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critic|all

V International Conference
on Architecture Design & Criticism

DIGITAL PROCEEDINGS
Delft 10-11 October

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01 Presentation

This 5th edition of Critic|all Conference consolidates the initiative that the Architectural Design Department of the Madrid School of Architecture at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (ETSAM-UPM) started ten years ago to provide an international forum for architectural criticism.

The Conference enhances its scope as a place for knowledge production from which to convene relevant voices around the proposed topic at each edition. This time, with a joint event co-organized with the Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at the Delft University of Technology (BK-TU Delft).

We would like to thank all participants for their work and trust, as well as the members of the Scientific Committee for their effort and commitment.

We want to reinforce the idea contained in the conference's name. Critic|all is a *call on criticism*, and also a *call for all*. An appointment that, beyond the scope of each edition, we hope will be able to reinforce a more general debate on the role of architecture in the present context.

Silvia Colmenares
Director of Critic|all

02

Call for Papers

e(time)ologies or the changing meaning of architectural words

The study of the origin and history of words has played a central role in the recurrent search for a deep, allegedly forgotten, meaning of architecture. The strikingly persistent and often problematic influence of Martin Heidegger's *Bauen Wohnen Denken* proves the fascination of architects with the ancestral power of words. The same fascination explains the equally recurrent urge to explore new meanings and invent new terms in architecture, in order to alleviate the weight of old cultural prejudices and connotations. Hence, etymological lines extend in two opposite time directions: one pointing to roots and sources, the other to future visions and transformations. Architectural thought oscillates between the illusory stability of conventional, present meanings, the mystery of remote, often obscure, connotations, and the poetic, creative drive of language invention. Choosing between communication (order) and noise (entropy), the opposite terms used by Umberto Eco, becomes a typically architectural problem, one which relates both to words and forms, terms and materials.

The heavy architecture-is-a-language fever of the 1960s is long overcome. Robin Evans' "all things with conceptual dimension are like language, as all grey things are like elephants" might suffice to prevent its return. However, the multiplication and transformation of architectural words has probably accelerated since then, pushed by the development of competitive research production. In fact, every research problem is, at its core, a problem of language, of word use and word definition. Research on the contemporary urban and architectural condition can be no exception.

Meaningful arguments about the changing meaning of architectural words need to address the role of language in the description of current matters and realities as well as its potential to unchain innovative perspectives and actions. New situations call for new terms as much as new terms provoke new situations. Today's interface of architecture with other disciplines is exemplary in this sense. The growing need to establish meaningful communication between experts from different fields fosters both codification and distortion of language, the homologation of terms and its expansion through translation and borrowing. In the first case, the descriptive precision is favoured to produce an objective (codified) system, whereas misunderstandings, metaphors and inaccuracies can lead to the generation of new knowledge and actions in the second. Such complexities are especially evident in the terminology emerging from practice-based or design-based research. In fact, the translation between visual and verbal signs, which is at the core of architectural practice, tends to obscure the distinction between descriptions and actions.

While the transdisciplinary context might certainly lead to an intensified look, in the last decades architecture has engaged in a process of expansion and adjustment led, in part, by new combinations of old keywords (ecology, landscape, urbanism, infrastructure, logistics...). Beyond disciplinary discourses, contemporary debates addressing the social, ecological and political connotations of architecture are providing a new set of critical words. Adjectives ("post-anthropocentric", "non-human", "inclusive", "transcultural") names ("decolonization", "decarbonization") and phrases ("climate change", "race and gender identity"...), have gained increasing visibility over the last two decades, both to inform and transform architecture's critical thinking. The proliferation of prefixes in many of them (post-, de-, trans-), denotes the urge to build new words and concepts from existing materials, pushed by the speed of contemporary culture. The problem of meaning persistence and change, but also of the tacit positions inscribed in words, can be exemplified by the crucial differences between "post-colonization" and "decolonization".

These and other terms are generated by a sequence of adjustments and oppositions, distortions and borrowings. The study of such processes, not in strict etymological terms but in a broader sense including the complex relations between words, practices, disciplines, is key to unveil the cultural and ideological positions behind current architectural debates. We propose to carry out this critique as a tool to explore today's emerging terminologies, and the ones to come.

The 5th edition of Critic|all Conference welcomes contributions that critically address the uses and misuses, the creation and wearing, the transformation and timeliness of the words with which architecture is – or has been – described, historized or updated through time. We expect interpretive work that draws new relations between words, concepts, things and practices, not strict etymological studies.

The most basic structure should present the expression or word under scrutiny, explain the reasons that justify the choice, formulate new interpretations or perspectives stemming from it, support these with arguments in the main body and bring the paper to a conclusion.

03

Conference Program

TUESDAY 10-10-2023

All schedule indicates local time in Delft, NL (UTC/GMT +2 hours)

	09:15 - 09:30	Welcome and Presentation
panel #1 Revisited Terms	09:30 - 11:00	Faculteit Bouwkunde TU Delft Berlagezaal 1
Elisa Monaci Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy	09:35	Kitsch. Learning from Ordinary Dreams of Architecture Critical Spatial Practices
Francesca Gotti Politecnico di Milano, Italy	09:50	Inhabiting an Ever-changing Term
Jana Culek Delft University of Technology, Netherlands University of Rijeka, Croatia	10:05	(Re)Defining Utopia. The Changing Concept of an Ideal World
Carla Molinari (1) and Marco Spada (2) (1) Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom (2) University of Suffolk, United Kingdom	10:20	Past and Future of Townscape. For a Humane Urbanism (*)
Session Chair: Marcos Pantaleón Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain	10:35 - 11:00	Discussion
Welcome by BK Dean Dick van Gameren	11:00	Berlagezaal 2
Coffee Break	11:00 - 11:30	Berlagezaal 2
panel #2 Modern Genealogies	11:30 - 13:00	Berlagezaal 1
J. Igor Fardin and Richard Lee Peragine Politecnico di Torino, Italy	11:35	The promise(s) of sustainability
Cássio Carvalho and Alexandra Alegre Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal	11:50	Visions on Democratic Architecture
Federico Costa Universidade Estadual de Campinas & Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, Brazil	12:05	Nostalgia for Backwardness. Investigating the Persistent Influence of Modernity on Brazilian Contemporary Architecture
Öykü Şimşek Istanbul Technical University, Turkey	12:20	Vulnerable architecture as a/n (im)material assemblage
Session Chair: Heidi Sohn Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	12:35 - 13:00	Discussion
Lunch Break	13:00 - 14:00	Berlagezaal 2
panel #3 Situated Terms	14:00 - 16:00	Berlagezaal 1
Mohammad Sayed Ahmad (1) & Munia Hweidi (2) (1) Tohoku University, Japan (2) Sophia University, Japan	14:05	Space, Makan, Kūkan. Phenomenology of Space through Etymology
Khevna Modi CEPT University, India Carnegie Mellon University, USA	14:20	Word, Associations, and Worldviews. A case of pol Architecture of Ahmedabad (*)
Marine Zorea Kyoto Institute of Technology, Japan Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Israel	14:35	Speaking of Collective Dining. The Spatial, Social and Semiotic Realities of the Kibbutz Dining Room
Lola Lozano Architectural Association, UK	14:50	Redistribution: Domestic space and Land Sharing in Mexico City's urban centre
Hanxi Wang Cornell University, USA University College London, UK	15:05	HOME-steading. Subversions, Reversions, and Divisions of the Moral Right to Space

Session Chair: Janina Gosseye Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	15:20 - 16:00	Discussion
Coffee Break	16:00 - 16:30	Berlagezaal 2
panel #4 Expanded Meanings	16:30 - 18:30	Berlagezaal 1
Clarissa Duarte and Mariana Magalhães Costa Université Jean Jaurès (UT2J), France	16:35	From sustainable development to sustainable (urban) engagement: The evolution of a concept
Haitam Daoudi Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain	16:50	A relational approach to performance. Composition of meaning through Price and Ábalos
Grayson Bailey Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany Association for the Promotion of Cultural Practice in Berlin, Germany	17:05	Architecture / architectural
Zeynep Soysal Atılım University, Turkey	17:20	Platform: as an Architectural Ecotone Transtemporal
Maria Kouvari and Regine Hess ETH Zurich, Switzerland	17:35	Unlocking Time in the Architectural Discourse
Session Chair: Alejandro Campos Delft University of Technology, Netherlands	17:50 - 18:30	Discussion
Dinner	19:00 - 21:30	Huszár, Delft

(*) presenting remotely

(**) by express desire of the author the full article is not included in these digital minutes

WEDNESDAY 11·10·2023

All schedule indicates local time in Delft, NL (UTC/GMT +2 hours)

panel #5 Projective Language	09:00 - 11:00	Berlagezaal 1
Cathelijne Nuijsink Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA	09:05	Redefining Architecture from an Undecidable 'Anybody'. The Anybody Conference in Buenos Aires, 1996 (**)
Caterina Padoa Schioppa Sapienza University of Rome, Italy	09:20	Composting Death. Towards a Body Sublimation
Federico Broggin and Annalisa Metta University of RomaTre, Italy	09:35	Mundus. Designing landscape as wholeness, thickness, and fertility
Silvia Calderoni CIRSDe, Interdisciplinary Centre for Research and Studies on Women and Gender, Italy	09:50	Architecture, transfeminism, queerness: reimagining the urban space
Marco Spada (1) and Carla Molinari (2) (1) University of Suffolk, United Kingdom (2) Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom	10:05	Industrial Pastoralism. Post-productive arcadias in machine-modified landscapes
Session Chair: Mariana Wilderom Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil	10:20 - 11:00	Discussion
Coffee Break	11:00 - 11:30	Berlagezaal 2
Keynote Lecture Albena Yaneva	11:30 - 12:30	Berlagezaal 1 Don't Fly, Don't Jump: Critical Proximity in Architectural Research
Lunch Break	12:30 - 13:30	Berlagezaal 2
panel #6 Translated Terms	13:30 - 15:30	Berlagezaal 1
Xuerui Wang Tongji University, China	13:35	The Term "Architectural Art" in the 1950s Chinese Architectural Theory. A Semantic Transplantation (*)
Miho Nakagawa University of East London, United Kingdom	13:50	Analysing English translation of ma interpretations between the 1960s and 80s (**)
Mustapha El Moussaoui Free University of Bolzano, Italy	14:05	Going Back Home/House. Unravelling Linguistic and Existential Differences
Marcela Aragüez IE University, Spain	14:20	From Kankyō to Environment to Enbairamento. A Mutating Concept Between Intermedia Art and Architecture in Post-War Japan
Ye Chen Nagoya Institute of Technology, Japan	14:35	Comparison of Jiàngòu and Kekkō. Differences in Terminology Translations of Tectonic Between China and Japan in <i>Studies in Tectonic Culture</i>
Session Chair: Marcos L. Rosa Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil	14:50 - 15:30	Discussion
Coffee Break	15:30 - 16:00	Berlagezaal 2
Round Table	16:00 - 17:15	Berlagezaal 1
Break	17:15 - 17:45	
Keynote Lecture Adrian Forty	17:45 - 18:45	Oostserre Words and Buildings Revisited
Closing Ceremony	18:45 - 19:45	Oostserre

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05 Papers

Composting Death Towards a Body Sublimation

Padoa Schioppa, Caterina

Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Architecture and Design, Rome, Italy

Abstract

30 square meters of soil fertilizer: is that our very final destination?

Compost – from the Latin *com-positus*, “to place together” – or decayed organic material, commonly prepared by decomposing plant, food waste, recycling organic materials and manure used as a fertilizer for growing plants – has a weird, both etymological and semiotic, resonance with an inclusive idea of home, which goes far beyond the domestication of Nature. As a metaphor, compost has recently become a broad concept encompassing a revised relationship between humankind and the environment, aiming at overcoming the modern dualistic approach in favor of a hybrid and “ecologized thought”.

According to Donna Haraway, “living is composting”. Biologically, this means that a multi-species living is a dynamic mess of diverse bodies. Cognitively, the notion of compost enhances the “making oddkin” extending familial ties beyond blood relations, ultimately making communities out of compost.

Beside this metaphorical representation, compost is acquiring another odd meaning. As an environment-friendly alternative to burial or cremation, both carrying pretty high environmental costs, especially in dense urban areas, human bodies can be turned into soil after death, similarly to what happened to our ancestors, and their livestock, for tens of thousands of years. This practice, which places a corpse directly into a natural burial ground or in a reusable “vessel” made of biodegradable materials that foster its transformation into nutrient-dense soil in about a month, is the epitome of the circular economy, and the end of the very idea of humans as supernatural beings. The predicted carnage that will affect a large number of human beings in the near future – the chronological end of the boomers generation – poses the question in terms of a paradoxical nemesis. The generation that is most responsible for intensifying man’s negative impact on natural resources could literally repay the damage with the “sacrifice” of its members’ own bodies.

Yet, beyond the ecological foundation of the natural organic reduction of human remains, not universally supported by the scientific community, such “green death” questions the whole approach to death in Western cultures. After all, the time has come to invent not only a new way of living in the “damaged earth”, but perhaps, and primarily, a new way of dying.

In this regard, “terramation” implies a rethinking of the very notion of memory and thus of architecture as construction of memory devices.

This broad concept of compost will lead to a reflection on the consequences that secularization, as well as the presumed and possible desecularization of culture, has on ritual practices and farewell spaces.

Key words: compost, communities, death, rituals, farewell spaces.

1. Snapshot of Italian contemporary mourning

What can be the advantage of living in a country that, with extreme delay compared to other Western countries, responds to the pressures of a plural society, increasingly challenging policies and actions for inclusion and protection of civil rights, which also concern death?

The Italian case is paradigmatic of a radical change, occurred over just a few decades, in demographic composition, social structure and, as a consequence, cultural orientations. The country is ageing – with the generation of boomers having reached the third age – and a collapse of spaces for the dying and the dead, especially in large metropolitan areas, is a realistic prediction. At the same time, the increasing presence of migrants, non-Catholic and so-called “non-belonging” communities¹, even beyond the large semantic umbrella of LGBTQIA2S+, unfolds the growing demand for non-discriminatory spaces for unconventional ritual practices.

These changes, as I will try to explain, affect not only the living but also the dying and the dead, long exiled by modernity to states of exception and locked into invisible spaces². Hospitals, nursing homes, residences for dementia patients, hospices, and of course cemeteries have consolidated their separated, introverted nature through both their urban location, often at the outskirts of cities, and their morphological and typological conformation. The “great confinement” of the diverse – the poor, the sick, the orphans, the elderly – initiated during the Renaissance and reinforced in the Enlightenment was enabled by the invention of actual *cities in miniature*, ideally self-sufficient, comparable to monasteries in terms of form and structure. Seemingly safer, these places are indeed death outposts, transition spaces for scrapping, where the process of physical and psychic deterioration is accelerated by isolation³.

In sometimes subtler forms, confinement is still today the solution for dealing with the “crisis of death”⁴ in Western cultures. Among the many side-effects of the recent pandemic, vulnerability to dealing with death, in a both physical and psychic sense, both as a community and as individuals, has generated a new interest⁵. Nonetheless, the interest towards death is paradoxical, since humans have never ceased to be fatally entangled. New questions concerning the categories of thought and political, social and architectural design tend to create a connection between the environmental and climate emergency and the discourse on practices and spaces for death in the future. In particular, I am referring to those practices that consciously address the mortality of life “without lies”⁶ through forms of “domestication” of death that allow taboos to be broken – e.g. euthanasia; or to those practices that unscrupulously point to ecological, for some macabre, alternatives for the treatment of corpses; and finally to anti-rhetorical practices on human remains, capable of challenging the very idea of burial and memory, by approaching even death in terms of an “ecological footprint”.

Actually, the philosophical speculations raised by post-humanism, questioning the dominion of *humanitas* over *animalitas*⁷ – the two inescapable conditions embodied by humankind – encompass the idea that Homo can sacrifice the desire of immortality and eternity⁸, materially symbolized by the tomb⁹, as the extreme awareness of his own *animalitas*. This perspective broadly merges the ecological, existential and architectural finalities. However, very crucial questions for the architectural disciplines are raised, given that burial – as a device of remembrance – has been truly the primary purpose of architecture, since archaic humanity, as Adolf Loos points out in his unmatched definition of Architecture. “If we find in the forest a mound, six feet long and three feet wide, raised by a shovel to form a pyramid, we turn serious and something in us says: here someone lies buried. That is Architecture”.¹⁰

To answer the question raised at the beginning, in this paper I will try to underpin the idea that the delayed reaction to the environmental and climate emergency in many Western countries is often justified under the narrative that people, whose conservative attitudes, habits and beliefs are difficult to erase, stand in the way of the revolutions that are needed today, while in fact the opposite is true. The space of death is the litmus test that shows a much more dynamic version of societies. It is a space of syncretism, a space of dialogue between archaic and contemporary conceptions, a metaphysical space of overlap between East and West¹¹. In it, magical thinking – which has resisted all attempts at extirpation by positivist culture – and secular spirit, which embraces an “open” idea of humanity, have always converged, and not in contradiction with each other. In this manner, the “laic” in its etymological root – from the Greek *laos*, people – is distinguished not from the sacred but from the exclusive, from the forbidden, the archetype of which is the Greek temple. The laic thus designates the unbidden, the unbanned, and by extension, the inclusive space.

Cemeteries can be considered architectural samples of cultural contamination and tolerance, early experiments of ethnic and religious coexistence, metaphors of a “universal common space”¹² between the common sense of familiarity and estrangement. In this regard, the first Islamic minaret in Italy is that of the French Military Cemetery in Venafrò, where about 6,000 soldiers – two thirds of whom from the Maghreb region – who fell in the battle of Cassino in 1944 are buried. The cemetery is conceived as a large field, whose formal evenness alludes to the non-hierarchical space of the democratic city, where all human beings enjoy equal treatment, and with equal dignity deserve to be celebrated and remembered for their sacrifice.

In line with this reading, beyond the specific architectural structure, the cemetery would be the archetype of inclusiveness but not, as is commonly thought, because of the denial of the symbolic, but on the contrary because of its exceptional redundancy, a redundancy that is rather qualitative than quantitative. That “absolute” symbolic landscape is truly home to all.

Like all built environments, the cemetery dialectically combines the rational obstinacy of the project and the correlative action of functional mutations, semantic contaminations, even the metabolic and corrosive forces of nature. This action, which is always generative, even when anarchic, is capable of violating the material integrity of architecture and transforming it into a “dying object”¹³, into a corpse, thereby amplifying its symbolic dimension. From convivial spaces, as well as eccentric, occasionally romantic and always free sanctuaries for wandering and healing the soul, in many cities cemeteries have become actual ecological storages, multi-species reservoirs¹⁴. Built as a hygienic device to protect the city of the living¹⁵, the fence that surrounds the cemetery has turned into its paradoxical, subversive counterbalance, soliciting the colonization of the wild. In this sense, the cemetery embodies that idea of the laic as an open, neutral, non-discriminated and non-specific space, akin to the concept of “queerness” developed in gender studies and extended to all fields of knowledge as a category that generically challenges the boundaries of normativity beyond the identity, literally “determining the indetermination”¹⁶.

This shift of framework leads us to argue that the spaces for death provide a great opportunity to formulate strategies for living in a “damaged earth”, to use Donna Haraway’s eloquence¹⁷.

2. From hybrid to scattered spaces

Changes in space are indeed a crucial hint to understand how the relationship with death has changed in Western cultures over the last centuries¹⁸. In early Christian societies, the lack of boundaries between life and death was emblematically represented by the simultaneous celebration of all rites of passage – the radical changes of ontological regime or social status, such as birth, marriage, death – in the same place: the church. Alongside the corpses placed in the spaces adjacent to or below the church for desiccation, religious and civil ceremonies took place, as well as the most ordinary functions of community life, such as Sunday walks, commercial exchanges and clandestine love encounters. The spatial and psychological promiscuity between life and death in the church embodies what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has described in terms of “dominicality of death”¹⁹, the human ability to perform daily, secular, even recreational duties within the space for death (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1

After all, the Christian civilization derives from earlier Mediterranean religions embedded in the myth of the dead and in the chthonic deity (the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Persephone/Kore), as well as in the katabasis (the descent into the underworld) and in the *nekya* (the necromantic practice of communication with the afterlife). For a long time, right up to the dawn of modernity, Western culture

considered the underworld Hades as a “vital” place, as a tipping realm from which mankind draws nourishment on an imaginative rather than material level, a passage one may access in order to reach an otherworldly dimension of knowledge²⁰.

Such necrophiliac mindset in the ancient world explains why the classic architectural and iconographic form of the threshold separating the living from the dead, Good from Evil takes the shape of an either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic gate, wide open to the underworld, taking on the appearance of a hellish mouth in many cultures, with the double meaning of evoking and exorcising the devil²¹.

With the Edict of Saint-Cloud in 1804, the door closes, the unity of space is broken, and the physical and temporal continuity between the space of ritual, the space for the treatment of the corpse, and the space for human remains – traditionally reserved for remembrance – is interrupted. The modern condition conveys a death “scattered” in a multiplicity of places that cannot symbolically compete with the solemn architectures of the past, and above all in places where the body, either the body of the mourners in ritual actions, or the body of the dead around which the cycle of mourning is performed, is no longer the main protagonist. Bodies are disciplined, and the funeral lament, namely a soliciting “technique of weeping”²² that has given a formal horizon to suffering and, together with the building of the tomb, is the foundation of anthropogenesis, is prohibited. According to the ethnographic research conducted by Ernesto De Martino in the Southern Italian region of Lucania in the 1950s, the funeral lament has the function of transforming the excess, the disorder of the “mourning crisis” (the symptoms of which are rage, hunger, lust) into order, and ritual action. The mimicry and gestures of professional mourners have a tragic and spectacular character that is essentially unchanged since the archaic to the Christian period, and on to modernity. Against the modern project of universalism, indeed, such “folkloric relics”²³, traditions and age-old superstitions have survived on islands and remote inland areas.

The decline of the body’s central position has been further accelerated by the rise of cremation rates in recent decades, even in countries like Italy, traditionally reluctant to such practice due to a firm Christian culture that – similarly to other Abrahamic religions – forbids the cinerary rite, much practised in antiquity, as the most terrific and sacred form of burial in the name of the “corporal mercy”²⁴. The first cremation in the modern age – performed through a gas-powered equipment, designed and tested for the first time in Italy by scientists Giovanni Polli and Celeste Clericetti²⁵ – had a very significant political and cultural impact. Affirming the right to choose the destiny of the mortal remains was indeed considered a heretical act, against the laws that in Italy, as in most European countries, adhered to religious dogmas until the second half of the 19th century.

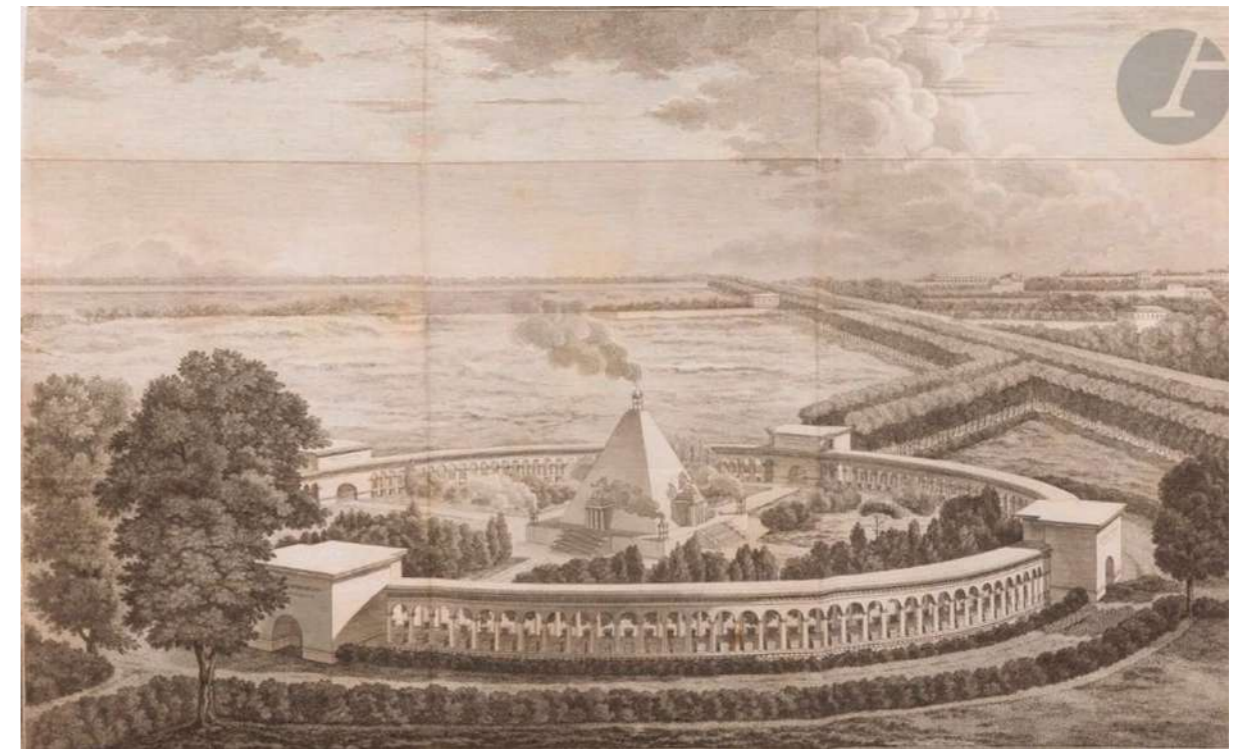


Fig. 2

At present, the planet seems to be clearly divided into two hemispheres, with the discriminating factor being the demographic distribution of secularity. Cremation is extensively adopted in the Far East – with an over 90% rate in Japan, Taiwan, India – and increasingly in North America and Europe – especially in Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom – while it is almost absent in the African continent and in the Near East²⁶. However, other factors also play a role in this new geography of cremations.

Cremation is cheaper and presumably more ecological than traditional burial. The concentration of the population in metropolitan areas, with little or no space for burial, the secularization of cultures and the spread of alternative forms of spirituality, based on the common “care for the earth”²⁷ have spurred a political demand and planning thinking on alternative funeral rites. Where the demand for cremation is growing rapidly, the space for cremation ceremonies should be entirely rethought. Italian crematoria, for example, are more akin to corpse processing factories, which fulfil the technical function but provide no farewell space. Coffins are often left in storage for weeks while the gap expands between the time of the funeral and the time when the body returns to the earth – either under a tombstone, or in a cell wall or scattered in nature. After all, the crematorium is still an architectural form to be explored in terms of design²⁸.

Since its first typological enunciation during the Enlightenment, much like the other social and productive infrastructures for the modern society, the burial incineration building was factory-like, despite its monumental representativeness. The very first project designed by Pierre Marie Giraud in 1794²⁹ is the emblem of this complex logistics, where technical functions – the cremation furnaces – overlap with theatrical, highly symbolic functions – the ceremonial spaces for the last farewell (Fig. 2). With its outstanding central chimney, as in the mythical fireplace of the Greek-Roman city, the Crematorium is configured as a real *limes*, a material and existential interface between the loud city of the living and the silent city of the dead. In 1940, Gunnar Asplund pioneered a quite different conception with his design for the Woodland Crematorium in Stockholm, an organic architecture, literally sunken into and intertwined with nature, where the funeral ritual is fully accomplished, up to the delivery and scattering of ashes in the stunning surroundings.

Despite such historical examples, crematoria are still rarely considered sacred architecture, or spatial devices holding the mourning ritual, the choreography of which is performed across thresholds, diaphragms and intermediate spaces, emphasizing the “metaphysical atmosphere” this universal anthropological experience requires. In countries that actively invest in the construction of new crematoria – such as Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries – the tendency is increasingly to conceive the farewell spaces for the collective rituals, as well as the waiting rooms, as places to stay, as domestic landscapes where time is spent processing the transformation of the deceased into dust. Large windows open onto fragments of nature, mineral gardens, or even water bodies – ultimately on the “terrestrial world” – metaphorically seem to remind mourners of the sense of human predestination: “*pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*”³⁰.



Fig. 3

Thinking of the crematorium as a hybrid architectural genre, at the same time an increasingly technologically sophisticated combustion plant, and a theatre of the ritual cycle, is a possible but not the only strategy. New options are on the table. In overpopulated countries, such as India, “open air cremations” – notably resulting in a poorer bone fragmentation – are widely employed, even as large,

collective funeral pyres during the recent pandemic. According to some scientists, outdoor pyres, burning human corpses without coffin, supported by a higher technical accuracy, are potentially more sustainable than any traditional indoor cremation involving the emission of dioxins, benzopyrene and other harmful chemicals and therefore further air pollutants³¹ (Fig. 3).

Conversely, in Japan, visionary, sometimes suggestive and perhaps necessary hypotheses for dense metropolitan areas are being envisioned. In a design competition for a vertical cemetery in Tokyo held in 2016, the winning project proposed a tower-station from which the human remains are dispersed into the sky inside red balloons forming a non-stop artificial swarm, a rain of indeterminate ashes.

In both these scenarios, the physical and psychological distance of burial – understood as a gesture that “puts a body into oblivion” – from the space of ritual, as well as the “anonymity” of burial define a perspective of death that is not necessarily more cynical but certainly wilder, literally messier. Yet, such perspective, implying a radical shift on body disposal and the final destination of human remains, is indeed cross-cutting and therefore hard to embrace. Except for a few exceptional cases, open air cremation is illegal in Western countries, while collective funeral pyres are outright unimaginable, challenging the most deeply rooted taboo. The figure of Antigone has shaped Western culture along with the idea that mourning cannot occur without the dead body – any replacement of which appears unacceptable – whose remains are an object of devotion, of veneration, of self-identity memory³². At the same time, the unbearable sight not only of the dead but also of the dying body paradoxically underlies a historical process of progressive and ineffable concealment of death.

3. Ecological death

Actually, the “sustainability” of cremation is controversial.

Cremation requires a lot of fuel and is responsible for millions of tons of carbon dioxide emissions every year. The combustion of a single corpse, indeed, produces an average of 534.6 pounds of carbon dioxide. Besides, the presumed chemical contamination of human bodies – particularly the mercury in dental fillings, widely used in the past decades – may undermine its employment too. Realistically, teeth will be extracted from corpses as naturally as other thanato-aesthetic treatments used to prepare the dead body for its final journey. Whereas this problem must undoubtedly be solved upstream, before the human body contaminates the earth and contributes to the fatal impoverishment of the soil – the main source of the climate crisis – the alarm has provoked a discussion about “green death”³³.

Today’s alternatives are diverse and respond to a multiplicity of beliefs, sensitivities, as well as living conditions and environmental contexts. Underlying the new “techniques” of dead body treatments is the predicted carnage that will affect a large number of human beings in the near future – the chronological end of the boomers generation. On a political level, the end of the very idea of man as supernatural being poses the question in terms of a paradoxical nemesis. The generation that is most responsible for intensifying man’s negative impact on natural resources could literally repay the damage with the “sacrifice” of its members’ own bodies for the good of the next generations. After all, that is the very epitome of circular economy (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

In reality, these are mostly experimental practices, viable in a few American states now pioneering design methods and technologies for the disposal of human remains. In most Western countries, legislation is still very restrictive due to the previously mentioned taboos.

The so-called water cremation, or “aquamation”³⁴, based on alkaline hydrolysis, is a process that disposes of human remains by placing the body in a pressurized reusable vessel filled with a mixture of water and potassium hydroxide, heated to a temperature of around 160 °C. In four to six hours, the body is reduced to its chemical components: porous white bone remains that, similarly to cremated remains, can be stored in an urn or scattered; and an organic liquid, either disposed of through the sewer system or used as soil fertilizer.

The idea of the human body ending up, like generic organic waste, in a dump, scandalizes us. Yet, aquamation may even acquire a poetic undertone and be seen as a ritual purifying bath, a return to the element that gave us life, a symbolic immersion in the underworld, a plunge into eternity, resembling the 5th-century BC fresco of the “Diver” portrayed in a Paestum tomb. Thus, Egyptian *mastabas* and Nuragic sacred wells come to mind, along with the architecture of the *mikveh* in Judaism: water devices employed for ritual purposes symbolizing the cycle of death and rebirth.

In recent years, another “technique” has been tested in North America as an environment-friendly alternative to burial or fire cremation, which turns human bodies into about 30 square metres of soil fertilizer. Much like our ancestors, and their livestock, for tens of thousands of years, the naked corpse is placed directly into a natural burial ground in a pleasant environment – such as a wood, a meadow – or, similarly to aquamation, in a reusable vessel filled with biodegradable materials. In the “terrimation”³⁵ process, oxygen flows through the vessel and stimulates microbes in the body resulting in its transformation into nutrient-dense soil within about a month.

Beyond the ecological foundation of the natural organic reduction of human remains, not universally supported by the scientific community, such “green death” questions the whole approach to death in Western cultures. Except for what can be truly considered a “sylvan burial”, banned in many countries, technological aspects generally prevail over the rest in experimental body disposal techniques. For just that reason, their impact on society is comparable to that of fire cremation in the 19th century, when it accelerated the reduction of human remains to about 2 kilos of ash through the sophistication of rapid combustion technology.

Even then, the gap between ethical motivations and practical constraints due to the restrictions imposed by current regulations – in conservative societies reluctant to give up control over human bodies – was evident in the “character” of the spaces. Despite the desire to transform the spaces of cremation, aquamation and terrimation into attractive places, they are still felt as industrial facilities where the process of “thanatocracy”³⁶ to which human beings submit themselves even before death in the name of medical and scientific achievements, comes to an end.

In addition, the reduction to organic material to be scattered and con-fused with the organic materials of the earth implies a radical rethinking of the very notion of memory and thus of architecture as a construction of memory devices³⁷.

4. Composting death

In the apocalyptic storytelling that supports some theories of the Anthropocene, the dying planet, plundered by the drive of colonialism and capitalism, is depicted as a desolating and hopeless “still life”, where the survival of human beings is already irreversibly compromised. To invert this cynical point of view, the dying planet may rather be understood as an endless, stratified fossil of human and non-human remains turned into humus – or compost – that feeds future living beings.

Compost – from the Latin *com-positus*, “to place together” – or decayed organic material, commonly prepared by decomposing plant, food waste, recycling organic materials and manure, used as a fertilizer for growing plants, has a weird, both etymological and semiotic resonance with an “inclusive” idea of home, which goes far beyond the domestication of Nature. As a metaphor, compost has recently become a broad concept encompassing a revised relationship between humankind and the environment, aiming at overcoming the modern binary and linear approach to human history, in favour of a hybrid and “ecologized thought”. In this respect, Manuel De Landa’s interpretation of human history as an “unfolding immersed in a cauldron of non-organic life”, where the organic and inorganic mixture becomes the “raw material for further mixture”³⁸ and for the emergence of new, hardly predictable, living systems is indeed relevant.

Accordingly, evolution is not measured in terms of biodiversity, that is the specialization growth, literally the “fabrication of new species”, but rather as the ability of species to be adaptive and *symbiotic* with the environment. “Evolution does not go from something less differentiated to something more differentiated”, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argued in 1980, further declaring that “the term we would prefer for this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms is ‘involution’, on the condition that involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is *involutionary*, involution is creative”³⁹.

The multi-species ability to “become-with”, i.e. the ability to adopt a strategy comparable to that of bacteria, which organize themselves into more complex systems in order to survive a hostile

environment, implies a “persistent intimacy between strangers”⁴⁰. Donna Haraway defines this mode in drastic terms, stating that “living is composting”, that is “making kin” and actually “making oddkin” – the neologism that “unravels the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species”⁴¹ – as an enjoyable earthly survival strategy. In such a multi-species assemblage process, a “multi-species ecojustice” can be achieved, not only within, but even beyond the boundaries of the known world, in search of solidarity with the chthonic forces, with the dead and the extinct. “Sym-chthonic kin”, literally tying kinship with chthonic forces (from the Greek *chthonios*, meaning “under, within, or belonging to the earth and the seas”) seems to be the final step towards this “humusity”⁴² – another brilliant term coined by the American philosopher to describe the next future when “communities of compost” will replace humankind, and its arrogant ways, and take charge of the Earth. In her storytelling, the “Children of Compost”⁴³ choose apparently inhabitable places, wasteland, exhausted fields, to take care of them, and turn them into interspecific “refuges”, in a dynamic, anarchic mess of diverse bodies (Fig. 5).

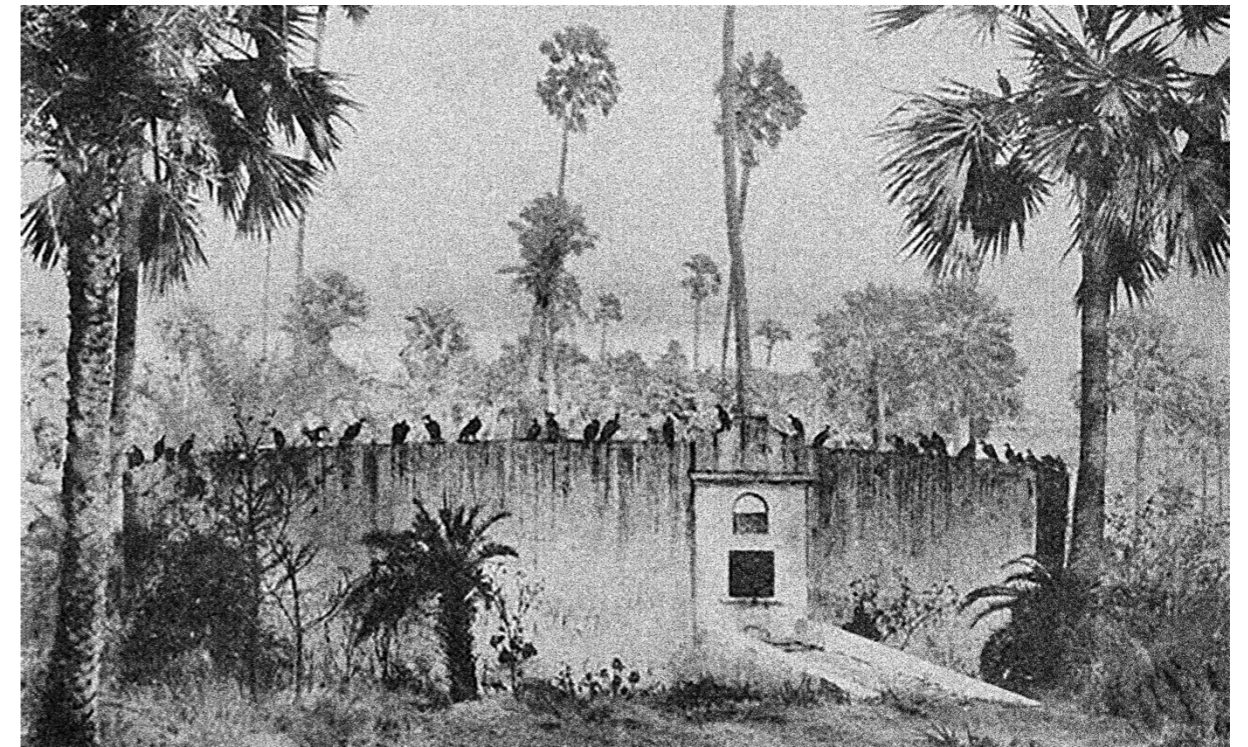


Fig. 5

French landscape architect Gilles Clément’s memorable description of the so-called “planetary garden” comes to mind, where the planetary “*brassage*” – i.e. the rebellious, parasitic, generative forces that tend to expand the global mixing of species – fatally reshape urban regions, seas and areas still unexploited or “secondarized” by human activities⁴⁴. Should this idea of occupying seemingly inhabitable places be applied to the dead, to human remains, a different perspective of post-anthropocentrism would finally emerge, where the domination of nature over culture would be accepted in death without scandal, and therefore anonymous, disordered, decomposed forms of dispersal and displacement of human remains would be embraced.

To use the leftovers of the contemporary city, abandoned infrastructure, unfinished buildings, as an opportunity to foster the planetary *brassage* is not such a far-fetched idea. It is well-known that Arnold Böcklin’s famous painting, *Isle of the Dead*, was inspired by the English Cemetery in Florence, a patch of land used for non-Catholic burials – an unusual roundabout where the frenetic life of the city and the stillness of the cemetery merge seamlessly. Ultimately, it is about looking at inhabitable places with a creative mindset and transforming them into myriads of communities of compost, into lands for the humusity to which all of us are, in all likelihood, bound to.

Notes

- 1 Judith Butler, *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 2 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- 3 Norbert Elias, *La solitudine del morente* (Bologna: il Mulino, [1982] 1985).
- 4 Among the first to speak of the "crisis of death" in modern societies was Edgar Morin, *L'Homme et la Mort* (Paris: Seuil, [1948] 1976).
- 5 Before 2020, an event that awakened some interest in the disciplines of space was the exhibition curated by Alison Killing and Ania Molenda *Death in the city* a social-political research on architecture for death. In 2014, they presented the project *Death in Venice* at the Venice Biennale. (See: <https://deathinthecity.com/>).
- 6 Recently the rich publication of Ines Testoni. *Il grande libro della morte* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2021).
- 7 Philippe Ariès. *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 659-711.
- 7 A summary of this concept in Leonardo Caffo. *Fragile Humanity. Il postumano contemporaneo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017).
- 8 Zygmunt Bauman. *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).
- 9 "There is no culture without a grave, there is no grave without culture: the grave is at the very least the first and only cultural symbol", asserts René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), 109.
- 10 Adolf Loos, *Ins Leere gesprochen 1897-1900* (Brenner-Verlag, Innsbruck: veränderte Auflage, 1932), 255.
- 11 Caterina Padoa Schioppa. "Postcards from the underworld. The ash trail from Palermo to Trieste" en Mosé Ricci (ed. by). *MedWays Open Atlas*. (Siracusa: Letteraventidue, 2022), 826-837.
- 12 Predrag Matvejevic. *The Mediterranean and Europe* (Milan: Garzanti, 1998), 141.
- 13 Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 35.
- 14 The documentary "Les cimetières: lieux de vie et terrains de jeu du sauvage" on radiofrance (November 1, 2022) only mentions French cases, but the phenomenon is spreading to all European countries. (<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/de-cause-a-effets-le-magazine-de-l-environnement/les-cimetieres-lieux-de-vie-et-terrains-de-jeu-du-sauvage-1229998>).
- 15 In the Western countries, the modern cemetery, born in the aftermath of Napoleon's law prohibiting the city of dead to be built within the city of living, developed into different types – e.g. monumental cemeteries, park-cemeteries, palace-cemeteries. For more on the architecture of cemeteries, among others: Mauro Felicori (ed. by), *Gli spazi della memoria. Architettura dei cimiteri monumentali europei* (Rome: Sossella editore, 2005).
- 16 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 17 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 18 The subject has been addressed from various perspectives by: Philippe Ariès, cit.; Michel Ragon, *Lo spazio della morte* (Naples: Guida, 1986); Edwin Heathcote. *Monument builders: modern architecture and death* (Wiley: Hoboken, 1999).
- 19 Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: éd. Gallimard, 1976), 35.
- 20 James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
- 21 The catalogue for the exhibition *Inferno* at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome (October 2021 - January 2022) contains many essays addressing the relationship between death, myth and art. Jean Clair (ed. by). *Inferno* (Milan: Electa, 2021).
- 22 Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale, dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020), 57.
- 23 Ibid, 58.
- 24 The Catholic Church still places many constraints on how and where ashes may be stored, ranging from the prohibition on keeping them in the domestic dwelling to scattering them in the air, on the ground or in water. This confirms that the prejudice against the practice of cremation is very much in evidence today. In: *Instruction Ad resurgendum cum Christo, on the burial of the dead and the preservation of ashes in the case of cremation*. (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_it.html).
- 25 The first modern cremation took place in Milan on January 22, 1876 in the Tempio Crematorio (Crematorium Temple) at the Monumental Cemetery, by means of a gas-powered apparatus designed by scientists Giovanni Polli and Clemente Clericetti, which is depicted in numerous illustrations. About three kilograms of ashes, dust and tiny bone fragments remained of the Freemason industrialist Alberto Keller, who had financed the construction of the Crematorium Temple. In that same year, the Milanese Cremation Society was founded and later the first Cremation Societies (So.Crem) were set up almost everywhere that, over time, amidst prohibitions and prejudices, allowed the development of cremation in Italy.
- 26 Data extracted from the website of The Cremation Society (<https://www.cremation.org.uk>)
- 27 Duccio, Demetrio, *La religiosità della terra: una fede civile per la cura del mondo* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2013).
- 28 An in-depth study on this typology was published by Vincent Valentijn, Kim Verhoeven (eds. by), *Goodbye architecture. The architecture of crematoria in Europe* (Rotterdam: Nai010 publishers, 2018). See also: Tom Wilkinson. 2016. "Typology: Crematorium". *Architectural Review*, no. 1436.
- 29 Pierre Giraud, *Les Tombeaux, ou essai sur les sépultures* (Paris: Hachette Livre Bnf, ed. 1801).
- 30 Caterina Padoa Schioppa, "Architectures for Cremation / Architectures for Cremation". *Abitare la Terra*, no. 56, 2021: 34-39.
- 31 For more on this debate see: Becky Little (November 5, 2019) "Little The environmental toll of cremating the dead. As cremation becomes more common, people around the world are seeking greener end-of-life options". National Geographic (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/is-cremation-environmentally-friendly-heres-the-science>)
- 32 Antigone's cry claiming the law of eternity – that is the law of Themis more archaic than that of Zeus, an unwritten law preceding divine laws – is not isolated, all Greek tragedy reflects on the theme of burial as a founding act of the polis and its laws. "A capital work for our civilization", the philosopher Massimo Cacciari defines it, Sophocles' Antigone from the 5th century B.C. is the tragedy that challenges the relationship between *nomos* and *polemos*, between the positive law of the fathers and the radical otherness that relies on divine laws. Massimo Cacciari, "La parola che uccide", in Sophocles (5th century BC): *Antigone* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007, 3-11).
- 33 The theme of "green deat" was well summarised in the article: Allie Yang (February 24, 2023) "Rest in ... compost? These 'green funerals' offer an eco-friendly afterlife". National Geographic. (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/rest-in-compost-these-green-funerals-offer-an-eco-friendly-afterlife>).
- 34 For more, see: Agence France-Presse, (January 2, 2022) "What is aquamation? The process behind Desmond Tutu's 'green cremation'". The Guardian. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/02/what-is-aquamation-the-process-behind-desmond-tutus-green-cremation>).
- 35 For more, see: Ritu Prasad, (January 30, 2019). "How do you compost a human body - and why would you?". BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47031816>). Also the website of Katrina Spade, founder of *Recompose* and pioneer of human composting. (<https://recompose.life/>).
- 36 Jean Baudrillard, cit., p. 35
- 37 Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb sculpture. Its changing aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini* (New York: Abrams, 1964); Edwin Heathcote. *Monument builders: modern architecture and death*, cit.
- 38 Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), 25-26.

- 39 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism, and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 262.
- 40 Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic planet: a new look at evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
- 41 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 143-149.
- 42 Ibid, 89-141.
- 43 Ibid, 151-194.
- 44 Gilles Clément, *Manifeste du tiers paysage* (Paris: Sens et Tonka, 2014).

Image Captions

- Fig. 1. The painting by Calcedonio Reina, *Amore e morte*, 1881 (Catania, Ursino Castle Civic Museum) represents the Baudrillard's concept of "dominicality of death". In the hybrid space of the church, the clandestine encounter between two lovers next to desiccated corpses would appear normal.
- Fig. 2. Pierre Giraud, burial incineration monument, 1974.
- Fig. 3. The Manikarnika Cremation Ghat on the Ganges river, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. © Arian Zwegers
- Fig. 4. A box of soil fertiliser, this is human composting.
- Fig. 5. Early 20th century drawing of the *dakhma* on Malabar Hill, Bombay (Project Gutenberg archives). The Zoroastrian Tower of Silent is the emblem of an "open house" or "interspecific refuges" for the "global mixing of species", made of organic and inorganic bodies.

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Biography

Caterina Padoa Schioppa (Rome, 1974) is architect, Ph.D., MA at the Architectural Association, founder of padOAK studio and Associate Professor of architecture and urban design at the Department of Architecture and Design at Sapienza University of Rome where she is also member of the Doctoral Board of the Programme "Architecture. Theories and Design". She is a member of the scientific editorial board of *Ardeth*. She authored many essays and articles on architecture and landscape theory. Recurring research themes are the problematic node between diagrammatic thinking and architecture finitude, as well as the impact in architectural theories of the complex and ecological thinking. Since 2018 she has been investigating the architecture for death and the architecture for rituals in the post-secular society. Among her books: *Transculturality and Adaptability in Landscape Urbanism* (Aracne, 2010), *Kongjian Yu. 1998-2018* (Libria, 2019), *Vector Architects* (Libria, 2021).

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