

Andrea Valvason

**The Muda Maé Cemetery at Longarone.****Reconstruction: between memory, suffering, and invention**

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**Abstract**

Hollowed out of the belly of the mountain, the Muda Maé Cemetery at Longarone resembles a rediscovered ancient necropolis, a symbol of memory and rebirth following the dramatic events of the Vajont disaster in October 1963.

Questioning the meaning of this work, beyond what it stands for, means investigating the context which generated it and the problem of reconstruction in general, a theme constantly present throughout history in which certain fundamental questions of the architectural debate – still in progress – become explicit through real and binding situations.

The work exhibited here represents a possible direct manifestation of a design approach based on a dialectical relationship and continuity with respect to a specific story and context. The theme of memory linked to reconstruction assumes a key role in the understanding and development of the contemporary project.

**Keywords**

Cemetery — Vajont — Reconstruction — Memory — Landscape

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The cemetery, like the house, is a place where everyone is, for the most part, involved individually, with a certain familiarity. [...] This suggests that the cemetery, like the house, belongs to the intimacy of a personal patrimony, one that it is reasonable to expect should be used privately. (Canella 1984, p.2)

Reflecting today on the cemetery project for the victims of Vajont by Francesco Tentori, at the time a regular collaborator with Gianni Avon who also involved his Milanese friend Marco Zanuso, can spark considerable interest if included within a broader dimension to do with the theme of reconstruction<sup>1</sup>. This highly complex, eternally topical issue addresses the problem of the architectural project in its relationship with the city and with the various variations it can assume if considered as a unique expression of *urbs* and *civitas* and therefore as a built, historical and social context, in which the architectural work becomes the bearer of meaning by addressing the fundamental issues that are intertwined within the theoretical and operational debate of *making contemporary architecture*.

The Muda Maé Cemetery work must therefore be interpreted and understood according to the context, structured as it was on several levels, from which it took its form and within which it was inserted: a context where everything revolves around the human tragedy that found a concrete expression in the loss of homes, the city, and life.

On the night of 9 October 1963, in the mountain valleys on the border between the Friuli and Veneto regions where, nestling among the rocks, the Vajont Dam rises, a huge landslide broke away from the northern side of Mount Toc to fall into the reservoir of the artificial basin, generating a wave of water and mud which quite literally wiped out the entire inhabited area of Longarone, and also partially erased some neighbouring villages such as Erto and Casso, located upstream of the barrier.



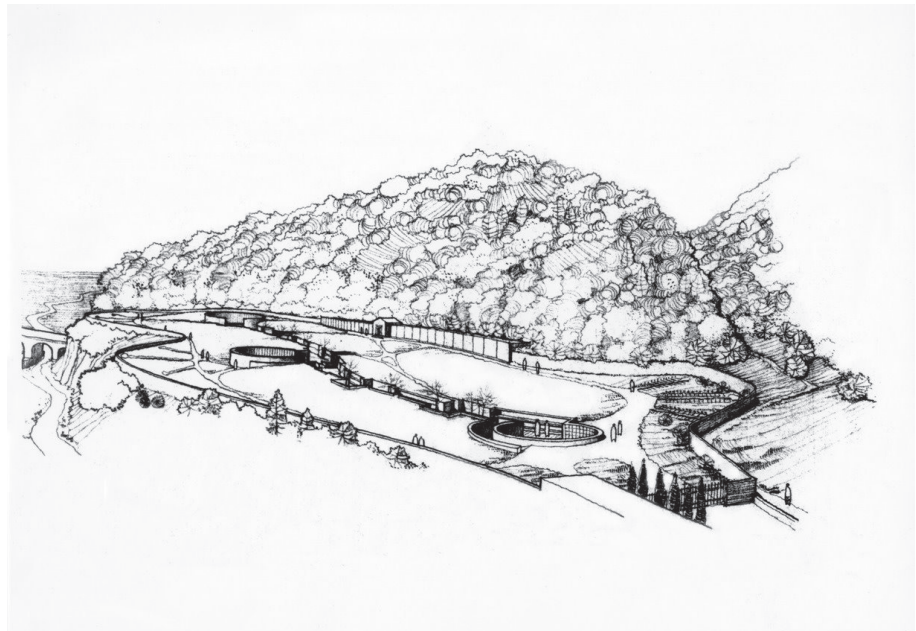
**Fig. 1**  
The “tabula rasa” of Longarone after the Vajont disaster (historical photo)

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the reconstruction plan and works were entrusted to a group of architects headed by Giuseppe Samonà who proposed a modernist intervention to rebuild Longarone, in a curt response to the diametrically opposed requests of the “survivors’ committee”, who hoped to reconstruct the urban fabric based on traditional models, moved more by a desire to regain possession of that family environment which they had seen dramatically vanish in the space of a few minutes rather than a philological restoration of the settlement.

The figures of Francesco Tentori and Gianni Avon made their appearance when the municipal administration called the latter to act as mediator between the two opposing factions, in the hope of speeding up the drafting of the reconstruction plan. The scenario which the two architects found was heavy with conflict, divided «between the models of uncompromising rationality of ‘technicians from outside’, and the vernacular aspirations of the local survivors» (Zucconi 2000, p. 89), inhabitants of a territory whose parochial but perfectly respectable mentality can be summed up by a verse of Pier Paolo Pasolini: «A no è àghe pi frès-cie che tal mè país»<sup>1</sup>.

Avon and Tentori succeeded in the enterprise through a careful and timely investigation aimed at mitigating the planning choices at urban and building levels while matching the inhabitants’ individual requests. Consequently, in the first months of 1965, the detailed executive project signed off by Samonà was approved: «In the fact of Vajont we weigh the difference between the planning of the institutions and that of the local community – a conflict between opposing cultures: the first standardizing, the second personalizing» (Pastor 2010, p.8).





**Fig. 2**  
Muda Maé Cemetery, perspective sketch (IUAV Projects Archive).

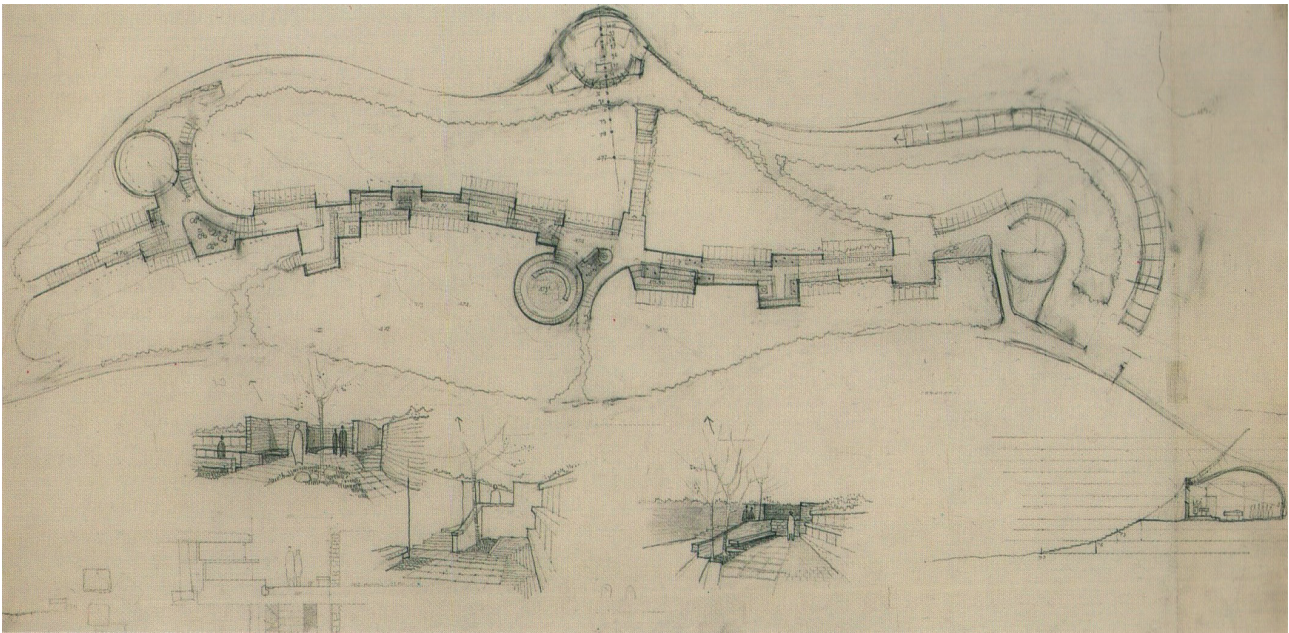
The attitude of humble self-denial with which the two architects carried out their work was symptomatic of the atmosphere which enveloped the Zoldana Valley in those years, where the suffering of the human condition was tackled with respect, fully aware of the desire for redemption among those who had survived the tragedy, whose only desire was to preserve their memory and recreate the essence of what had been lost.

Here we find the meaning of reconstruction which in its most basic sense can refer to an act of re-implantation, that is, a system of actions, a working method, an approach which, in the moment of doing, holds together memory, the present condition and a future vision for the realization of a contemporary work.

This type of approach can be traced in the design process which led to the realization of the Muda Maé Cemetery, the final moment of a work whose nature can be summed up in the words of Francesco Tentori: «It was undoubtedly the most interesting human experience of my life» (Tentori 200 p. 17).

Gianni Avon, Francesco Tentori and Marco Zanuso (an outsider who would have the opportunity to work on other occasions with Studio Avon) developed the project between their Milan and Udine studios, completing it in 1966 to be followed by the executive development phase and the realization which however would not begin until 1969, and ending only in 1972.

The cemetery is located on a steeply sloping terrain to the right of the Maé, a tributary of the Piave river, and mimics the form of an ancient substructure recently brought to light, composed of thick walls which «recall the boundary walls of mountain farms rather than the margin of a cemetery» (Acocella 200 4p. 117). The layout follows a linear, slightly curved pathway which respects the orography of the ground, in a structure strongly rooted to the site, becoming an integral part of it without altering the overall geography. The pathway develops completely below ground level, obtained by excavating the soil which becomes the built space within which the funeral rite takes place, the moment of the passage from life to death, its celebration and remembrance:



**Fig. 3**  
Muda Maé Cemetery, general  
plan, preparatory sketch.

From the first inspection, we could see that the land had a view coldheartedly focused on the huge expanse of gravel of the Piave valley (regularly almost devoid of water), and the dam which had devastated the thousands of inhabitants. It seemed to us that if the cemetery had been built with that view, it could not have provided that place of concentration and memory which is required when one goes to visit the grave of a family member. Hence the idea that it would be appropriate to dig the ground and create open-air environments surrounded by niches. (Tentori 1999, p. 20)

Fundamental elements of the ground plan are the ascending paths between the lower and ground levels, allowing a constant dialogue between the built environment and the natural landscape, and the three circular spaces, formally referring to the Greek *tholos*, which act as compositional hinges to which the cemetery pathway is attached, at the same time serving as spatial limits positioned at the beginning, centre, and end of the route: «From all these environments only the mountains can be seen, that is, the calm face of nature, not its threatening and distressing aspects» (Tentori 1999, p. 20).

The landscape and the naturalistic element do not play the simple role of a scenographic backdrop but become an integral part of the construction, an operating tool, a design material. This is due on the one hand to the siting of the structure and its internal development, and on the other to the use of the architectural elements described above through which the work becomes an open structure in which architecture and landscape coexist, collaborate, and fuse, bringing to life a unitary system whereby we can witness a reconciliation between man and nature in an attempt to restore a formerly compromised relationship in an interpretation of «landscape as anatomy»<sup>2</sup>, as if the forms of the one were an extension of the other, and vice versa.

The staging of the human tragedy intervenes here, understood in the poetic meaning of the term, in which the theme of memory is addressed through a design process and a compositional mechanism developed through a “silent” operation, generated, almost spontaneously, starting from the experiential, and from the events of which the cemetery is a direct witness: «So that the *collective trauma of those who remain* is also a *distressing awareness* of the need for every society to resort to the surviving morality to pass from a state of astonished affliction to a creative state promoted even by irrational spiritual resources» (Canella 1974 p. 2).





**Fig. 4**  
Muda Maé Cemetery, view from above (photo by Italo Zannier).

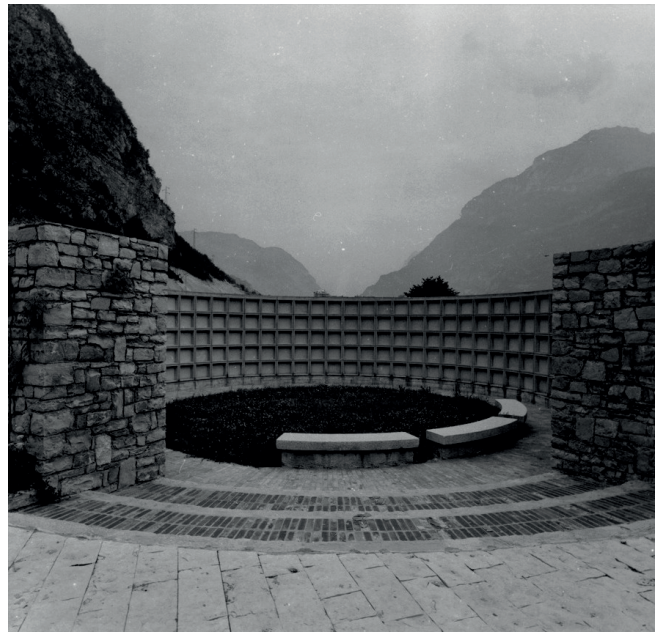
The control over the project at formal and figurative levels can be found both in the general scale of the ground plan, and in that of the details, where the construction techniques and the materials used come directly from the context and the site. The squared stone blocks of which the embankments and the walls that mark the internal pathway are composed are the same portions of rock removed from the mountain to graft the cemetery structure onto it: «The image of the return to the earth is poetically reinterpreted as an excavation into nature and a gesture of the material removed to contain the body: the first sign of man's architecture, like the mound in the woods which Adolf Loos spoke of. (Dorigati e Ottolini 1984, p.18)

Architecture and landscape in a dialogue with each other build a symbolic space for the contemplation of memory, recalled through the arrangement of a series of images which refer to the rite of death, to the history of which they are witnesses or to the context they are a part of: from the images of funeral pathways of ancient origin to those of the trenches or outposts hollowed out of the rocky walls of the mountains, dating back to the Great War and now an integral element of the Alpine landscape of this territory. Such a semantic charge was made possible thanks to the sensibility with which Avon, Tentori and Zanuso addressed the theme of the cemetery here, where the figure of the individual architect took a step back – so much so that the work cannot be attributed to any of the three designers from a linguistic point of view – to make room for the design, the architecture, and what this represents through the creation of a phenomenal device which generates images: visions that are abstract or real, tragic or happy, dense with memory but projecting into the future, images in any case imbued with hope, loomed over by the now calm figure of a scarred landscape.

By its very nature, the Muda Maé Cemetery is thus elevated to become a monument which is a place of memory and celebration:

Memory confers the measure of time on the things of space: all that time which lies before us. But it is the time of the dead, gathered in a consortium to warn us to be as alive as they were in their moment. Admonishing and remembering (*moneo* and *memini*) have the same root in Latin and from this the word *monument* as well as the concept it symbolically encloses acquire their value. (Rogers 1968, p. 137)

The issues addressed in this work, in particular in the design process,

**Fig. 5**

Muda Maé Cemetery, seen from the internal pathway (photo by Italo Zannier).

which concern the relationship of architecture with history and a confrontation with the context, the theme of memory, the relationship between landscape and construction, the theme of the image, a representation and symbol concretized in the action of passing on a value, of transmitting a memory, a teaching through that reciprocal exchange of contents which occurs between signifier and signified, can be traced back to the problem of reconstruction, analysed on both theoretical and operational levels. Reconstruction is to be understood in a broad sense, i.e. not referring solely to the operation of rebuilding, but interpreted as a critical action which guides the creative process from conception to realization, aimed at yielding a work of architecture based on the principle of continuity: «Our task is to arouse the dialectical synthesis of the complex cultural world in which we participate, creating an artistic environment which sincerely expresses today's reality (and problems)» (Rogers 1945, p. 69).

In the case of the Vajont disaster, these questions became immediately explicit and utterly tangible, where the response to the aforementioned themes was suddenly and urgently necessary so that the works produced became direct manifestations, concrete examples, of an operative way of thinking, some successful, some less so. However, it behoves us to reflect on the cultural significance of these interventions in which a certain inclination can easily be traced, a certain tendency to conceive the work of contemporary architecture as a calculated graft. A conception which can be extended more generally to what could be a viable direction in contemporary architectural design, even when it does not actually concern areas related to the need to reconstruct but ones which are nonetheless inserted within a space, a time, and a specific cultural context. With this, we wish to verify whether it is possible to transfer the theoretical assumptions determined by the reconstruction problem to a collective approach which directs the design action towards the development of an architecture for the city, that is, a work set within a circumscribed context: so that the pathos aroused in the face of the «defeat of the intimacy of places» (Rossi 2018, p. 18), loaded by dramatic contingent situations and transferred to the project, is the same one, appropriately measured, which intervenes in the critical and operational moment of making architecture extended to all

contemporary production, or at least to that of a Western origin. And without excluding, but focusing the right amount of attention on, that precious value of expressive freedom and «exquisite indifference» (Varnedoe 1990) which modern art has transmitted to us, and which today is plainly almost completely misunderstood.

Consequently, we have no wish here to enter into topics that lie beyond the scope of this essay, instead the intent is to look at the work of the Muda Maé Cemetery at Longarone from a broader perspective, through which it is possible to abstract founding principles that can be transcribed into general assumptions to examine while questioning ourselves to better understand the current condition of the architectural world, but also beyond it. One element of this project which can be seen as confirmation of the statements just expressed is the presence of an architectural language which is not easily attributable, not merely because it is a work prepared by several people, but above all because it was developed according to a principle of invention, and is therefore a culturally dynamic language which recovered, re-elaborated and recapitulated the elements of tradition, the territory and the history of the place, producing a coherent albeit completely new result, abandoning any personal idiosyncrasies to make room for architecture and its function.

The Muda Maé Cemetery is therefore a testimony, and at the same time a symbol, of a possible rebirth, established through a work whose meaning should be understood through the spirit and intention, «the souls of those who lived there» (Tentori 1968, p. 30) and weighed against such a human tragedy, bringing them back through a “silent” work which evokes both memory and hope: «The architecture represents this battle against misfortune, a charm against death, against fate, a show of resistance, a test of strength» (Semerani 1999, p. 63).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The theme of reconstruction is introduced here by referring to some research work begun within the Architectural Design Studio of a two-year Master’s Degree in “Architecture and Urban Design” at the Polytechnic University of Milan, under Professors Enrico Bordogna and Tommaso Brighenti, in the academic years 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. During these years, various degree theses on the situations of Amatrice, Norcia, and Camerino were prepared, including preliminary research work for projects that included in-depth analyses of the wide range of reconstruction episodes after natural disasters, such as that of the Vajont case under consideration.

<sup>2</sup> Zigaina G. (2014) – “*Paesaggio come anatomia*”. In: Magris C., Agostinelli F., Zigaina G. (eds.), *Zigaina: paesaggio come anatomia: l’incisione 1965-2014*, catalogue of an exhibition held in Trieste, Cervignano del Friuli and Udine in 2014 (the essay is from Zigaina G. (1995) – *Verso la laguna*. Marsilio, Venice). Lithostampa, Pasian di Prato (UD), p.27.

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Andrea Valvason born in Latisana (Udine) in 1994, Valvason obtained a Bachelor's Degree in “Architecture, Construction and Conservation” at the IUAV in Venice in the 2015-2016 academic year and a Master's Degree with honours in “Architecture and Urban Design” at the Polytechnic University of Milan in the 2018-2019 academic year, with a thesis entitled “Strategie di ricostruzione post-sisma in Italia centrale. Il nucleo antico di Amatrice: com'era dov'era?” (a project for the post-earthquake reconstruction of the historic centre of Amatrice). In tandem with his professional activity, he carries out research on the subject of reconstruction, and has collaborated in various studies and participated in competitions and design research. He carries out various teaching support activities at the Polytechnic University of Milan.