Architecture must be understood as a strategic attitude regarding space and resources. As a discipline that is arguably as old as humankind, architecture is an issue of common sense: a collective and strategic knowledge that is and could be applied by everyone, in any community, environment or culture, through a series of mechanisms, devices, structures and forms.

Since an important part of architecture history is inextricably linked to the ambitions of ruling elites, the obvious assumption appears to be that architecture will always reinforce prevailing conditions. This highly problematic conclusion would limit architecture’s meaning, undermine its field of operation and legitimize the idea that there is no alternative to the status quo. To reclaim the concept of common sense from within architecture is critical in the present context of global neoliberalization, political decay and by consequence, an ecological crisis.

In fact, architecture is also closely related to ecology. Ecology comes from Oikos: a house, not because it has walls, but because of the people who inhabit it. Housing is relational and it is a practice. It means producing an environment that is shared. The production of space is at once an architectural and a social laboratory. Thus, space is not a discipline confined to expert knowledge: it is a field of interaction between its users, assigning architects the role of catalysts in the process. Architecture, rather than just following the economical vector and being an enemy of ecology, can actually be its foremost expression, providing concrete environmental
form as politics and thus enable emancipatory ideas to become space. The Cementerio General in Santiago de Chile is a case in point here.

Since cemeteries represent extensive resources of open space within the city, the aim to consider them as metropolitan gardens implies a reassessment of their potential transformation into a common good. If on the one hand Cementerio General reflects the radical privatization of Chilean society following the neoliberal revolution after the military coup in 1973, on the other hand, it embodies a foundational moment of the city of Santiago, having come into existence nearly two hundred years ago in the midst of the Chilean War of Independence. The city of the dead appears as a model within a model – the neoliberal city –, a case study to look carefully and to take advantage of, a potential laboratory of a spatial shift in the city of the living: by turning the order of private parceling into commons by other means, the transformation into a cemetery as an urban garden indicates a way forward for the city at large. Let’s start with the facts.

**Urban Facts**

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

Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna

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 city – 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. It concentrates the 29 % of Recoleta’s green areas (293.1 ha) and adjoins (colinda) with Independencia, the district with less green areas in Santiago (1.7m²/hab). 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 center – 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 20th century mining industry. 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 Pinochet

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 (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 programs 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 favor 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 parceling and stratification by class is even more marked than in the urban fabric itself. 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 companies – 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 parceling and expansion of marketed land at the expense of common space. The spatial segregation between the different neighborhoods 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. 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 labor: 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. A ‘poor circus’, with explicit fragility.

**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 (Evans, 1997: 70). Ultimately, minimizing public space, in the interests of increasing economic efficiency, is the aim of bourgeois planning too: the same one that provoked an ecological crisis in a planetary scale. Public space, just like the lean state, is reduced to a minimum: 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.

**Typological Evidence**

The Cemetery contains a unique typological evidence regarding ‘collective housing’ for the dead – developing diverse strategies of common space – such as the Gothic Chapel, the Green Chapel, the Pavilion n°1, almost all of them located in the southern / historical part. Probably the most recognizable built example is the *mausoleo italiano*. The spiraling ramp at the
El Cementerio General en el contexto metropolitano. Con 82,2 ha, es el espacio público sin relieve más grande de Santiago, seguido por el Parque O’Higgins con 76 ha. / Cementerio General in the metropolitan context. With 82.2 ha the Cementerio General is the biggest flat public space in Santiago, followed by O’Higgins Park with 76 ha. © Plan Común.

El Cementerio General como corazón de las comunas de Recoleta e Independencia. A pesar de ubicarse en Recoleta, limita directamente con Independencia (la comuna con menos áreas verdes de Santiago). / Cementerio General as the heart of Recoleta and Independencia municipalities. Although it is located in Recoleta, it directly limits with Independencia – the district with less green areas in Santiago. © Plan Común.
core of the mausoleum’s wall of niches, can be read as an expression of both Guggenheim-like exhibitionism and a collective experience within the private space.

**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.¹

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 are the key to an understanding of property beyond utility.

**A Specific Heterotopia**

In relation to contemporary Santiago, the Cemeterio 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 – opposed to an ecological vision regarding our resources –, which receives no public subsidies.

**Anti-Cyclical Action**

Contemporary private cemeteries embody the development patterns of suburban real-estate. Following a minimalist funerary semiology, parkland typologies are replacing the 19th century **cimitero monumentale** model; dense architectural layouts are giving way to well-kept and surveilled 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 obvious cycle of reinvestment and gentrification that will follow the current downwards trajectory of the Cemeterio General, anti-cyclical action is required: the cemetery must be seen not as a relic or another commodity, but as an ecological urban device.
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 program 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 (Ungers, Koolhaas, et. al., 2013). 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’? (Kristeva, 1991).

**In Between Life and Death**

Even though the cemetery is a place of socialization of memory and 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, tipdependent caretakers cleaning the graves,
tourists visiting the mausoleums of illustrious characters, cemetery aficionados wandering around taking pictures, children playing between the tombs.

The Possibility of a Metropolitan Urban Garden and an ecological model for Santiago

The 200th anniversary of Santiago’s General Cemetery will take place in 2021. It is a great achievement if we take into account both its fragile administrative framework and its delicate physical condition: in retrospect, the cemetery has shown several times its resistance to political and economic shifts, unfair competition with other funerary complexes, natural disasters and even corrupt administrations.10

After studying the Cemetery during the last four years, we suggest that this transformation involves some key operations: a serious communication strategy,11 a proper framework of collaboration among diverse institutions in order to unlock the complex current scenario and to think in a new phase12 and a clever political approach that understands how to deal with the ‘Chilean way’ when it comes to urban projects of metropolitan relevance.13 All this has to be done in parallel to a long-term process of internal transformation – repairing and correcting irregular or undesired situations.

The list of tasks is long:
1. To count with precise surveys: at the moment most of them are neither precise nor complete.
2. To regulate informal labor: legalizing the status of the ‘caregivers’ and offering them proper work facilities, in favor of a new life within the cemetery.
3. To preserve the fragile vegetation according to a clear landscape strategy, currently inexistent.
4. To pay the historical debt with the northern area inhabited by the ‘poor’, including its collective infrastructure and the recognition as historic monument such as the southern zone.
5. To open or boost new connections with the city, i.e. with a new access from the North.

These are just a few basic operations needed to transform the Cemetery into a proper metropolitan urban garden. We are not even considering reclaiming water rights of La Polvora canal, something outside our domain as architects and that would need strong political will.

On the other hand, the mutual exchange between the living and the dead within the cemetery is fundamental to
translating the notion of architectural commonality into a formalized approach. The ritual visit to the cemetery is reciprocated by the dead, who could serve as the building blocks for future structures to receive the living. Through this strategy, the funerary complex could have a historical opportunity to reframe both its model of development and its spatial coherence: a significant shift, reclaiming architectural form as a political act within the neoliberalised city. Compared to the rhetoric of freedom that saw escapist design become the epitome of the neoliberal société du spectacle (Debord, 1967), 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 rigor and strength can allow us to recalibrate our understanding of freedom as a collective discipline.

But to understand the Cemetery as a transformation model for the neoliberal city is much more challenging. It seems crucial that 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: a redefinition of what we mean by ‘property’.

This bicentennial is an occasion of both celebration and critical understanding of the cemetery’s actual role and ‘performance’ in the metropolitan context of Santiago. This historical milestone offers a unique opportunity for the funerary complex to finally reclaim an ambitious political agenda and engage with the collective after decades, shifting from an ‘urban black hole’ to a strategic ecological device. Subverting the critical condition of the city of the dead will surely give us some clues or guidelines to transform the neoliberal city of the living. By doing so, architecture could be a radical expression of ecology, offering strategic thinking and concrete environmental form as politics.

It’s time to ‘hacernos cargo del muerto’. 

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9 Lado norte periférico del cementerio, incluida la rotación cada diez años; sólo el 20-30% de los restos se trasladan a nichos antes de que las unidades se vuelvan a vender. Fuente: Cementerio General de Santiago. / Peripheral north side of the cemetery including turnover every ten years; Only 20-30% of remains from the earth yards are moved to niches before the units are sold again. Source: Cementerio General de Santiago.

2 Père Lachaise cementerio en París (abierto en 1804) es un ejemplo temprano de los cementerios de paisaje que empezaron a desarrollarse durante el siglo XIX.

3 El primer nombramiento oficial de monumento histórico sólo se produjo en 2006 cuando el Patio 29 – el lugar donde los presos políticos ejecutados por el Dictador fueron enterrados – fue declarado un monumento histórico. En 2010, después de un proceso liderado por el arquitecto chileno Tomás Domínguez, la parte histórica del cementerio (de 42 ha) también fue declarado un monumento histórico – con la mayor colección de patrimonio funerario de América del Sur.

4 En 1991 Augusto Pinochet – entonces ya un dictador pero aún comandante en jefe del Ejército chileno – respondió a las preguntas del periodista Mirna Schindler:
   - Hoy, el cuerpo de Bautista van Schouwen [político chileno, fundador de la MIR] fue encontrado en el Patio 29. ¿Qué piensas?
   - ¿No lo encuentran? ¡Felicito a quienes buscan los cuerpos!
   - General, después de la descubrimiento de estos cuerpos ¿cómo puedes seguir insistiendo en que no había detenidos desaparecidos en Chile?
   - Señorita, repito, existía una guerra irregular en progreso, que fue muy bien planeada por el KBG!
   - Pero ¿qué puedes decir sobre el hecho de que han encontrado dos cuerpos en un mismo hoyo?
   - Pero ¡qué economía magnífica!
The Metropolitan Area of Santiago has a population of more than seven million. 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.

The water rights of La Pólvora canal were scandalously sold back in 2008 by Gonzalo Cornejo – a corrupt right-wing mayor – for 400 million CLP to a private water company and then to the Hippodrome. The current fees vary from 230,000 CLP for an earth grave (22 per cent of demand); 14m CLP for a first-to-fourth-floor niche with perpetual ownership; 3.7m CLP for a family vault (33 per cent of demand); 520,000 CLP for a niche of remains; 190,000 CLP for the mausoleum owner’s offspring; 680,000 CLP for a cremation; 120,000 CLP for a columbarium niche; to 96,000 CLP 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 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.

At least during the last two decades, the Cemetery has been confronted to a constant crisis climate in every possible field: budget cuts, lack of resources, internal changes, etc. The Cemetery will not have a radical transformation and recovery, unless it finds institutional allies. It has a very specific and strong inertia – in the end, we are talking about the city of the dead. The Collaboration Agreement between the funerary complex and Universidad Católica since 2016, promoted by a group of professors and professionals related to UC Architecture School, is just one example of possible alliances. Although it is in force, it hasn’t accomplished several of its goals because of a chaotic management of the Cemetery during the last years.

In the Chilean extreme neoliberal context, the difficulties to promote urban transformations that are not market oriented are common knowledge.

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.

Literally «deal with the dead».

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