

Claudia Pirina
“Landscapes” of memory

Abstract

The mystery of permanence is the theme investigated by Claudia Pirina in the forms of the sacred and in those architectural systems capable of relating man to the divine. These forms are perpetuated over time, in a circularity that becomes essence, stimulating reminiscence. They are forms of the transposition and representation of mnemonic images, delegated to the remembrance of the absent object (or person), activated by perception and by the senses. In this text, however, we are not interested in investigating only the forms themselves, but rather the ability of some architects to «bring together distant forms, in time and in the mind, [to] bring together a time with another time, [to] create short circuits; another idea of time». Two works, not contemporary to us, are used as examples for their ability to interpret differently, sometimes oscillating ambiguously between one term and the other, what Teyssot recognizes as a fundamental problem of funeral art: «invention as opposed to repetition»: Plečnik's Garden of the Dead in the Žale cemetery in Ljubljana and Ravnikar's Kampor Memorial on the island of Rab.

Keywords

Funeral archetype — Žale cemetery — Kampor Memorial

From the underworld

From parks to museum and then cemeteries: our travels through the scripture of myth – travels in mythic topography – now makes landfall on the obscure shores of memory and oblivion par excellence. In the ‘beginnings’, architectural works arose to be the dwellings of the gods and the dead. (Teyssot 1983, p.5)

In the early eighties, George Teyssot¹ begins with these words the opening text of the issue entitled *Funeral Lotus*, dedicated to «architecture as a work of mourning». The author continues by declaring the interest (or the urgency) to deal with the theme, in opposition to or response to the condition of progressive «embalmmment of the environment», of «mummification of culture» and reduction of the project to the conservation of the existing, predominant in that specific historical moment.

Today, after forty years, his words can be read again, starting from «questions relating to a profound rethinking of burial places or to possible themes of invention or reinvention» (Capozzi e Pirina, 2020, p. 2) by architectures assigned to the rite of passage from life to death. In the search for possible answers to these questions, it can be recognized how new models, and sometimes changed rites, are grafted onto pre-existing imaginaries². «It may be of use to study the relation between the architectural work and the space of death» (Teyssot 1983, p. 5), turning our eyes to the origins and mystery of permanence in the forms of the sacred and in those architectural systems capable of relating man to the divine. Therefore, to go back to dealing with that «beginning» of which Teyssot speaks, with the source of phenomena, with a sort of their original dimension that links the forms of the rite to the forms of architecture.



Fig. 1
 Jože Plečnik, Pyramid on Zois Street, Ljubljana, 1927.

**Fig. 2**

Funerary complex of el-Giza, aerial view and plan of the Pyramids and the Necropolis, Egypt, 2600-2500 BC.

Rudolph Müller, the Protestant cemetery, Rome, c. 1840

Bartolomeo Pinelli, *Una tumulazione notturna nel cimitero protestante*, Rome, 1840.

Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Cenotaph*, [projet n° 15] [planche n° 13], 1781-1793, <https://gallica.bnf.fr>.

Francesco Venezia, Exhibition "Pompei e l'Europa, 1748-1943", Amphitheater of Pompeii, May 26 - November 2, 2015. Redrawing by Claudia Pirina.

Forms of reminiscence³

The relationship between primogenial forms of architecture (and art) and the «aspiration of man to get in touch with supernatural forces in order to know the future» (Giedion 1969, p. 7) is the interpretation chosen by Sigfried Giedion to retrace its origins in search of an «eternal present». These origins can only be understood by investigating the relationship a people have between rite, sacred and their representation in form. According to the author, man's aspiration towards the divine or survival after death can be found in a series of primeval archetypal forms that demonstrate how «in the infancy of time art was prayer» (Parmiggiani 2010, p. 4). They are forms of the transposition and representation of mnemonic images, delegated to the remembrance of the absent object (or person), stimulated through perception and the senses. Those same «simple forms [cylinders, pyramids, cubes, prisms, spheres] that trigger constant sensations»⁴ –which for Le Corbusier constitute the lesson of Roman architecture – are perpetuated over time, in a circularity that becomes essence.

But what are some of these forms that, remaining in the history of architecture, refer to the sacred? «Pure cubes, spheres, pyramids and cylinders: these geometrical forms evoke a primitive, primordial time; funerary and sacred architecture can only return to its origins, the times of the beginnings» (Teyssot 1983, pp. 9-10).

A series of images in sequence of forms and devices of permanence can be used for some reflections useful to introduce the projects subsequently analyzed.

An image of the necropolis of Giza shows the articulation of the complex of ancient monuments in which the three great pyramids of Cheops, Chefren and Menkaure, are counterpointed by other elements of equal interest: small pyramids, tombs, temples, ceremonial streets, pits and necropolis characterized by the regularity of the mounds in the form of tombstones. This image activates reflections on the difference, repetition, and measurement of symbolic forms, but also evokes a duality between the representative uniqueness of the monument and the obsessive “democratic” repetition of the identical.

By comparison, the image of the pyramid of Caio Cestio and the adjacent Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome testifies of the fascination exercised by the pure pyramid shape on the wealthy Roman who adopted it as his own

**Fig. 3**

Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno, Genoa, from 1851. From Lotus International, 38, 1983, p.4.
Non-Catholic Cemetery, Rome, from 1821. Photo by Claudia Pirina.
Cemetery, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. Photo by Claudia Pirina.
Marc Barani, extension of the cemetery, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, 1992. Photo by Claudia Pirina.

Fig. 4

Tomb entrance, Cerveteri. Photo by Claudia Pirina.
Funerary complex of el-Giza, reconstructive hypothesis, Egypt. Wikimedia Commons.
Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Part of the ancient Via Appia. Engraving of the Sacro Monte di Varallo, 1890. Wikimedia Commons.
Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Via Appia, 1756. Wikimedia Commons.

funerary monument in a prestigious position at the beginning of the busy consular Ostiense road. The space of the original cemetery, made available at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Pope Clement XI as a burial place for Protestant members⁵, introduces at the same time the relationship between architecture and nature, portrayed, described, and remembered by numerous painters and artists attracted by the charm picturesque of that place and the presence of the prestigious archaeological presences.

The relationship of architecture with nature and topography, which characterizes this as well as other romantic cemeteries, is indeed one of the recurring *topoi* in the image of burial places, and refers to a symbolic link between nature and death. At the same time, the theme of the itinerary characterizes, in a symbolic form, spaces inside the cemeteries, but also larger portions of the territory. In this sense, the Egyptian ceremonial streets in the form of causeways mentioned above are flanked by the Etruscan cuts – which contrast the previous extrusion of volumes with a crack in the ground –, or the Roman necropolises generally present at the edges of the inhabited areas. The exemplary Via Appia, dotted with funerary monuments characterized by iconic shapes sometimes of considerable size⁶, will once again be handed down for a long time in more or less romantic representations.

Path in symbolic form is also the foundation of the design of the *Sacred Mountains* that stage the ascent to Calvary by Christ, building a symbiotic relationship with the landscape.

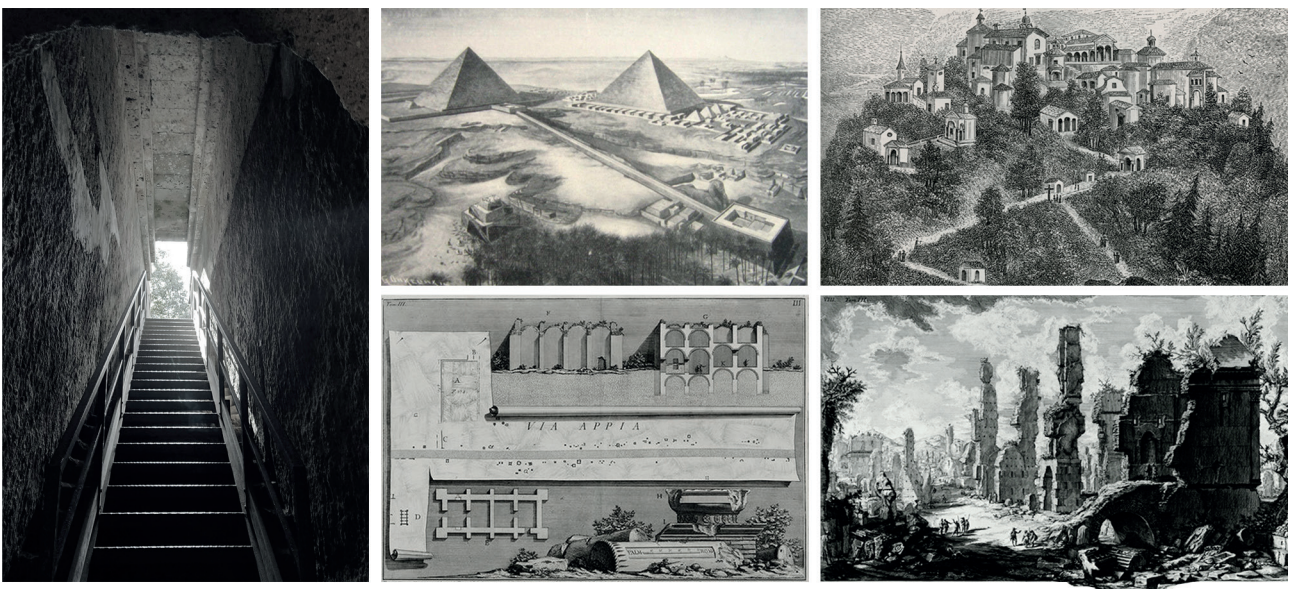




Fig. 5
Necropolis of Cerveteri. Photo by Claudia Pirina.

Going back to the initial image of Cairo, if the shape of the pyramid will be declined over the centuries in projects of cemeteries, tombs, votive shrines, monuments or mausoleums, the image of the tombstone will have as much luck which, in the form of an imprint or volume, not only can be found in the necropolis of numerous peoples of antiquity, but it will in turn constitute a reference for as many contemporary funeral architectures.

In this text, however, we are not interested in investigating only the forms themselves, but rather the ability of some architects to «bring together distant forms, in time and in the mind, [to] bring together a time with another time, [to] create short circuits; another idea of time» (Parmiggiani 1995, p. 170).

Two works, not contemporary to us, can be used as examples for their ability to decline differently, sometimes oscillating ambiguously between one term and the other, what Teyssot recognizes as a fundamental problem of funeral art: «*invention* as opposed to *repetition*» (Teyssot 1983, p. 9). The “landscapes” of memory designed by Jože Plečnik for the Žale cemetery and by Edvard Ravnikar for the Kampor Memorial are the expression of another idea of modernity, among archaic forms and new figurations.

***Ars perennis* and another idea of modernity: Jože Plečnik’s Žale cemetery stone garden in Ljubljana (1942).**

The so-called Garden of the Dead⁷ of the Žale cemetery is the project that Jože Plečnik delivers to the city of Ljubljana at a particular moment in which there is a heated debate resulting from the issuing, by the administration, of a series of decrees to limit funeral processions in the city⁸. The architect’s purpose is to respond to the request for new hygienic conditions and functions, returning to the foreground of the ceremonial of the last trip. By renewing a funeral ritual that focuses on the ways and rites of farewell, Plečnik intends to design corresponding places capable not only of welcoming them, but of magnifying them, while integrating the ancient cemetery specifically dedicated to burials. The resulting original structure, designed in contrast to some requests from the municipality, celebrates the rite of passage, providing a place to welcome the pain of the living in a private and intimate way. The succession of the phases of the rite guides the design of spaces, paths and buildings, as well as their respective positions and sizes. The journey from the city of the living to the city of the dead is, in fact, meticulously designed⁹ by Plečnik, according to a procedure whereby «all the procedures are subtended by the architecture and by microuban planning solution» (Pozzetto 1983, p. 111). The interior of the “garden” is separated from the city by solemn propylaea that refer to classical and baroque images and which, with their concave shape, welcome the funeral procession to ferry it into a new dimension¹⁰. The interior is dotted with 14 chapels¹¹, which refer to the as many stations of the Via Crucis, as well as a series of more or less symbolic elements that integrate the functions of the park (such as benches, street lamps, fountains, etc.). These chapels can be interpreted as a sort of catalog of architecture derived from primitive geometric shapes which, in the architect’s work, also refer to those symbolic elements taken from the forms of the sacred inserted in strategic places in the cities of Ljubljana, as well as in Prague. Columns, pillars, arcades, aedicule, obelisks and ornaments will constitute those signs arranged inside the garden – or along the urban paths – which in some way become an expression of his will (which he himself declared) to build a bridge between tradition and formal invention: «like a spider, I



Fig. 6
Jože Plečnik, entrance to the Stone Garden of the Žale Cemetery, Ljubljana, 1942. Wikimedia Commons.
Jože Plečnik, the Gate of the barrier on the Ljubljanica River, Ljubljana.

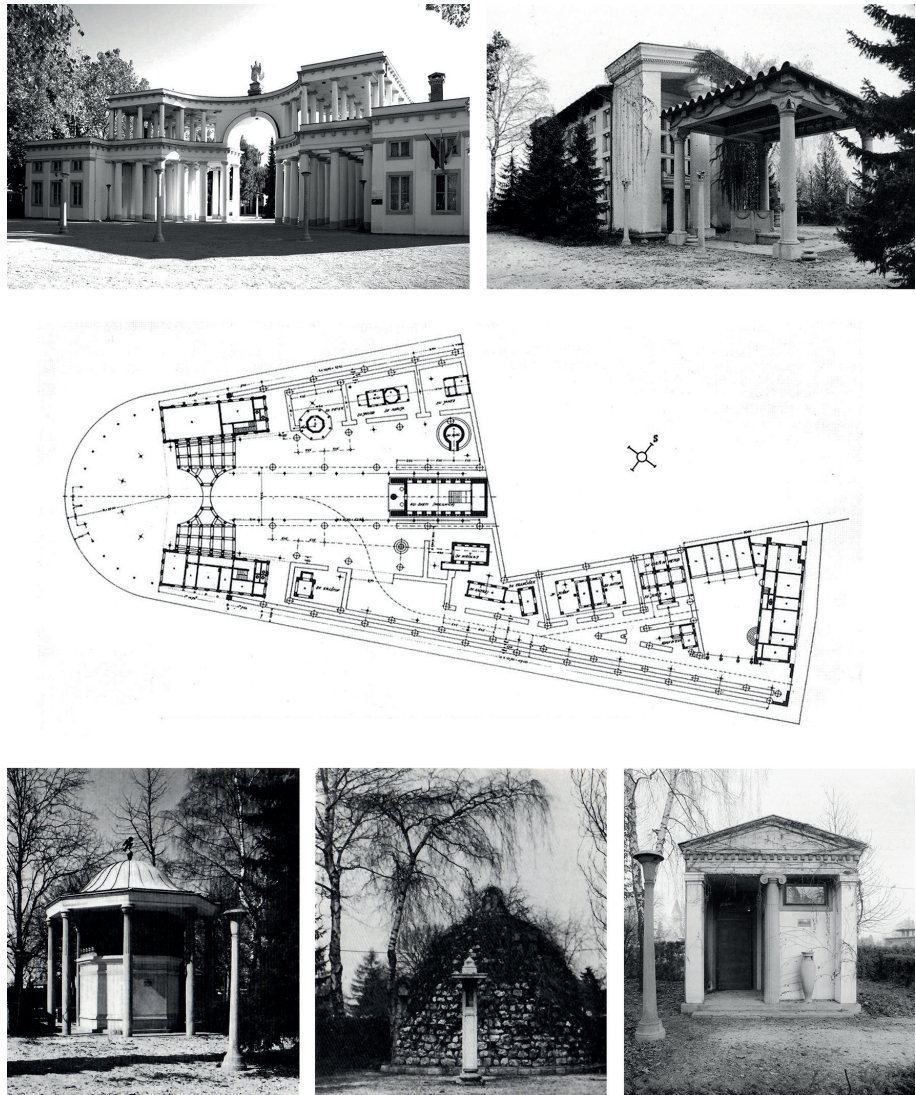


Fig. 7
Jože Plečnik, The Stone Garden
of the Žale Cemetery, Ljubljana,
1942.

aspire to attach my thread to tradition and, starting from there, to weave my web» (Burkhardt 1988, p. 112). According to Plečnik, in fact,

there is [...] a relationship between the philosophy of real time and millenary art, a relationship of true analogy or internal similarity (partial equality + partial difference). Both have their origins in ancient religion (mythology). Both have their peaks in the religious sphere [...] The *ars perennis* absorbs the revelations of beauty from all eras and schools, it rejuvenates itself with ever new forms, yet it is not gothic, nor baroque, nor romantic, nor naturalism, nor symbolism, nor surrealism. (Plečnik 1941, p.230)

The harmonious geometry of the volumes, combined with the plasticity of the forms, starts from ideal figures or monumental forms, becoming the expression of a personal style. The imprint of novelty is obtained through a transformation and simplification of these forms and, at the same time, a monumental definition of the detail. The “stone” garden thus becomes an archive of small architectures that decline the shapes of the mound, the dome, the Turkish sepulcher, octagons with drums, oblong bodies in the shape of a nave, volumes that welcome central columns in the form of an archetype (Cornoldi 1996).

His personal montages do not refer only to a symbolic dimension: symbolic aspects of the architectural signs derived from Etruscan, Greek and Roman art are in fact assembled and mixed with decorative elements, and popular art, with the aim of promoting and enhancing a new national identity. This

eclectic assembly of elements gives a character of opulence to a place where the decorative dimension «is not an additional application but an expressive combination born from a different constructive logic. [...] Columns, pillars, arcades and ornaments are an attempt to evoke memory through tradition; the use of a code recognized by the creator as by the users therefore allows the association with the past» (Burkhardt 1988, p. 108).

Going back to the path of the rite that structures the project, an oratory podium is arranged in line with the entrance below a square canopy in front of the Prayer Chapel. The internal spaces of the chapels, with their contained forms that can accommodate only the few family members, emphasize the private dimension of mourning that is combined with the design of the external spaces that allow you to accommodate a larger number of people, in case of need. A series of buildings used for functions deemed less significant for the rite will find their place on the edge of the system. The mystical search for a relationship between man and divinity is the ultimate goal of Plečnik's work, who effectively interprets in an architectural form that journey described by Rangon which «constitutes the last journey, perhaps a modern version of the ancient journeys of the dead to the underworld» (Rangon 1986, p. 173).

“In the shade of cypresses and inside the urn ...”: the Kampor Memorial on the island of Rab by Edvard Ravnikar (1953)

To the “stone” garden of Plečnik is juxtaposed the “landscape of the memorial that Edvard Ravnikar designed on the island of Rab to commemorate the massacre of the concentration camp for civil war internees in Rab. The two projects, if analyzed together, make it possible in an emblematic way to provide a sort of archive of forms of funeral architecture. Although constructed in different contexts¹², in response to different forms of the rite¹³, they share a similar search for spirituality and suspension of time.

Ravnikar, a pupil of Plečnik, inherits from the master the interest in the ancient, together with the desire to transform the past, and to merge the forms of different civilizations in a new symbolic language. In the Memorial project, the search for a primordial alphabet capable of radical innovation builds a metaphorical vocabulary that alludes to the origins of architecture. Platforms, columns, walls, sacred streets and openings onto the landscape give life to a universal harmony, «the simultaneous expression of a multiplicity of meanings transmitted through symbols» (Eliade 1948, n.169) that become an expression of the sacred.

Everything that is not directly consecrated by a hierophany becomes sacred thanks to its participation in a symbol [...] The symbol is not important only because it prolongs or replaces a hierophany, but above all because [...] it reveals a sacred reality or cosmological that no other ‘manifestation’ is capable of revealing, [...] [implementing] man’s permanent solidarity with sacredness [...] [in] a ‘language’ accessible to all members of the community. (Eliade 1948, n.169,170)

Ravnikar creates an architecture, evoking the horror of that place, sublimates its terrible history through the landscape, stimulates the senses and the mind, challenges time and produces a continuity, echoing ancient memories, and at the same time of dry land that divide the properties, or archaeological complexes scattered throughout the region.

The site is delimited by a fence that takes up exactly the measurements of the dry-stone walls that dot the territory in height, building a distance

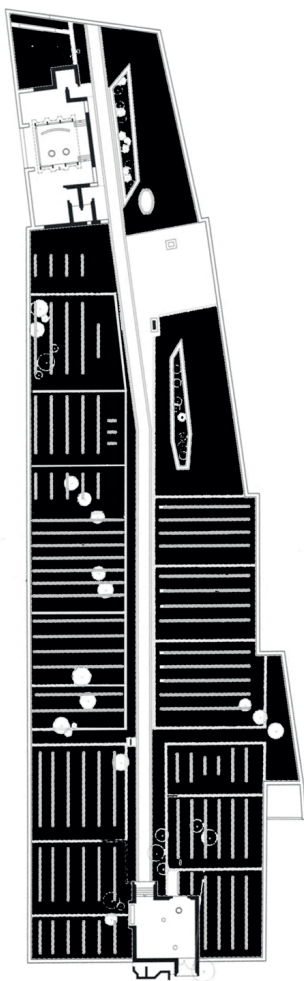


Fig. 8
Edvard Ravnikar, plan of the Kampor Memorial on the island of Rab, 1953. Redrawing by Claudia Pirina.

**Fig. 9**

Edvard Ravnikar, images from the Kampor Memorial on the island of Rab, 1953. Wikimedia Commons.

between the external landscape and an internal world that is divided into a processional path that introduces the temporal dimension into the architectural experience. A refined system of carefully controlled visual foreshortenings is obtained through denied misalignments, deviations and axialities, which generate a feeling of estrangement. Asymmetry and diagonal paths simulate a labyrinth that, once you cross the threshold of the metal portal, leads inside a petrean open-air room inhabited by drums of broken columns and windows overlooking the landscape. Subsequently the ritual path winds along the entire length of the site along a paved “sacredcccc” street of ancient memory, to culminate, on the opposite corner, in the equally iconic slightly recessed space created below a lowered vault that alludes to archetype of the ancient arcosolium «populated by domestic animals, buffaloes, pheasants and peasants» (Semerani 2010, p. 57). «A feeling for the antiquity that is a moving backwards, towards the archaic, the primeval and towards the search for the original symbols» (Semerani 2010, p. 58) projects the Memorial into a timeless dimension that incorporates the surrounding landscape into experience of the observer. The ritual structure produces meditative calm and serene spaces in which abstraction, monumentality and pure form are combined with the search for the symbol, and the relationship with traditional architecture and the classic.

Between the central ordering structure and the enclosure, the architect arranges a series of slightly terraced platforms to support the trend of the topography, which accommodate the orderly and rhythmic rows of tombstones aggregated in elongated shapes. Once again, the arrangement according to perpendicular trends produces an alternating and harmonious rhythm, in which the horizontal lines of the tombstones lying on the ground contrast with some vertical stems (obelisks) and the elongated ‘architecture’ of the cypresses. Light, shadow, proportion, material and scale are the other elements used by Ravnikar to evoke emotional reactions in the observer.

While Ravnikar’s Memorial Complex on Rab contains classical echoes, the intention was never to anchor a reference to one particular example, place or time. On the contrary, abstraction was this architect’s means for distilling the past, for fusing sources, for seeking out an essential nature, a sort of archaic, eternal present. (Curtis 2009, p.44)

Epiphanic places and symbolic forms return in these two works, showing another time and another modernity, and projecting mourning and death into the future and into action¹⁴.

Notes

¹ At that time editorial coordinator of *Lotus International* magazine.

² In retracing the history of the burial places, it is clear to recognize their close relationship with the culture and knowledge of the different eras, but also with particular conditions that determine, in some cases, the gap capable of triggering new answers to ancient and ancestral questions. In this sense, in France, the dismantling of the largest cemetery in Paris in the heart of Les Halles in 1785, on the one hand can be considered a direct expression of the acquisition of new medical-scientific knowledge that promotes a removal of burials from urban centers, on the other hand it will activate the change that will lead to the enactment of the 27 articles of Napoleon's *Décret impérial sur les sépultures* in June 1804. This decree, as well as its subsequent extension to the Kingdom of Italy through the *edict of the Medical Police* of September 1806, will provide precise indications on the new burial methods that will give rise to the appearance of a new model which, albeit with modifications, is still perpetuated today.

³ «In philosophical usage, the corresponding term of Gr. ἀνάμνησις, which in Platonic terminology is distinguished from μνήμη 'memory'. While memory (especially in the Teetetus) indicates the unconscious reservoir of knowledge into potential, reminiscence is the act that transforms that knowledge from the unconscious state to the conscious state. On this distinction Plato sets his theory on the knowledge of ideal forms by the soul. On the other hand, it is maintained, even after the abandonment of this theory, by Aristotle, who dedicated to the distinction of the two concepts the short treatise *Περὶ μνήμης καὶ ἀναμνήσεως* (*On memory and reminiscence*)». From Enciclopedia Treccani. At <<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/reminiscenza>> [Last accessed November 2021].

⁴ Reference is made to the text in Le Corbusier's sketch in *Vers un'architecture*.

⁵ Subsequently the burial place of foreign and illustrious personalities.

⁶ As in the case of the tomb of Cecilia Metella.

⁷ Or of the Farewells, or of All Saints.

⁸ The first project will be drawn up in 1936, and subsequently modified in the final version which will be carried out in parts, separating a part of the land which, only in more recent times, will be acquired by the cemetery. The current condition partially distorts the layout of part of the open spaces designed by Plečnik to adapt them to the insertion of a new church.

⁹ Even the design of the uniforms of the personnel assigned to the ceremony.

¹⁰ The images of the propylaea of Žale, together with those of some chapels, are pinned by Plečnik himself to accompany his theoretical text *Architectura perennis* in which he deals with offering a personal reading of the architecture of the tradition that precedes the exhibition of his theory on the relationship between *Philosophia perennis* and *Ars perennis*.

¹¹ Dedicated to the patron saints of the individual parishes of the city.

¹² The city of Ljubljana is in contrast with the Mediterranean landscape of the small island of Rab.

¹³ Place expressly dedicated to farewell (independent from the cemetery) in the case of Plečnik, while space for remembrance and burial for Ravnikar.

¹⁴ According to Michel Guiomar's theories, it is the category of the lugubrious that has this ability, as explained in Guiomar M. (1967) – *Principes d'une esthétique de la mort*. Librairie José Corti, Paris.

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