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THE ISLAND AND THE UNDERGROUND. ON THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF PRE-FUNERAL FACILITIES

WYSPA I PODZIEMIA. O DOŚWIADCZENIU PRZEJŚCIA W ARCHITEKTURZE OBIEKTÓW PRZEDPOGRZEBOWYCH

Abstract

Architecture can serve as a space for experiences related to death and funeral ceremonies. Following van Gennep, these can be termed "spaces of transition". Using buildings in Flanders as a case study, a study was conducted into the design features of pre-funeral facilities concerning the way in which ceremony participants are guided through the building's space. The analysis highlights this design element as one of the key means of universalizing the forms and metaphors of funerary architecture.

Keywords: *architecture, death, metaphor, space, transition*

Streszczenie

Architektura bywa przestrzenią doświadczeń związanych ze śmiercią i ceremoniami pogrzebowymi. Van Gennep określa je jako przestrzenie przejścia. Na przykładzie obiektów położonych we Flandrii przeprowadzono badanie środków kształtowania obiektów przedpogrzebowych dotyczące prowadzenia drogi uczestnika ceremonii w przestrzeni obiektu. Analiza pozwala wskazać ten element projektowania jako jeden z kluczowych środków uniwersalizacji form i metafor form architektury funeralnej.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, metafora, przejście, przestrzeń, śmierć*

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture can serve as a space for experiences related to death and funeral ceremonies. It then becomes a space for emotions; it can evoke and guide them, engaging the mind and the senses to construct meaning. Depending on one's worldview, it is a place of transition from being to non-being, from earthly life to life after death, a transition from coexistence to the experience of absence. Following van Gennep, who wrote about

rites of passage and identified in them the phases of exclusion, transition, and inclusion, we can apply this concept to architectural spaces associated with funeral rites, treating them analogously as spaces of transition, exclusion, and inclusion.[1] These spaces are intended for the deceased, but perhaps even more so for those who temporarily remain among the living. For them, architecture, using its own tools, creates spaces in which this liminal experience is made more familiar. As Juhani Pallasmaa points out, experiencing the world through architecture takes place through the body and engages various senses; light, material, sound, and movement become integral elements of the experience of space.[2] Today, in an era marked by the coexistence of many worldviews and religions and by advancing secularization, architects are seeking common rules, symbols, and points of reference. The shaping of light, the selection of materials, and the way the path of the ceremony participant is guided are means that, by directing human experience, appeal to feelings that are shared and independent of religious affiliation or worldview. It can therefore be said that today we are witnessing a trend toward the universalization of metaphors and forms in funeral architecture.

2. RITUALS AND SPACES OF TRANSITION

In 1909, Arnold van Gennep's book *Les rites de passage*, devoted to rites of passage, was published in France. The Polish translation of this work was published in 2006.[3] The author's reflections on moments of particular significance in human life and the rituals associated with them remain relevant today and seem particularly useful as a point of reference for research on architecture. The concepts of rites proposed by van Gennep are organized in his work according to the human life cycle and include, among others, those related to birth, coming of age, and marriage. Rites of passage also encompass ceremonies associated with death and burial. The author notes that these have specific spaces dedicated to them. Following van Gennep, we can thus refer to the architectural spaces corresponding to these ceremonies, which, for rites of passage related to funerals, include pre-funeral facilities, chapels, funeral homes, and crematoriums. We can examine the specific characteristics and elements of funerary architecture, which serves as a space for experiencing rites of passage. An important aspect of architecture in the context of its function as a space dedicated to these rites is the fact that, in this field, "passage" can be understood almost literally – as a movement, the path of the participating observer through space. Sabina Tanović explores the significance of shaping the path of participants in funeral ceremonies by analyzing the designs of the Brion-Vega mausoleum cemetery in San Vito di Altivole, designed by Carlo Scarpa, and the Igualada cemetery near Barcelona, designed by Enrico Miralles and Carme Pinos. Tanović notes that "in both designs there is a concern with a ritual procession and a notion of time needed for passing through several well-defined stages of space, but also an aspiration toward the future in which the architecture becomes even more poetic with passing

[1] A. Gennep van, *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii* [*The Rites of Passage. A Systematic Study of Ceremonies*], Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2006, pp. 30, 36–37.

[2] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły* [*The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*], Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012, pp. 18, 62, 77–78.

[3] A. Gennep van, *op. cit.*

of time and nature taking its part in the design."[4] Similar conclusions can be drawn when examining pre-funeral facilities. The architect's task, therefore, is to chart this path, and this is achieved in various ways – including those that confirm the thesis of a drive toward the universalization of architectural metaphors in today's culturally diverse world.

3. IN SEARCH OF FORMS FOR PRE-FUNERAL STRUCTURES – AN ARCHITECTURAL LABORATORY

An interesting example is the measures taken in Belgium and their results, both in terms of completed and uncompleted pre-funeral facilities. Florian Heilmeyer[5] describes the process initiated by the Flemish government, which in 2003 decided to launch a program to build new crematoriums, with the Vlaams Bouwmeester overseeing the planning and implementation of some of these projects. This program was viewed as a task of great importance to society, its functioning, and its culture. Thus, a unique architectural laboratory was created, in which design teams were selected through an open competitive process known as "Open Oproep." In Flanders, an assessment was conducted and solutions were proposed for crematoriums as the new dominant type of funeral facility. The crematorium was intended to be not merely a technical addition but an integral part of the space where the boundary-pushing experience of a funeral takes place. Belgian and Dutch architects participated in this architectural discussion, including the well-known firms Klaus en Kaan and Office Kersten Geers David van Severen, as well as architects from outside Flanders – Pritzker Prize winner Eduardo Souto de Moura and later laureates, the team at RCR Arquitectos. Other prominent architects, including Sou Fujimoto, also presented their unbuilt projects. This makes Belgian Flanders a unique architectural laboratory worth examining closely when analyzing contemporary funeral facilities that seek an architectural answer to the question of how to shape funeral spaces. In a region where various religious traditions – Catholic and Protestant – coexist, while the process of secularization of society is also well advanced, a key task is to seek means and solutions that allow forms to be detached from specific traditions and to find a formula for their functioning as shared spaces. Of particular interest is an analysis of the means employed by architects to universalize the metaphors and forms of funeral architecture. One of the fundamental design issues is the question of guiding the path of ceremony participants and its significance as a metaphor within the space of the rite of passage.

4. HOFHEIDE CREMATORIUM – A JOURNEY THROUGH THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD

At the Hofheide Crematorium, designed by RCR Arquitectes and built between 2006 and 2015[6] near Holsbeek, the pre-funeral facility is situated on the water – a feature that can be interpreted

[4] S. Tanović, *Designing Memory: The Architecture of Commemoration in Europe, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 76.

[5] F. Heilmeyer, *Sieben Krematorien und ein Friedhof. Neue Bestattungslandschaften in Flandern*, "BauNetzWoche" 2021, no. 587, pp. 8–14.

[6] RCR Arquitectes, *Crematorio de Hofheide*, "El Croquis" 2017, no. 190, pp. 30–55.

as an evocation of the culturally rooted image of the "island of the dead."[7] The path from the expansive parking lot, which blends into the landscape, leads down toward the water's edge. The approach is integrated into the natural setting, winding through thickets and reed beds toward an artificial yet nature-harmonious reality created by human hands. The moment of transition – of stepping onto the architectural island – is clearly marked. Crossing this boundary marks the entry into the ceremonial zone, into a world that touches upon the realm of the dead.



Ill. 1. Hofheide Crematorium, Eduardo Souto de Moura, photo: Marcin Brataniec

Through a gradual reduction of exterior views, visitors are guided into a space of tranquility. The ceremonial halls are devoid of specific religious symbols; instead, they create an atmosphere through the use of raw concrete combined with corroded steel, and light that is directed and filtered by the architecture. Various exit routes are provided leading toward the burial site, the columbariums, or family burial plots, but all these paths are designed as scenic routes. Ceremony participants are consciously guided from the moment of arrival, through the rituals, toward the moment of burial and the return to everyday life. Their path remains closely connected to the place, which – through its connection to nature – water, vegetation, and light – becomes a guardian of emotions, allowing for calm, closeness, and a gradual distancing from the difficult experience. There is a clear metaphor for embedding the human life cycle within the cycle of nature that depends on the passage of time and changes in the states of matter. In this unique environment, where architecture intertwines with water and light – both of which are subject to constant change – the funeral ceremony takes on the dimension of a timeless reflection on transition, transformation, and transience. The shaping of architectural form – and above all, its close integration with nature (Tanović 2019) – places architectural form within the realm of universal feelings and symbols, detached from the specific symbols of religion. At

[7] A. Böcklin, *Die Toteninsel*, 1883, Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, "Google Arts & Culture", https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/die-toteninsel/0wFgMTIQ3kZCpg (access: 21.09.2026).

the same time, the space remains clear and suitable for ceremonies in accordance with various worldviews and religious traditions. The manner in which a funeral ceremony is conducted, its direction and dramaturgy, and its manifestation within the architectural space are key elements of a strategy that allows architecture to be shaped as a universal metaphor.

5. UITZICHT CREMATORIUM – A PATH THROUGH THE UNDERWORLD

In his design for the Uitzicht Crematorium in Kortrijk, completed between 2005 and 2011[8], Eduardo Souto de Moura presented a coherent, poetic vision of the rite of passage using exclusively architectural means. The drama associated with the funeral rite unfolds as a passage through a sequence of spaces corresponding to successive stages of participation: arrival, pausing, detachment from everyday life, preparation for the funeral, the ceremony, saying goodbye to the deceased and expressing condolences to the bereaved, and finally, the procession of the body to the burial ground. All these stages are given a clear architectural representation. The consistency with which the drama of the funeral ceremony unfolds is remarkable. Arrival, passage, pausing to say goodbye, and departure form a path from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. The participant does not retrace their steps; they do not repeat the path they took. The entrance to the pre-funeral area and the exit to the funeral area are separate; they are successive stages that must be traversed.



Ill. 2. Uitzicht Crematorium, RCR Arquitectes, photo: Marcin Brataniec

[8] *Eduardo Souto de Moura, Crematorio Uitzicht: Cortrique, Bélgica. Concurso Primer Premio (en colaboración con Sumproject)* [*Uitzicht Crematorium: Kortrijk, Belgium. Competition First Prize (in collaboration with Sumproject)*], "El Croquis" 2015, no. 176, pp. 84–94.

The crematorium and pre-funeral spaces do not form a visible structure. They are hidden below ground level adjacent to the road leading through the open landscape. A passerby, cyclist, or driver sees only a long, concrete wall the height of a railing and a counterpoint in the form of a vertical sculptural element, which is in fact a chimney necessary for technical reasons. Its form, which widens toward the top, lends a metaphorical dimension to its technical function[9] (Charciarek 1999). Behind the elongated concrete wall, a path leads to the main spaces designated for the ceremony. The slow descent detaches the participant from the landscape of everyday life. The view of the street disappears, as do those who are not participating in the funeral. The main view is now defined by the surrounding walls and the courtyard, sunken into the ground, which closes off the perspective. The view of the sky, which frames the courtyard, plays a central role in this scene. Attention is drawn to the opposite wall featuring a sculpture – an art installation in the form of a brick wall that deteriorates over time. The transition from ground level to the sunken courtyard level provides a moment to calm one's emotions and leave behind the external, everyday world of intense stimuli. This quieting is also literal, as the sunken area provides a break from street noise, immersing visitors in the acoustic atmosphere of the sloping walkway and the enclosed courtyard, where the designers have also created auditory experiences by incorporating the movement of water. The sound of water and the natural deterioration of the bricks serve as a metaphor for the passage of time, a kind of memento mori.

The entrance area serves as a space for preparing to participate in the ceremony and for welcoming guests; it is equipped with the necessary cloakroom facilities. It is illuminated from the courtyard through the glass panels of the wide entrance and additionally through a small window that foreshadows the conclusion of the ceremony, offering a view of the distant cemetery grounds. The main space of the funeral home has a low ceiling and is illuminated primarily by overhead natural light – which is not directly visible from where the casket is placed. The size and atmosphere of this space foster the formation of a temporary community and the experience of the rite of passage. An unusual yet symbolic functional solution is that the path continues not back to the entrance hall, but to a small room adjacent to the main ceremony hall, which serves as a place for the final farewell to the deceased, to view the body, and to express condolences to the bereaved. From this room, a path leads directly outside to the cemetery's burial grounds.

The architect deliberately creates paths and access areas, linking them – through the decision to lower or raise them – to the emotional narrative accompanying the ceremony. He or she consciously shapes places for pause and relaxation in areas where emotions need to be calmed. The process of quieting and calming is gradual. The ceremony participant is led to the lowest point, located below ground level, where the main ceremonies take place. This place is also a place of community, of sharing experiences with others. The path to the burial ground leads upward. It corresponds to reconciliation and the search for meaning represented by light.

This path through the ceremony marks the passage of time and the inevitability of events. Its gradual descent – sinking into the ground to correspond with the climax of the funeral

[9] M. Charciarek, *O metaforze w architekturze współczesnej* [*On Metaphor in Contemporary Architecture*], Kraków 1999, pp. 143–148; see: M. Brataniec, *Detal jako metafora. Krematorium Berlin Treptow. Axel Schultes, Charlotte Frank* [*Detail as Metaphor. Berlin Treptow Crematorium. Axel Schultes, Charlotte Frank*], "Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura" 2012, no. 109(5-A/2), pp. 55–57.

– and subsequent ascent back to the surface can be interpreted as a spatial counterpart to the ceremony's dramatic structure and the shifts in its emotional trajectory. Likewise, the sequence and size of the rooms serve as a spatial record of social relationships: arriving alone or in small groups, the community coming together in a time of difficulty, offering sympathy to loved ones, and jointly accompanying the deceased's body on its final journey. In a metaphorical sense, this path corresponds to a descent into the realm of difficult emotions, an attempt to find solace in community, and a search for the way back to the realm of everyday life.[10] Architecture shaped in this way reflects the experience of participating in funeral ceremonies, which, according to van Gennep's terminology, can be called rites of passage.

6. SUMMARY

Pre-funeral facilities are not, in the strictest sense, spaces of death for the person whose body will be buried. They provide a setting for the events and emotions that unfold after death. In essence, they are spaces of life for those who have lost loved ones. Architecture can be a companion to the experience of loss. The sequence of spaces resulting from the consciously designed choreography of movement within the architectural scenography of a pre-funeral facility serves as the stage on which the drama of the rite of passage unfolds. The consciously designed architectural space of pre-funeral facilities contains references that are intelligible within the diverse cultural universe of humanity. The path of experience associated with death, the path of transition, also leads through architecture, which has the power to record and transform the universal experience of loss. The architectural metaphors of pre-funeral facilities can also be universal.

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[10] See: S. Tanović, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–138.

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