

LIFE AFTER DEATH

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**Aerial view of the *Cementerio General*, showing the marked difference between the southern part of the cemetery, which is recognized as a historical monument, and the northern part – the poor periphery, lacking infrastructure and collective spaces.
Source: Google**

The cemetery appears as a public space within the city. Look more closely, however, and a deeper truth becomes apparent. Reflecting the order of the city of the living, the cemetery is organized according to the logic of private parcelling, which mostly limits the role of the spaces between the tombs to circulation and access rather than opening them to collective use. In no way is the cemetery a commons. Yet this extensive resource of open space within the city could serve the common good, if it were to be considered as an urban garden.

A case in point is Santiago's *Cementerio General*, which embodies a foundational moment in the city's history, having come into existence nearly 200 years ago, in the midst of the Chilean War of Independence, but also attests to the radical privatization of Chil-

ean society in the neoliberal revolution that followed the 1973 military coup. As a model within a model, this city of the dead has the potential to become the laboratory of a profound spatial shift in the city of the living.

Urban Facts

We will not hesitate to affirm that the monument that brings the greatest honour to Santiago is neither its hospitals, its statues, its cathedrals, nor its wonderful public promenades, but its cemetery.

Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna¹

The *Cementerio General*, founded in 1821, was the first public cemetery in Chile and still remains the largest formal cemetery in Latin America. Originally created as a landscape-style cemetery on the outskirts of the city² – next to the main quarry at Blanco Hill – it would become a black hole in the expanding agglomeration, lying at the core of two central municipalities: Recoleta and Independencia. Extending over 82.2ha, it is today the largest level open space in Santiago and the only one located on the northern bank of the Mapocho River. The cemetery is structured by an orthogonal grid (similar to that of Spanish colonial cities) made up of 167 yards (or blocks) in total. Its monumental southern part – entered via an urban square directly related to the city centre – has been developed along a central north–south axis and displays a collection of eccentric palaces for the bourgeoisie who grew wealthy from the early twentieth-century mining industry.³ By contrast, the northern part resembles more a working-class urban periphery with a lack of green areas and public infrastructure: here, there are collective mausoleums with thousands of individual niches built in rows of pavilions and galleries. At its far end a vast area of informal graves represents the equivalent of urban slums, small earth yards with self-built metal sheds and ornaments.

The Chicago Boys Cast Their Shadow

But what a great economy!

Augusto Pinochet⁴

In 1975 Chile became a guinea pig for authoritarian capitalism. At a time when Western economies were still dominated by the model of the Keynesian welfare state, General Pinochet's dictatorship

1 Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna (1877), Chilean writer, historian and politician, governor of Santiago between 1872 and 1875, cited in Juana Paz Cutierrez Fischman, "De las problemáticas a las definiciones estratégicas de un plan de manejo. Cementerio General de Santiago de Chile" (Santiago, 2016): "No vacilaremos en afirmar que el monumento de mayor honra para Santiago no son ni sus hospitales, ni sus estatuas ni sus catedrales, ni sus maravillosos paseos públicos, sino su cementerio."; translation by the authors.

2 Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris (opened in 1804) is an early example of the landscape-style cemeteries that started to develop during the nineteenth century.

3 The first official heritage designation only came in 2006 when the Patio 29 – the place where political prisoners executed by the Dictatorship were buried – was declared a historic monument. In 2010, after a process led by Chilean architect Tomás Domínguez, the historical part of the cemetery (of 42ha) was also declared a historic monument – with the biggest collection of funerary heritage in Latin America.

4 In 1991 Augusto Pinochet – then already a former

dictator but still
commander-in-chief of the
Chilean army – answered
questions posed by the
journalist Mirna Schindler:
– Today, the body of Bautista
van Schouwen [Chilean
politician, co-founder of the
MIR] was found in Patio 29.
What do you think?
– Did they find it? I
congratulate those
searching for the corpses.
– General, after the
discovery of these corpses
can you continue to insist
that there were no missing
detainees in Chile?
– Miss, I repeat, there was an
irregular war taking place,
which was very well planned
by the KGB!
– What can you say about
the fact that they found even
two bodies in one grave?
– But what a great economy!”
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uiv4rT_Ja1U;
translation by the authors.

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The Metropolitan Area of
Santiago has a population of
more than seven million.

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Among the 17 cemeteries
in Santiago, 14 are privately
owned and managed.
The *Cementerio General*
currently accounts for
18 per cent of the total
funerary offer in the
metropolitan area.

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The water rights of
La Polvora canal were
scandalously sold back in
2008 by Gonzalo Cornejo
– a corrupt right-wing
mayor – for 400 million CLP
(540.030€) to a private water
company and then to the
Hippodrome.

(1973–90) provided the stage for the neoliberal experiment led by Milton Friedman, Arnold Harberger and the Chicago Boys. Under a new constitution that remains in place today, welfare and social programmes were dismantled through privatization, deregulation and restrictions on trade unions, providing the blueprint for a world economic order based on a combination of radical privatization and strongman rule. What initially appeared as a paradox has since become the new normal: free markets seemingly work best if ruled by authoritarian governments, privatization makes societies at once richer and more divided. In its Chilean model, the neoliberal city discloses what freedom in a market economy ultimately means: getting rid of collective spaces, social rituals and cooperative practices in favour of the ubiquitous competition for property.

The Cemetery as Model

A formal miniature of the city, with a population of more than 2.3 million departed souls, the *Cementerio General* funerary complex is both a model of Chile's unequal society and its urban manifestation in the capital city, its parcelling and stratification by class even more marked than in the urban fabric itself.⁵ Although it is a public funerary complex – thus embodying the idea of the public good in contrast to its free-market competitors, namely cemeteries owned by religious denominations, private and joint stock companies⁶ – the commodification of death means that it operates as a real-estate enclave. To make the scenario even more ruthless, there is a privatization of natural resources within the cemetery and a constant parcelling and expansion of marketed land at the expense of common space.⁷

The spatial segregation between the different *neighbourhoods* of the complex – from the stone mausoleums of the wealthy few to the earth yards of the multitudes – is made even more explicit by the different forms of ownership that apply within the cemetery. While the rich are assured of the right to hold a plot in perpetuity and benefit from the mausoleums built by their ancestors, the poor are limited to a short-term lease, after which their remains are removed to make way for others.⁸

Furthermore, due to the shrinkage and dismantling of public services within the cemetery (a process that began in the 1970s), out of the 215 people on the official payroll just 40 work on the grounds and only two of those are professional gardeners. The maintenance

of the cemetery thus relies on deregulated labour: around 400 permanent informal “caregivers”, paid by tips, fulfil the tasks that the weakened administration can no longer accomplish, and their 330 sheds and self-built workshops occupy in-between spaces all over the cemetery.

It is this quality that we want to use to challenge the existing order. For us, the key to an alternative spatial organization based on the collective is not the improvement of the so-called public but rather the inversion of our notion of the private. Redefining what we mean by “property” will allow us to find common space within the private realm and to make the cemetery a model for the future city of Santiago.

Beyond Public Space

The space necessary to demarcate one private space from the next is infrastructural, and while it is called public, its purpose is to generate and articulate private space. As determinants of a utilitarian order, infrastructural typologies – such as streets and squares in the city, or corridors and halls in floor plans – allow for separate access to many individualized rooms, as opposed to the pre-modern thoroughfare spaces or enfilades, where this kind of infrastructure is not required.⁹ Ultimately, minimizing public space, in the interests of increasing economic efficiency, is the aim of bourgeois planning too. Public space, just like the lean state, is reduced to a mini-



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The current fees vary from 230,000 CLP (310€) for an earth grave (22 per cent of demand); 1m CLP (1,350€) for a first- to fourth-floor niche with perpetual ownership; 3.7m CLP (5,000€) for a family vault (33 per cent of demand); 520,000 CLP (700€) for a niche of remains; 190,000 CLP (255€) for the mausoleum owner's offspring; 680,000 CLP (915€) for a cremation; 170,000 CLP (230€) for a columbarium niche; to 96,000 CLP (130€) for a niche of remains in the perimeter wall. There are different types of ownership in the cemetery. Mausoleums: three to four generations (100 years); Family vaults: perpetual (three generations can be buried in the same vault); Earth graves and fifth-floor niches: five years + one or two extra years, with a turnover (*resaca*) every ten years; niches of remains: perpetual ownership. Only 20 to 30 per cent of remains from the earth yards are moved to niches before the units are sold again. In other words, 70 to 80 per cent of remains are dumped in the process of turnover.

With 1,600 niches and a density of 2.85 bodies per square metre, the mausoleo italiano is the tallest construction in the whole cemetery, at a height of 30m. Designed by Francisco Brugnoli Cañas and built in 1942, it offers a stark demonstration of the lack of regulation over building heights within the complex.
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See Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages", in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 70.

Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, December 1913: "Adolf Loos und ich, er wörtlich, ich sprachlich, haben nichts weiter getan als gezeigt, dass zwischen einer Urne und einem Nachtopf ein Unterschied ist und dass in diesem Unterschied erst die Kultur Spielraum hat." Translation as quoted in Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 89.

num: a space of police and of policies, not a place of politics. With regard to the cemetery, we encounter an increasingly rationalized grid that morphs from a hierarchical pattern of squares and streets at its outset to plain economy in the latest stage, in which individual graves are leased for seven years to allow for a full turnover of each "block" within a decade. Using this pattern as a starting point, the leasing contracts may cumulatively be seen as a new form of investment: building blocks for the construction of spaces that serve the living rather than the dead.

The Monument as Potlatch

A monument is the Western equivalent of the potlatch, an investment that is at once consumed, an asset without yields. While it is not useless, it is nonetheless free of utility. It may thus be perceived not just as architecture but also as art, if we accept the notion that architecture distinguishes itself from other arts by its usability. In the words of Karl Kraus: "Adolf Loos and I – he, literally and I, grammatically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot, and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room."¹⁰ While we might expect monuments to be expressions of collective aspirations, tombstones actually represent the overlap of monument and private space. Tombstones are private monuments. As such, they will be the key to an understanding of property beyond utility.

A Specific Heterotopia

In relation to contemporary Santiago, the *Cementerio General* is the inseparable flipside of the coin of its historical identity. While the historical family tombs are protected by their heritage value and thus perpetuate social distinction as art history, the majority of the tombs, and especially those of the poor in its northern part, will never acquire any status since they are effectively short-lived consumer products with a ten-year expiry date. Indeed, the frequent and timely resale of burial plots to those who cannot afford a long-term lease is essential to the economic model of the cemetery, which receives no public subsidies. To overcome their precarious status, these individual interments on the northern margins of the cemetery will have to form a collective. Replacing the notion of family that prevails in the historic monuments, this collectivity will endow them with a monumental quality – one that extends their scope and life,

allowing them to become collective condensers, infrastructures to be appropriated by the many living users of the cemetery.

Anti-Cyclical Action

Contemporary private cemeteries embody the development patterns of suburban real-estate. Following a minimalist funerary semiology, parkland typologies are replacing the nineteenth-century *cimitero monumentale* model; dense architectural layouts are giving way to well-kept gardens with almost immaterial tombs. Meanwhile, the historical cemeteries present an unlikely overlap between museumization and an asset for the poor, following the pattern of historical downtown areas before gentrification sets in: lacking investment, they become places of public interest by default. Historical cemeteries in Western cities are shrinking both in number and in size, representing potential land resources for urban redevelopment while gradually disappearing as places of meaning. Anticipating the cycle of reinvestment and gentrification that will follow the current downwards trajectory of the *Cementerio General*, anti-cyclical action is required: the cemetery must be seen, not as a relic, but as a project.

Urban Island

As a city within the city, a large cemetery can be perceived as an urban island, defined as a morphologically specific unit rather than an area that is specialized in terms of programme and use. The alternative model of urbanism proposed by O.M. Ungers in the 1970s envisaged the city as a collection of urban islands as analogical exhibits, autonomous pockets of interest and vitality— though interestingly he did not approach the cemetery in this way.¹¹ Such a reading requires a morphological and a typological analysis of the structure of the islands in order to set them apart from their surroundings. In the “Berlin: Green Archipelago” proposal he developed together with Rem Koolhaas, these surroundings were green parklands intended to accommodate heterotopical urban elements. Today, this concept appears at once fascinating and constricting. Could the heterotopical Other reside *within*, rather than around the island, as the foreigner who lives within us, or the “Stranger to Ourselves”?¹²

The Chance of Paradox

Starting from existing typologies such as the *mausoleo italiano*, the first step of the Santiago cemetery project consists in a thor-

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See Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska, *The City in the City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago, A critical edition by Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013).

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See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Mausoleo italiano, exterior view.
© Plan Común



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See Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967).

ough analysis of historical precedent in order to develop notions of common space. The spiralling ramp at the core of the mausoleum's wall of niches, for example, can be read as an expression of both Guggenheim-like exhibitionism and a collective experience within the private space. These notions will then be defined typologically in order to generate paradoxical uses. For us, formal rigour results, paradoxically, in greater freedom of use, giving architecture the task – and the burden – of providing social freedom through the strength of its typology and morphology. Compared to the rhetoric of freedom that saw escapist design become the epitome of the neo-liberal *société du spectacle*,¹³ culminating in starchitecture for advanced consumerism, the view from the city of the dead in Santiago yields startlingly different hypotheses. The challenge of redefining terms such as rigour and strength causes us to recalibrate our understanding of freedom as a collective discipline.

The Dead as Building Blocks

In the end, what is at stake is culture. Even though the cemetery is a place of socialization of memory, of collective rituals, funerary architecture is defined – just like private housing – by a patrimonial concept of family, with property and lineage at its core. Here, the presence of the living is mostly related to obsolete formal rituals emptied of their meaning and disconnected from contemporary experiences of the family. At the same time, these formal rituals are carried out alongside spontaneous ones that embody shared experience, commonality – informal workers and their food carts, tip-dependent caretakers cleaning the graves, tourists visiting the mausoleums of illustrious characters, cemetery aficionados wandering around taking pictures, children playing between the tombs. This mutual exchange between the living and the dead is key to translating the notion of architectural commonality into a formalized ap-



Mausoleo italiano, interior view.
© Plan Común

In-between spaces all over the cemetery are filled by some 300 self-built sheds and workshops used by the workforce of some 400 permanent informal keepers (*cuidadores*).
© Plan Común



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The concept of architectural commonality is introduced by Atelier Bow-Wow: “We have conceptualized this idea of ‘commonality’ as shared property, so that anyone could be able to understand the relations which are hidden yet full of potential in things and behaviours”. See Atelier Bow-Wow, “Architectural Commonality: An Introduction”, trans. Ayano Aramaki Sando, in *Atelier Bow-Wow: Commonalities*, ed. Francisco Díaz, Felipe De Ferrari, Diego Grass (Santiago: ARQ, 2015), 14–30.

proach.¹⁴ The ritual visit to the cemetery is reciprocated by the dead, who will serve as the building blocks for new structures to receive the living. Through this strategy, the funerary complex has a historical opportunity to reframe both its model of development and its spatial coherence as it approaches its bicentennial. It presents a significant shift, reclaiming architectural form as a political act within the neoliberalized city.