illustration invented by imaginative artists in the scientist's service [...] to accompany an irrefutable investigation into the mystery of life», Chastel A. (1954), p. 240.

¹⁸ «which parts it would be sufficient to build. There is a part of the project, that is certainly less known, that is very important. They are these small slabs laid on a little hill at the entrance where part of the earth removed from the cut is amassed, where there is an absolutely unrecognisable spiral drawing – it is too big to be recognisable. It would probably be enough to start from these elements to build a cemetery», Miralles E. (2009a), p. 26.

¹⁹ «It is certainly not the truth. My words are comments *a posteriori*», Miralles E. (2009a), p. 26.

²⁰ «The sea as its floor and the sky as its roof», Levene R. and Márquez Cecilia F. (2019), p. 468-477, «Extension of the Cemetery of San Michele in Isola».

²¹ « philosophy of the cottage and the small garden », Vázquez Montalbán M. (1987), p. 218;

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