

Federica Conte
The hidden city: Chacarita's cemetery

Abstract

In this essay a characteristic thought about one of the first Clorindo Testa's work is going to be discussed.

He was one of the most important Italo Argentinian architects of the XX century. The cemetery of Chacarita, like many other cemeteries sited in the huge Metropolis of Buenos Aires, will be interpreted as a real "city in the city". Only venturing into this parallel world, this thought about what is in between life and death shapes up through the language of Architecture. From the main entrance a layering of different periods and styles accompanies us to the heart of the cemetery, where the construction of the *Sexto Panteón*, dated 1958, takes place. This is just the first stop of an endless path where light effects and corridors labyrinthically animate the "eternal" space of the underground.

Keywords

Cemetery — Memory — Clorindo Testa

Every single Art have been tried to narrate, with the most heterogeneous languages, the ritual of life and inescapably that one of death.

Literature has met the challenge of what's comes from this invisible rite of passage that takes hold in human imagination.

Words have talked about the silent lives of people from the underground¹ and drawn the space around burial sites²; the painters have interpreted its shadows and the sculpture has tried to catch its changelessness.

Architecture, however, shapes something nobody can know: it's the bridge between the land of the living and death and it clouds the strict limit which sets them apart.

From the cemetery as a complex system to the great national monuments built for the war victims, Architecture has the aim of staging a play made by memory and oblivion, matter and spirit, lights and shadows. It shows humans new pathways, thinking about the future.

Precisely in this dynamic and complex perspective, the essay will show one of the possible ways of reflecting on the theme, with particular reference to the cemetery of Chacarita in Buenos Aires. Here, a young Clorindo Testa has given voice to the silence of the contemporary necropolis.

Every society, regardless of their own belief, culture started with burial rites³ It is interesting to note how René Girard considers this constant metamorphosis of the human being for reaching this conclusion.

He underlines that «non ci sia morto in società che non diventi una grande risorsa della vita». Here, a great anthropological revolution underlines something relevant for understanding the key issue: «ciò che è fecondo sul piano culturale, non è la coscienza naturalistica della morte o il desiderio che si ha di fuggire [...] ma è la rivelazione della morte come



Fig. 1
Focus on the entire Chacarita's cemetery area.

sacro, come potenza infinita, più benevola, in fin dei conti che temibile, più adorabile che terrificante.» (Girard 1983).

In this view, Architecture builds the complexity of the ritual spaces, as the only *Art* capable of giving an ordering *sense* to every single element: from the archetype of the mound⁴ to its variations; from the temple/sarcophagus to the domus as a place of worship.

Cemeteries serve as a metaphor for a rite made by hopes and peace where the addressee is “us”, humans. In this immense forest that is the city, we cross the destiny saying: «qui è sepolto qualcuno. Questa è architettura!»⁵ In the deafening noise, the silence breaches Buenos Aires city, creating something unexpected. The invocation to the Silence *is just an establishment of the Word*⁶, the architectural one, which replies to the frenetic and confusing noise of the big Argentine capital.

The most famous cemetery in BS is probably the Recoleta's one but this essay will focus on another case, another city in the city: the Chacarita's.

The yellow fever was spreading like wildfire around the capital, where the cemeteries of Recoleta and Parque Patricios were still not enough to bury people dying for this terrible illness.

For this reason, from 1871 the municipality of Buenos Aires decreed that a new cemetery would be built in the Chacarita's district, from where it got its name.

Only between 1920 and 1960 Buenos Aires's population increased from 1 million to about 3 million. In less than half century a new addition for the cemetery was necessary. The area of the new necropolis was becoming bigger than it started.

This is just an example of one of the interventions that the municipality had to start at that time. Clorindo Testa took part to this project, which represents in a sort of sense one of the saddest interludes in Argentina's history.⁷

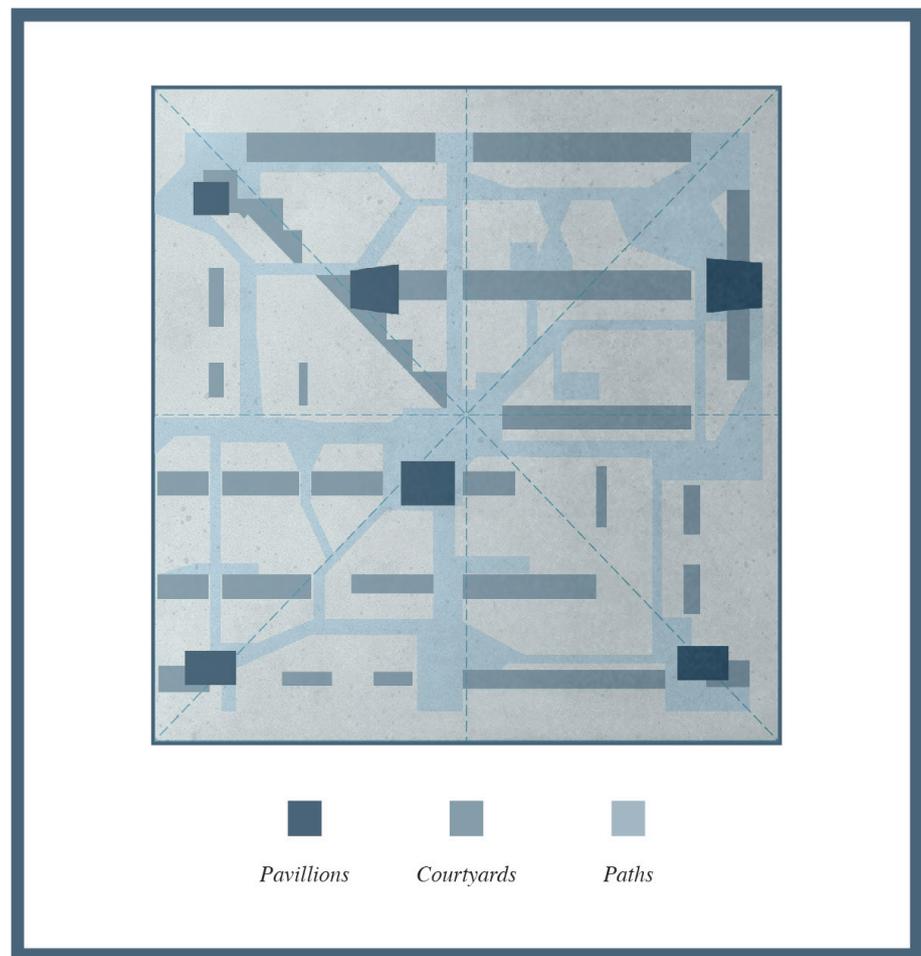


Fig. 2
Critical redrawing of the master plan.

In my opinion, it is necessary, for a second, to introduce this eclectic character who was Clorindo Testa.

Challenging and particularly creative, he becomes one of the most important players of the XX century in South America. He was a very controversial figure about whom there is still a heated debate. Maybe, the Banco de Londres y America del Sur and the Biblioteca Nacional de Buenos Aires are his masterpieces but his long career as an architect, apart from that one as a painter or in general as an artist, we could say, allow him to experiment with construction. From the small to the large scale.

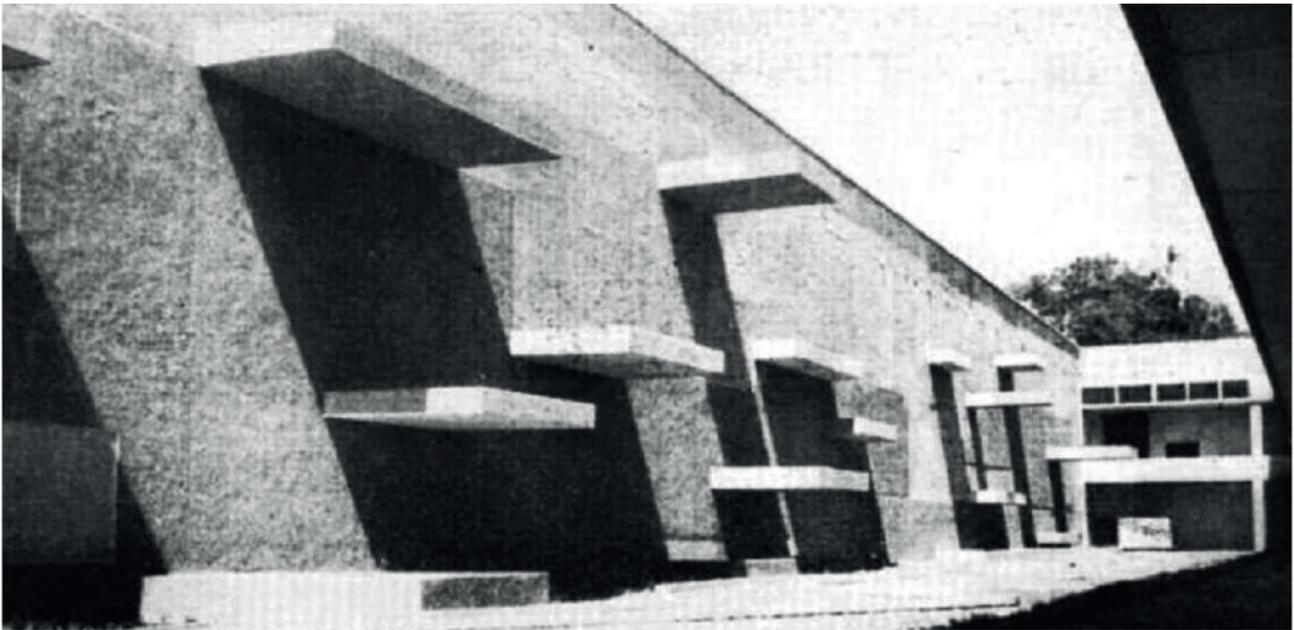
Every single project teaches how the new fragments, which are expression of a language that is only apparently of breaking, are linked in harmony although the city has a XIX century urban scheme.

It is necessary to narrate the exciting story through the Chacarita's cemetery going back a few years after Testa's graduation at the Facultad de Arquitectura of Buenos Aires. As a very young architect he quickly took part in the project of the new master plan for the capital. The Post-War context was very productive: a lots of architects, as Itala Fulvia Villa, were called to join this huge change of the Chacarita's area and to modernly rethink about its old design.

After coming through the monumental entrance of the cemetery, a combination of noble and statuary chapels precedes the immense empty space that opens in front of the visitors, suddenly surprising them all.

Our path is interrupted and the limits of the cemetery disappears.

The city of the "other life" that Clorindo Testa imagines, starts at the ground floor: it is composed by a system of pavilions where each of them has a different identity.

**Fig. 3**

Clorindo Testa, Chacarita's cemetery. Photography with the view inside the big dig courtyards. (Nuestra Arquitectura n.379, 1961).

They represent the only one access to the Underworld, where creativity and harmony of the shapes guard hundreds of urns.

The design process allowed the “other city” to live only where the city of the living ends. In this point twisted pavements and flower gardens take place and the city of the Dead digs and takes its own shape, being reborn from the underground.

Picture n.2 shows how through a geometrical process of decomposition, the squared area will be conceived as a set of triangles, as a diamond, where the big portals harmonically take their place, spaced out by cuts in the ground. The walls play to carry out level changes.

This extraordinary composition hides again, from an overhead view, the heart of the project.

The path to the underworld is a real catharsis, not only emotionally but also physically conceived, and it finds out when we arrive to the lower floors.

The wide concrete stairs cross each other: the space – it is piranesianos in its complexity and finitude – allows the visitors to have a crossed view, from inside out. The great texture of the wall pierced by a multitude of small hole introduces what is going to happen in the heart of the cemetery. The iron railings, made by simple geometries, guide us along the whole way. The hammered concrete, rough and imprecise, has been sculpted with decorations in the underground spaces of transition where, the light rays projected to the floor, gradually disappear, as the night progresses.

The weight of the concrete dematerializes exactly when the construction begins: Testa has learned very well what indirectly Le Corbusier has taught him: «Puissent nos bétons si rudes révéler que, sous eux, nos sensibilité sont fines»⁸.

In this game of dug gardens, 12 meters beneath the ground, the architect regards them as if they were *patios* through which the deceased's home can takes bright light. Its shiny power plays a key role in the entire project, especially opposed to the imperviousness of the concrete.

The catacombs are an important reference: here Testa rethinks about them, changing their dark and claustrophobic nature that becomes something open and luminous. Designing a cemetery had presented certain logistical problems to be resolves, one was thinking about the system of the air circulation: the incredible inventiveness of the architect promoted a double system, one for the single urns and another one for the visitor's area.

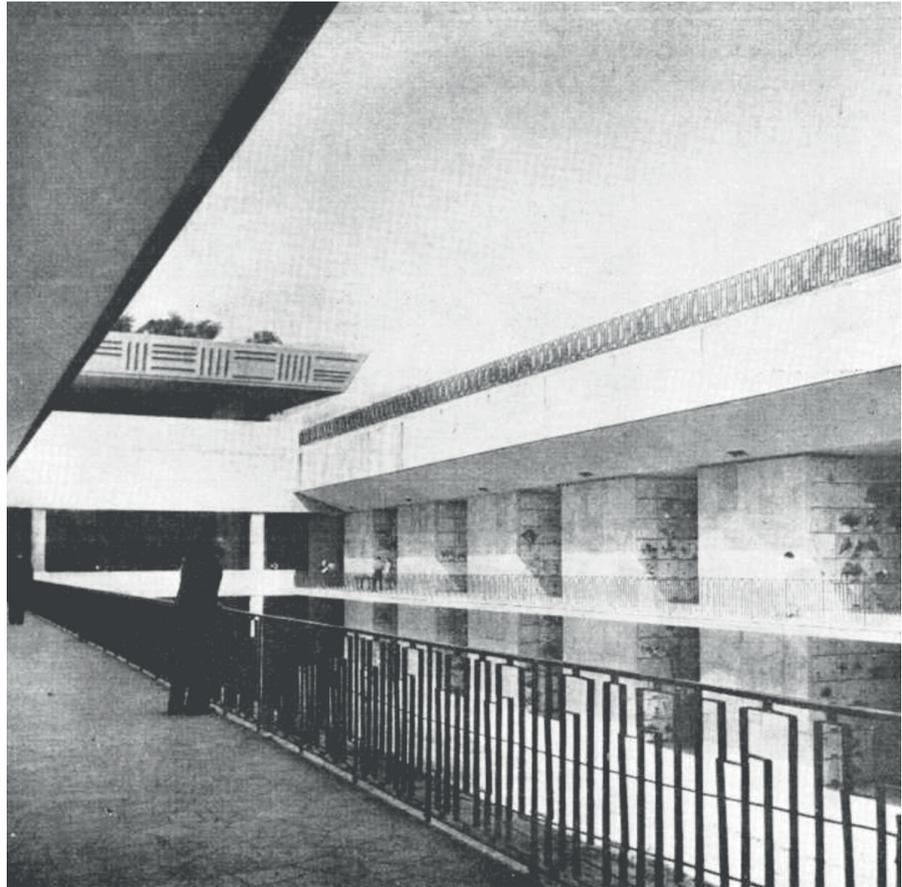


Fig. 4

Clorindo Testa, Chacarita's cemetery. Photography with the view from the first floor under the ground.

(Nuestra Arquitectura n.379, 1961).

He turned ejection tube into decorated monoliths, with a specific position for the balance of the formal design composition.

In the original design, the big courtyards had to host big pools of water to reflect lights directly on the marble walls of the urns.

During construction this idea was abandoned, extending the green area: on this way the courtyards become beautiful hanging gardens, that is what we can see today.

The deep courtyards books resemble walls where over-sized shelves (fig. 3) rhythmically become graduated notches of hypothetical yardstick that emphasizes the height of the two underground levels.

The project has three different floors. While as we go down, a rarefaction of the materials is determinate. The level where pavilions are is the solid object that is going to be lighter at the first floor under the ground thanks to the courtyards and the corridors where visitors can still have free movement.

When you arrive at the second floor under the ground, the last one, however, the solidity of this object breaks up: three of the eight triangles evade, reducing the floor area.

Spaces became reduced and the only point to go from the norther part to the southern is the geometrical center of the square. It is slightly away from the vertical axis where the grand staircase reminds us to go back, to the ground floor.

In a sort of sense, the heart of this city of Dead always gives visitors a chance: following the hypogeum labyrinthic path or to go back to the world of the living.

Cemeteries, as the Flores's one, are little known works of this author. Here his sensivity as a painter and his expressiveness as an architect becomes something explicit, despite he tried for all his career to take them away.

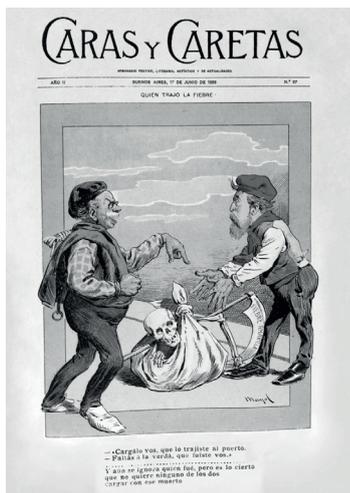


Fig. 5
Caricature of Yellow Fever. (from
Cara y Caretas, 1899).

Clorindo Testa is the narrator and at the same time the reader of this story that comes from another dimension: the transcendental experience of death.

This device of hiding the heart of the project underground reminds me a particular stylistic choice that Ugo Foscolo used for writing *I Sepolcri*: thanks to *ipotiposi* – a figure of speech – he used to describe places that were apparently sketched. In this way these places would be anywhere in the world encouraging readers to imagine. That is thinking out of the box.

The project gives visitors, who can be careful of not, to have right in front of them only the incipit of his architectural narration.

And even if painting did not find his place here, architecture and sculpture give rise to the *phénomène de nature plastique*⁹ from where the research of the *poetic sense of the art* starts.

The path through the vault becomes a space who overtakes the need of burying: the immense underground city ends up to be the destination of a travel that goes beyond the dimension of reality.

At the down of his career, Clorindo Testa was able to eloquently address the issue of the relation between life and death, underlining an important theme: memory does not reside in material object but in what, through great works, every human can find the freedom for imagining and remembering.

Notes

¹ Foscolo U. (1926), *I sepolcri. Liriche scelte*, Romeo G. (edited by), Antonio Trimarchi Editore, Palermo.

² Edgard Lee Master, *Antologia di Spoon River*, edited by Girolamo Romeo, Antonio Trimarchi Editore, Palermo, 1926

³ «The tomb is none other than the first human monument erected around the expiatory victim, the primeval cradle of significations, the most elementary and fundamental one. There is no culture without a tomb, there is no tomb without culture». Taken from the book Girard R. (1983), *Delle cose nascoste sin dalla fondazione del mondo*, Adelphi edizioni, Milan, pp.108-109

⁴⁻⁵ Loos A (1972), *Parole nel vuoto*, Adelphi edizioni, pp.253-255.

⁶ Arís C. M. (2002), *Silenzi eloquenti. Borges, Mies van der Rohe, Ozu, Rothko, Oteiza*, Christian Marinotti, Milan.

⁷ The Chacarita cemetery has undergone numerous changes since 1886, the date of its foundation in the area that today falls under the name of Parque de los Andes. In 1886 it did not even fall under the name we know today, but as “Cementerio del Oeste”. In 1913 it was radically enlarged and in 1918 the part of the English Protestant cemetery was separated from the German one. After the Second World War, starting from 1958 the Sexto Panteón was built and there are additions and demolitions up to 2017.

⁸⁻⁹ Le Corbusier, *Entretiens Avec Georges Charensol 1962 et Robert Mallet 1951*, Fremaux & Assoc. Fr

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Federica Conte (Bari, 1994), architect, graduated with honours from the IUAV in Venice with a thesis entitled "Racconti di Calabria" (Tales of Calabria) supervised by Prof. Armando Dal Fabbro. She is currently carrying out research as a PhD student at the Doctorate in Architecture and Construction of the Faculty of Architecture at the Sapienza University of Rome.