

**Tomaso Monestiroli**  
**Forms of the ritual, forms of architecture.**  
**If we were to come across a mound in the woods...**

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**Abstract**

Through the reading and the analysis, a posteriori, of Studio Monestiroli's projects for the Cimitero Maggiore of Voghera and the Cemetery on the island of San Michele in Venice, the text identifies in some specific elements, which build the place of the dead, the reasons of sense and form for the representation of the sepulchral space. The comparison of the two works also leads to a profound questioning of the permanent architectural elements that contribute to the representation of the cult of the dead. Protecting and preserving through the relationship that these elements establish with the place and, at the same time, questioning the relationship between architecture and nature.

**Keywords**

Enclosure — Island — Forest — Portal — Mound

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The recollection, the memory of those who have left us, is a personal feeling often entrusted to an object, an image, a piece of writing, or a series of random items which each of us treasures not only physically, but also in our mind. Items jealously kept safe, often in isolation, which have a particular, very personal and intimate meaning that is not necessarily shared with other people. Then there is the collective memory, the civil one, which needs a location in order to be institutionalized. A suitable location, exclusively dedicated to the act of remembering, a place recognized and recognizable by the entire community of citizens.

Mankind has always attributed an important, otherworldly meaning to the moment of death, shrouded in mystery and often by a fear of what comes “after”, which has led to the definition of an accompanying rite in the search for a meaning capable of alleviating that feeling of melancholy sadness which affects us when someone dear to us ends his or her earthly existence. This occurs regardless of religion, historical era, and the social structure of belonging. The funeral rite has always been that final earthly act in which the community recognizes and celebrates human life by projecting it, in diverse ways according to their beliefs, into the world of ideas, into the time of memory. It is this that makes people “immortal” – the memory of them, which in order to be handed down over time needs to be safeguarded.

In the culture of our time, the place dedicated to the safeguarding of memory is the cemetery. A place reserved for the dead and evocative of time. A place which needs the forms of architecture to be defined.

Architecture is entrusted with the task of making the character of the places in the city of the living recognizable and, in the same way, it must build

the identity of the city of the dead.

The rules which define the relationships between the parts of the cities we live in (streets, houses, parks, community buildings) are similar to those which define the parts of the place of the deceased, the only difference being that the city as we live it is a set of distinct functions, the cemetery, instead, although built on the same formal structure, is a place linked to a single function.

With his famous definition, Adolf Loos already linked the feeling that architecture arouses in those who observe it, to the theme of burial. In the few lines with which Loos tells us what the deepest meaning of architecture is for him, all the theoretical issues of our discipline are concentrated: «If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a sombre mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say, ‘There is someone buried here.’ That is architecture» (Loos 1972, p. 255).

In this passage the profound meaning of architecture is clearly stated, that is, its recognition expressed by the appropriacy of the form and its construction. Loos reminded us of the fact that architecture, unlike any other built artefact, is able to arouse moods in man, something which Le Corbusier in another famous definition of architecture would then associate with *wonder*<sup>1</sup> and that the main task of the architect is precisely that of knowing how to specify precisely this state of mind, through the art of composition. With this in mind, it is possible to say that what distinguishes good architecture from non-architecture is the correspondence between the representative forms of architecture and the mood aroused by these forms, their measure, and their proportions.

The ultimate goal of architecture is to *arouse emotion*.

The rite, to be such, needs to be recognized and shared by the community who take part in it. First and foremost, it needs a place, which can be either natural or urban. Naturally, it must be a place dedicated to its performance. A place suitable in its size and shape for the implementation of all those human actions which the rite in question includes.

Architecture has precisely this task: to make the place and space intended for the ceremony adequate, with the necessary form, the precise size, the recognizable character capable of arousing an emotion in those participating. Suffice to think how important it is, in designing a church, to have a deep knowledge of the rite that takes place there. The relationship with the liturgy is fundamental in the construction of a sacred hall.

Designing a church means attempting to build a community space in which the congregation who gather there take part in the rite that unites them and in which they can recognize themselves.

In fact, it is a hall based on the relationship between two parts: the presbytery where the rite is celebrated, and the nave, where the community is called to participate in the rite. It is through the relationship between these two parts, through continuous compositional research grounded in an interpretation of the theme, that the diverse types of sacred hall have been consolidated over time, each time heeding the rules which determine the performance of the rite, the liturgy.

Returning to Loos’ definition, we can see how all of this has been masterfully expressed.

To begin with, Loos identifies the location of the work of architecture: a wood, a natural place which in Anglo-Saxon culture was often associated with a burial site, and is therefore in keeping with the theme being dealt

with. Later, Loos describes the mound and precisely illustrates its size and shape obtained by working with a shovel. The desire to give the most appropriate form to the construction of the burial place is the necessary element for its recognition and consequently for the sentiment transmitted. *Measure, form, and construction*, in their proportional and geometric appropriacy, combined with the correspondence with the location, allow the construction to be recognized, bestowing upon it a sacred value which arouses a feeling of respect in those who come across it. This is the power of architecture, and the architect's responsibility lies precisely in an implementation of the recognition of its forms.

Architecture must arouse emotions in a sincere way, relying on constructive honesty and without delegating anything to the transient. Here again, Loos showed us how this is possible without using ornament, but relying exclusively on decoration. Still one of the most debated issues in our discipline, and perhaps very little understood, is the clear difference between *decoration* and *ornamentation*. The confusion between these two elements of the architectural process is historical, and it was certainly Adolf Loos, through his writings and his works of architecture, who specified once and for all the different meaning of the two terms.

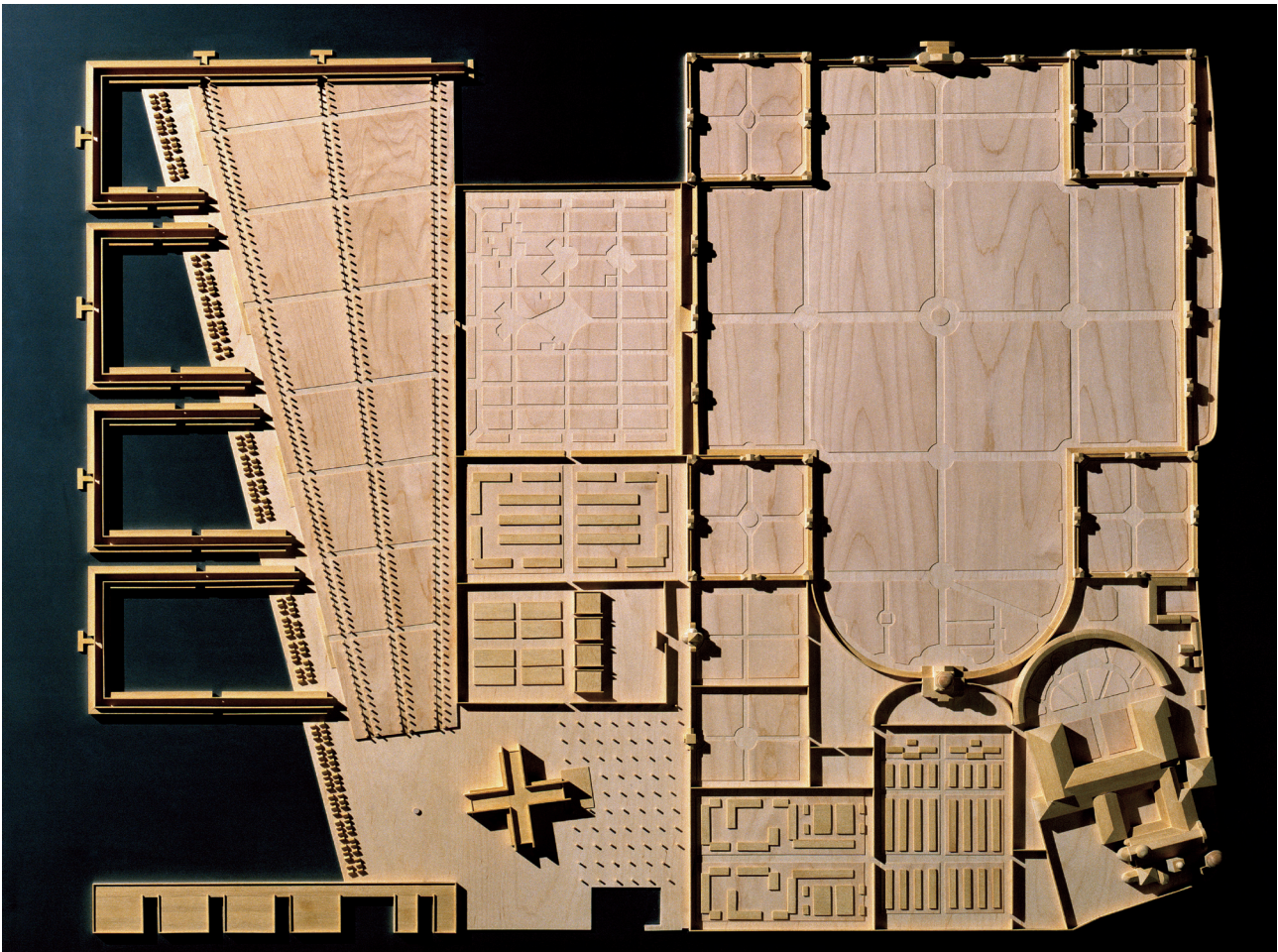
*Ornamentation* is not part of the construction, it is superimposed on it, often making it hard to recognize. On the contrary, *decoration* is an integral part of the construction, it defines its form which then becomes expressive of its role. For Ernesto Nathan Rogers, decoration was a way of enhancing the reality of things and, in our case, it is not and can never be separable from construction. The difference between a support and a column lies precisely in this passage. Both perform the same practical function of supporting, but the column takes the appropriate form to make the act of supporting expressive, it "enhances" its supporting function. Entasis, which in itself has no static function, is a formal representation of the stress borne by a column in carrying out its function. The central bulge of the shaft of the column is somewhat similar to the image of a man, who, loaded down by a heavy weight on his shoulders, tends to bend forward to better resist the strain he is being subjected to. This is arguably one of the major critical issues of contemporary architecture: the persistent confusion between decoration and ornamentation.

To return to the central theme of this writing, namely, the relationship between the forms of the rite and the forms of architecture, we should therefore ask ourselves which form corresponds to the theme of safeguarding and remembrance for the culture of our own times.

To safeguard means to keep, to keep with care, to take care of something or someone as well as to defend or protect; therefore, the place designated for the safeguarding must be representative of its meaning. When designing a burial place, it is necessary to ask the question of what the profound meaning of the funeral rite is, and what architectural elements are suitable to represent it.

The enclosure is perhaps the most appropriate architectural element to represent the theme of safeguarding. The act of enclosing is a primordial act of architecture; determining an *inside* and an *outside* already means establishing the perimeter of a place. However, this act does not establish a form nor a dimension *a priori*. It can be defined by a continuous wall, a colonnade, or a simple trench in the ground, and the more the enclosure is defined in architectural terms, the more it assumes a decisive role in identifying the character of a place.





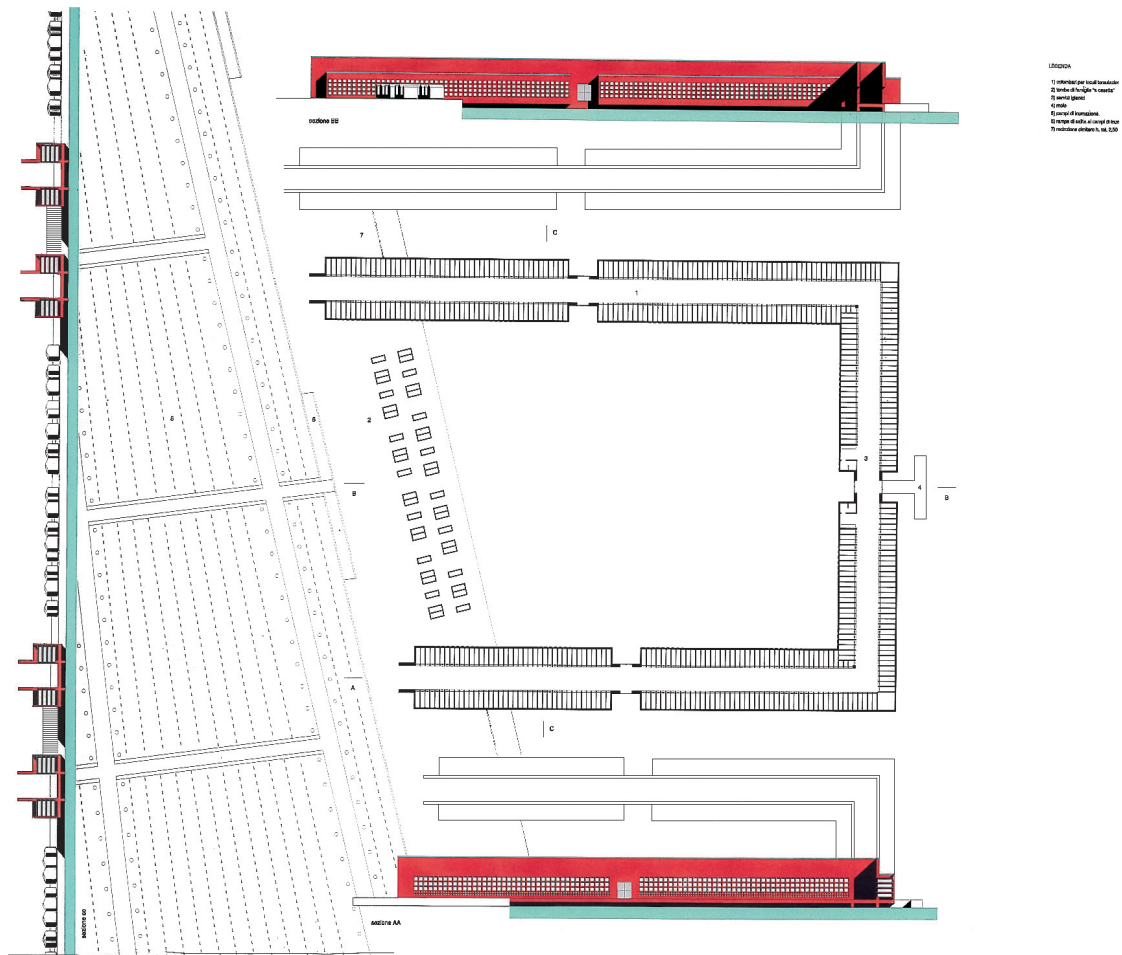
**Fig. 1**  
Monestiroli Architetti Associati,  
Competition for the enlargement  
of the cemetery on the island of  
San Michele in Venice.  
Zenith view of the model. Photo  
by Stefano Topuntoli.

For example, if we consider the Greek temple in front of which we all remain enthralled, the compositional clarity of its parts and the expressiveness of its forms is such as to make it possible every time to recognize the act of enclosing and protecting something which was considered of immense value. A temple protects and encloses the cell of the divinity to which it is dedicated, and although it is not a place accessible to the community, it nonetheless arouses a feeling of profound respect among it, directed towards the rite celebrated there. The ancient temple is certainly a building in which the forms of architecture correspond to the forms of the rite.

In the contemporary era, the place where it is possible to experience a similar feeling is certainly the cemetery.

The cemetery represents the place of farewell and the safeguarding of memory with the particularity that two parts must coexist in it: one domestic and private, in which each individual can devote himself to the cult of the single burial, the other public and facing the city, where the entire community of citizens can recognize themselves as well as recognizing the cemetery as the burial place of all the deceased. The difficulty in designing a cemetery lies in making this double character explicit. While on the one hand the right to a private relationship with the tomb cannot be denied, on the other hand it is impossible to dispense with the representation of that singular albeit hazy feeling which binds all citizens to each other in the face of death. These two ways of seeing the place, both indispensable, are the basis of the design choices of the cemeteries presented here.

In the project for the fifth extension of Voghera's Maggiore Cemetery, as well as later, in the project to expand the cemetery on the Island of San Michele, Venice, this dual character was interpreted with the installation of a double headstone.

**Fig. 2**

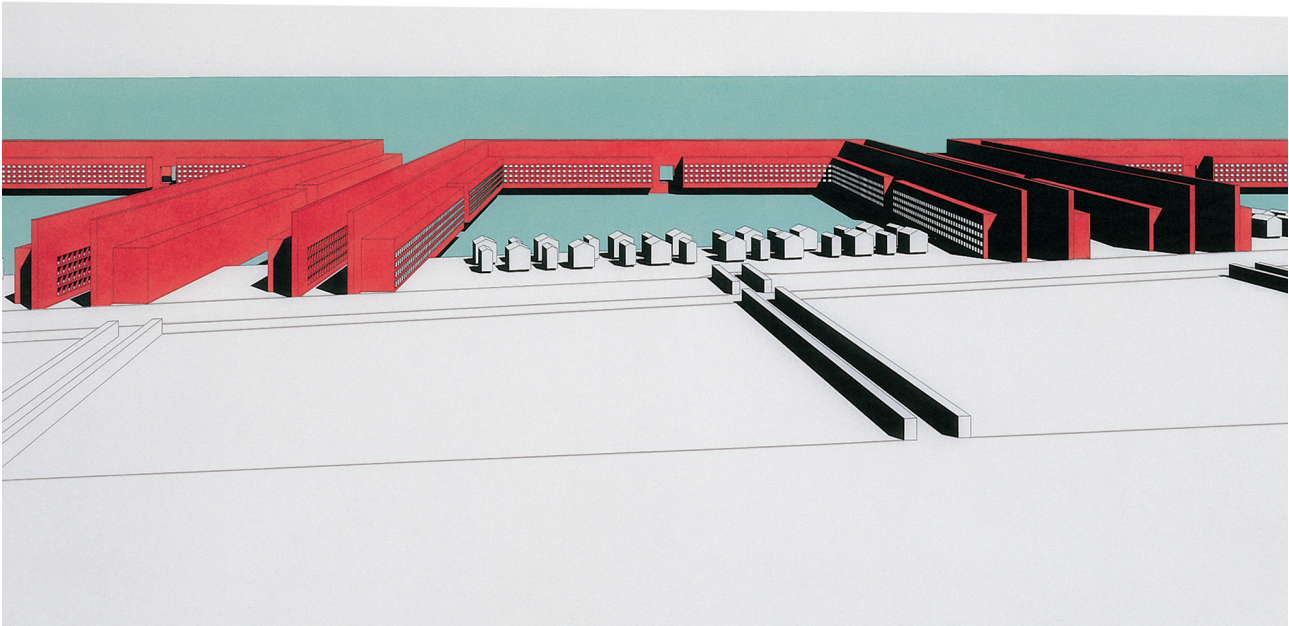
Monestiroli Architetti Associati,  
Competition for the enlargement  
of the cemetery on the island of  
San Michele in Venice.  
Plan and sections of the court of  
loculi.

A plaque mounted inside the corridors of burial niches and destined to the singularity of the rite, to the memory of the single individual, bearing all the information necessary to identify the buried person – an inscription of their name and dates of birth and death, a photograph, a light, flowers – where a freedom of compositional choice necessary for the consolidation of the private sphere is granted.

Then a second plaque of a different shape and size, with only a lightly hollowed cross, set, according to the precise rhythm of the interweaving, in the brick wall which defines the large central courtyard, to which the expressive task of the collective value of death is entrusted, a representation of that *there is someone buried here*.

In Voghera, the burial niches are arranged along three sides of a courtyard open towards the sunset. The courtyard overlooking the agricultural landscape encounters the connecting road to the city centre and assumes the role of a new atrium for the whole cemetery complex. Through it, from the three doors placed to the east, north and south, we can respectively access the oldest part of the cemetery, the most recent extension, and the new wood of in-ground burials, which remains to be realized. The building with the burial niches extends over three storeys, one of them underground, and is separated from the large central lawn by a pool of water which, like the moat of a fortress, prevents anyone crossing it from being able to touch the wall and the grave markers set into it. In addition, the pool, 15 centimetres deep and entirely clad in black stone, reflects on its surface the image of a thousand white grave markers, increasing the emotional perception of the sense of place, and revealing the presence of an undercroft where other burial niches are located.



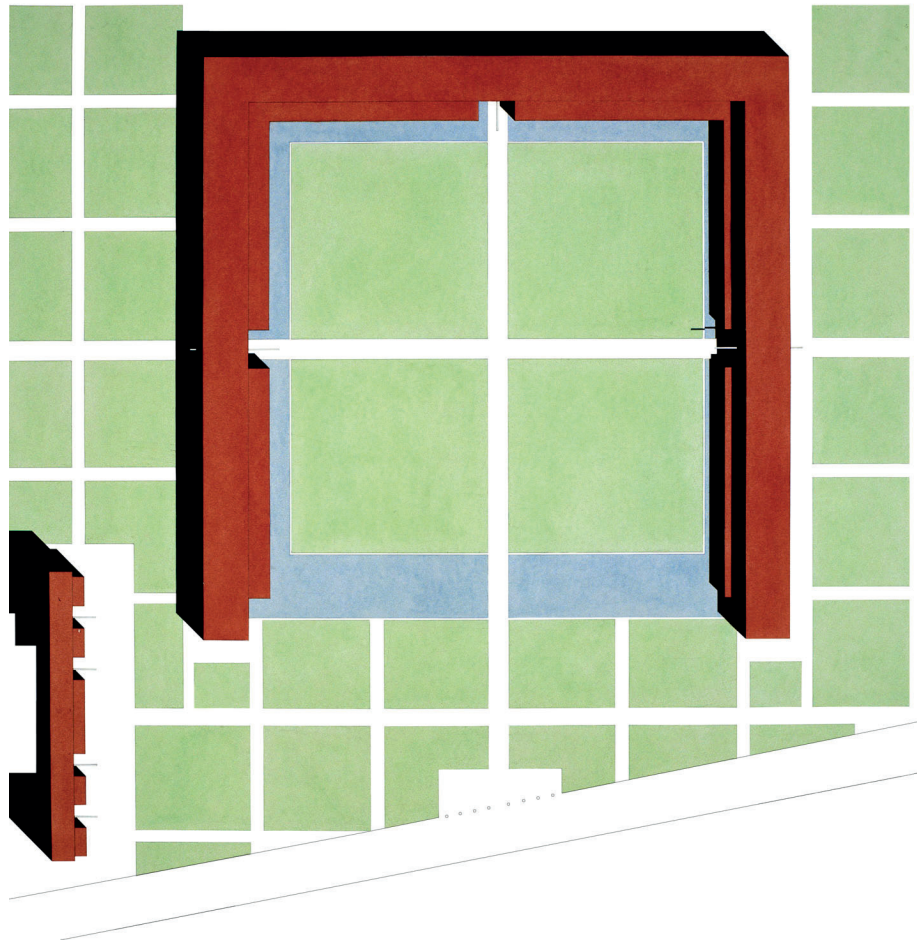
**Fig. 3**

Monestiroli Architetti Associati,  
Competition for the enlargement  
of the cemetery on the island of  
San Michele in Venice.  
Perspective view of the cour-  
tyards of the loculi.

An island is thus formed inside the court, originally conceived as the new *famaedium* of the cemetery, a large lawn divided into quadrants by the crossing of paths, which affords a vantage point for the surrounding grave markers.

In the competition entry for the extension of the cemetery on the Island of San Michele, Venice, the courtyards of the burial niches define four water squares overlooking the burial park, and mark a new limit of the island to the east. The courtyards, built from two parallel buildings which form an open-air path “suspended” over the water, recalling the narrow lanes of Venice, have the same representative value as the courtyard of burial niches at the Voghera cemetery. Here, too, the presence of a double plaque guarantees on the one hand that sacred moment of individual, private, personal reflection in the presence of the individual deceased, while on the other it restores the collective value of the memory that any monument must endow a place with. Unlike the Voghera project, here the courtyards cannot be crossed freely, however it is possible to contemplate them from the edge of the island’s new inner shore, thereby increasing their symbolic and representative value even more.

Being built on stilts, the courtyards ensure a continuous movement of the waters following the tides, defining a new relationship with the lagoon, while respecting the character of a closed, impassable place typical of a cemetery. In this case, the water is not so much an element in support of the forms of the architecture, as a necessary element for recognition of the place. In fact, once on the Island of San Michele, crossing the entrance to the cemetery via the ancient monastery of the monks, the relationship with the water of the lagoon is totally lost. The place is completely enclosed, and from inside, it loses any reference to Venice and the other islands of the lagoon. The project therefore sought on the one hand a definition of the most appropriate forms of the rite and on the other, to define a new relationship with the specific setting, with the lagoon. Which is why, in this case, the water has a particular symbolic value. In one of the first sketches of the project the four large courtyards of the burial niches were represented as rafts moored to the quay moved by the sea currents, almost randomly. In the definitive version, however, we wanted to emphasize the value of the construction of the island’s new eastern front.



**Fig. 4**  
Monestiroli Architetti Associati,  
Fifth extension of the major cemetery of Voghera.  
Volume plan.

In the cemetery of Voghera, the water defines a limit which establishes a respectful distance from the grave markers and at the same time builds an island from which to contemplate the place; in that of Venice, the water represents being in the lagoon, restoring the place's recognizability.

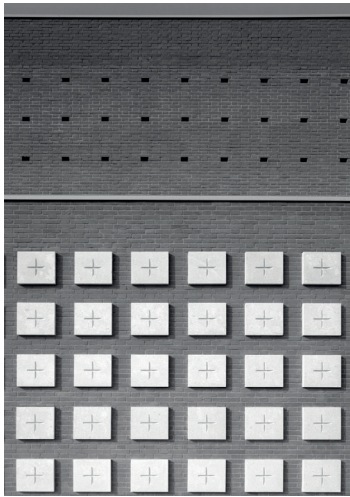
A second element in common between these two projects is the in-ground burial park.

In Voghera the burial park is represented by a wood planted following a Cartesian pattern which identifies a series of fields of approximately 12 metres per side. For each field, 4 trees are planted, beneath each of which are eight graves in the ground (four pairs of graves), so that everyone can hope to be buried under a tree. The reference is to that of the cemeteries of Nordic culture where the place of peace and eternal rest is represented by the wood; where nature is the protagonist of the sense of place.

In Venice, the burial park is the place to view the courtyards of the burial niches built over the water. Here the park is built as a hanging garden where three avenues of tall and slender cypresses, arranged in a trident, branch off from the square of the crematorium temple and, running lengthwise across the entire garden, lead to the southern end of the island directly overlooking the shore of the *Fondamente Nove* of Venice. In both projects, however, there is a clear desire to interpret the theme of in-ground burials with an explicit reference to Loos' woods in which the natural place and the place of burial coincide and in which the forms of architecture make room for a green project. to make the forms of the rite explicit.

There is also a third and final element in common between the two projects described. The ossuary building.



**Fig. 5**

Monestiroli Architetti Associati, Fifth expansion of Voghera's major cemetery. Detail of the elevation of the loculi. Photo by Stefano Topuntoli.

**Fig. 6**

Monestiroli Architetti Associati, Fifth expansion of Voghera's major cemetery. The ossuary. Photo by Marco Intorini.

**Fig. 7**

Monestiroli Architetti Associati, Fifth expansion of Voghera's major cemetery. Construction site photos. Photo by Tomaso Monestiroli.

In Voghera, the ossuary building, built with the same rules as the niche building, but with radically different sizes and proportions, represents an imposing urban front gazing directly at the ancient city. Built as a large portal and divided into five sectors, between which four doors open, the ossuary is arranged over two storeys and can accommodate 1,200 cells for worship. Each of the cells is represented on the external masonry by a plaque smaller than that of the burial niches, which testifies to a presence at that point and to which another plaque adorned with information on the deceased corresponds internally.

In Venice, the ossuary building coincides with the crematorium temple at the centre of the entire composition which everything overlooks. The crematorium temple, with a central Greek cross plan, is also the site of the funeral ceremony of the last farewell, as well as the practical function of cremation and above all the safekeeping of the urns. The Greek cross, corresponding to the axes of the four cardinal points, is defined by the construction of four brick walls arranged in an L-shape, with the funerary altar in the centre. Here too, as in Voghera, the presence of the urn container is "told" by the setting of white Vicenza stone grave markers into the external brick masonry.

The wall, the enclosure, the tombstone, the water, the wood, and the portal are all elements of the architecture which define the place in their composition, while the decoration is what determines its character. In these projects: «The quality derives from having identified the right measure, the right number of courses of bricks or stones, the right size of the marble slabs, and therefore the right kiln or the right quarry, the right firing or the right vein, the exact profile of the beam, the best projection to use the shadow as a residual mobile moulding» (Semerani 2004, p. 11).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> «Architecture is the wise, correct, magnificent play of volumes under light ...The business of Architecture is to establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials [...] Architecture is the art above all others which achieves a state of platonic grandeur, mathematical order, speculation». Taken from Le Corbusier (1923), *Towards a New Architecture*, London: J. Rodker, 1931. Reprint New York: Dover Publications, 1985

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Tomaso Monestiroli (Milan 1967) graduated in architecture at the Politecnico di Milano in 1996. In 2004 he obtained a PhD in Architectural Design at the Faculty of Architecture in Florence where he taught Theory of Contemporary Architectural Research. Since 2006 he has been teaching Architectural Design at the Faculty of Civil Architecture of the Polytechnic of Milan. In 2006 he participated in the 10th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, as invited designer at the Italian Pavilion. In 2006 he won the special prize of the jury of the Brick Award 2006 in Vienna. He collaborates with some architectural magazines such as AL, monthly information magazine of the Lombardy Architects Associations, Firenze Architettura, Il Disegno di Architettura.