Renato Capozzi
The architectural sacralisation of death

Abstract
Starting from a theoretical reflection on the writings of Ragon and Byung-Chun Han on the profound relationship between ritual and architecture and, more generally, on the theme of sacralization, the text selects two iconic works: the Cremation Temple in Parma by Paolo Zermani and the Cemiterio de Fisterra by the Galician architect César Portela as iconic works in which the complexity of the funeral ritual is translated into lasting and stable forms.

Death, rites and architecture
The fear or inexplicability of death is at the origin of thought, the authentic motive behind the birth of philosophy and science. But death is part of life, and for Svevo it is «the only disease that is always mortal» those who live hope to live as long as possible and one of the ways of doing this is to exorcise death by sacralising it.
As Michel Ragon (1981) lucidly pointed out in his fundamental study *L'espace de la mort*, rites and the many practices[1] connected with death are very ancient and consubstantial to man, who according to Thomas «is the only animal that buries its dead» and, even if «not all peoples have had a cult of the dead» according to François Carpenter, «no human group disregards its dead». According to Ragon, «at the origin of funeral rites lies the belief in the survival of the dead and the desire to prevent their return, rather than respect. All this is still within us in spite of ourselves» and elsewhere «primitive man, who often attributes earthquakes, but also lightning, drought, famine and disease to the jolts of the dead, must reconcile these dangerous spirits with persuasion, conciliation, cunning or force. Most funeral rites have this origin and meaning». According to the French historian and art critic, the root of the rites is essentially apotropaic [from gr. ἀποτρόπαιος *that drives away*, der. di ἀποτρέπω *to drive away*] of the death through reconciliation with the deceased, with his spirit, considered dangerous on this primordial archetypal graft. Obviously, the regions, their dogmas of faith (immortality of the soul, life after death, reunion of souls) and their codified rites constituted a mode of necessary reconciliation that compensated both the detachment between relatives and loved ones and the fear of death as *Thauma*.
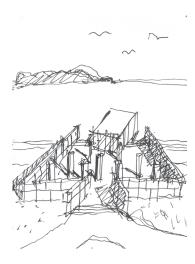
Fig. 1
Renato Capozzi, The architectural sacralisation of death, pen on paper.

In defining man as a «project thrown» into the world, Heidegger attributes to him the status of «being for death» with an unsalvageable and irremediable destiny. We could continue to argue about this often neglected aspect of the funeral rite as a reconciled way in which love and pain for the detachment are mixed with the fear of the return of the deceased and we could also decline and update it, in a broader sense, with the fear of the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic in defence *à-la* Agamben of the «naked life», which led in 2020 in Italy and elsewhere – in the absence of any remedy beyond the so-called aporetic "distraction" – to the death of the deceased. In the absence of any remedy other than the so-called aporetic "social distancing", this will lead in 2020 to the abolition of all funerals and funeral rites, all rites of farewell, and all possible private or collective reconciliation with the deceased affected by disease.

There will be a way to deal with this when the crisis is truly over, but starting now, we must continue to reflect and remedy the collective mourning that still grips us. The theme of the sacralisation of death naturally has a natural counterpart and a tangible manifestation in architecture, one of the tasks of which, by bringing together forms of ritual and forms of architecture, is precisely that of «ferrying, through memory and the sacralisation of the passage, the transient human condition into a permanent and lasting condition [...] and of overcoming the trauma of death, which is both terror and wonder (*Thaûma*), by staging the ritual» (Capozzi e Pirina 2021, p. 2). In presenting his study, Ragon himself lamented the lack of studies on death (investigating it on a historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological and semiological level) from the point of view of «architectural space, town planning, decorative arts» (Ragon 191, p. 29), of the places occupied by the rites and needs of burial, from its centrality in the Middle Ages to its progressive de-sacralisation in the Age of Enlightenment, to a «distancing of the testimony of the end of life celebrated [...] in the cemetery-skyscrapers and anonymous hospitals-obituaries of our civilisation» (Rangon 1981, flap of the cover) forgetting that «the first known architect, Imhotep, the author of the great step pyramid of King Zoser, of the 3rd Egyptian dynasty, the only architect to have been deified, was first and foremost the designer of a tomb» (Ragon 1981, p. 29). Adolf Loos, too, in his famous definition of architecture, says «If in a forest we find a mound, six feet long and three feet wide, arranged with a shovel in the shape of a pyramid, we get serious and something inside us says: someone is buried here. This is architecture» (Loos 1972) and in his famous essay *Architektur he explains that* «only a small part of architecture belongs to art, the tomb and the monument».

Another significant contribution to defining the contours of the theme of sacralisation is that offered – on rites and their progressive disappearance as a reflection of the contemporary condition – by the South Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chun (2021) Han in his very recent essay *La scomparsa dei riti. Una topologia del presente.* Han observes that «rites are symbolic actions, they pass on and represent those values and orders that sustain a community. They create a community without communication, while today communication without community dominates. [...] Today the world is very poor in symbols [...] In the symbolic void those images and metaphors are lost which are capable of giving a foundation to meaning and community, stabilising [through sameness (*Selbigkeit*) and repetition (*Wiederbolung*)] the life. [...] Repetition is the essential feature of rituals» (Han 2021, p. 11). In other words, the (funeral) ritual, which is nothing more than the codification of repeated symbolic acts, opposes the

"social distancing" that destroys the very idea of community. If, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1999, p. 24) says, «rites are in time what the house is in space» and if there is – according to Mary Douglas (1979, p. 13) – «a broad and explicit refusal of rituals as such [and consequently] we are witnessing a revolt against form» then we can understand how architecture in its enduring "resistant" object condition (*the resistance of things* as Hannah Arendt would say) referring to living (which requires duration) can and must allow and stage the ritual. For Han (2021, p. 23), «in the funeral rite, mourning is an objective, collective feeling, it is impersonal [...] In the funeral rite, it is the community that is the true subject of mourning: faced with the experience of loss. It imposes it on itself, and these collective feelings consolidate it [...] Collective feelings are formed more and more rarely». As Roland Barthes observes (2005, p. 210) «Ceremony [protects as a house makes feeling habitable. An example is mourning» and so it «[…] spreads like a protective varnish over the skin and insulates it from the terrible burns of mourning at the death of a loved one. Where rituals, expedients of protection, are lacking, life is completely defenceless» (Han 2021, p.21). In other words, ritual becomes a sort of "antidote to chaos" (Peterson 2018) and if rites objectify the world, then architecture, as a cosmic art that opposes *Cháos to propose a Kósmos,* cannot but prepare itself to be the theatre, and the fixed scene of the hierophany of the rite of life and death. The "rite", as we have seen, designates a «ceremony articulated according to a fixed succession of events» and in general «the set of rules that regulate the ceremonies of a cult»[2]. The rite is the actual way, today we would say "eventual", to manifest the sacred to a community starting from a normative-dogmatic structure that defines a particular "cult". Making manifest the ultra-worldly condition, unknowable and "infinite in the fake", inherent in the ritual in deference to a particular cult becomes the arduous task that any religious building must try to fulfil. The manifestation of the sacred, in this sense, can be associated with the term "hierophany" which is specifically «the sense of the presence or manifestation of something "sacred", that is, something connected to, inherent in, the divine, not necessarily of a god, which man feels or can feel» to which corresponds the adjective "numinous" coined in 1917 by the theologian Rudolf Otto (1917) to indicate «the peculiar, extra-rational experience of an invisible, majestic, powerful presence, which inspires terror and [at the same time] attracts». An apparition/manifestation of the sacred that can be hypostatized in objects, stones, plants, symbols that refer to the beyond, *à-la* Otto, to the "wholly other" (*ganz Andere*) in wanting to charge further unreal meanings through real objects and forms. Similarly to the objects, the problem concerns the forms that build the sacred space (Eliade, 1982) where the cultic ritual takes place, spaces capable of making the sacred manifest through a structure that is not only symbolic and adherent to the ritual but also properly formal, provided that these forms are able to reveal and amplify the sense of the world that this space recreates ontologically. In these two reflections, the close relationship of meaning between the sacralisation of life and therefore of death and architecture as reification and condition of possibility of this manifestation *sub specie æternitatis.* emerges significantly. If rites were, *tout à coup*, to disappear, what could architecture ever represent?

Fig. 2
Paolo Zermani, Cremation Temple, Parma, 2010.
Perspective view. Photo by Mauro Davoli.

Fig. 3
Cremation Temple, Parma, 2010.
Internal view. Photo by Mauro Davoli.

Two examples of the reification of the rite of passage and the rite of memory
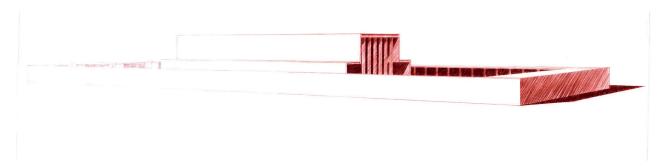The architecture that coincides with the tomb, in the most essential sense of the mound, manifests in its codified forms, in the spaces that these forms define, the sense and value of the passing and the memory of the deceased, or by building a home "for those who no longer need it" or by magnifying death in the monument as a vehicle and ilemorial representation of timeless values. There have been many constant ways of transforming and transfiguring death and the rites associated with it *sub specie architecturæ*: from Egyptian tombs to mausoleums, sacrificial areas, temples, churches, cemeteries and, in recent times, places for saying goodbye, often linked to cremation practices.
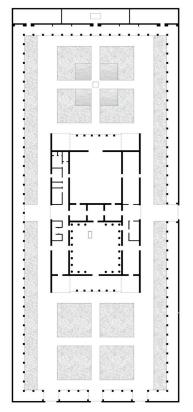
Among the numerous examples that could be given and questioned in order to emblematize two exemplary cases of the reification of the rite of passage and the rite of memory, two works by two contemporary architects will be briefly analyzed below, which individually, in the extreme iconicity that distinguishes them, entertain in their thematic and formal differences not a few subtle links of meaning: the Tempio di cremazione in Parma by Paolo Zermani and the Cemiterio de Fisterra by the Galician architect César Portela[3]. The Tempio di cremazione in Parma, located between the Via Emilia and the city and the countryside ordered by the persistent traces of centuriation, is isolated by an enclosure, which constitutes its *crepidoma*, from the surrounding context, redefining the landscape through its iconic presence. As we read in the project report:

As a cut fragment, it hosts and suspends in time the rite of passage, making it a single great urban symbol, almost an altar, in which the city celebrates, incessantly, the memory of itself through the memory of its dead. [...] an enclosure made of architectural space, because it is conceived as a portico wall and inhabited by the cellars that house the dust, contains, in an uninterrupted path, the relationship between life and death, fixing its reading in the sense of an ideal continuity of life. [the Tempio] also marks the tome of the rite, spatially, between the exterior and interior, dividing, in a processional path, the area for welcoming the deceased and his or her family, located near the entrance, from the area of the Garden for sprinkling the ashes, located after the farewell and cremation areas, and is characterized by two similar facades to the north and south, almost two sections that

allow for as many open and covered spaces. (Zermani 2006)

A temple of exact proportions is placed inside the temenos, almost as if to emphasize the detachment, the cut that the *sacer* space must be able to make with respect to the prosaic condition in order for the rite to take place. An oriented, delimited and protected space for the farewell with only one entrance and only one exit because:

In the excess of openness and the breaking down of boundaries that dominates the present, we lose the ability to close [and the place is a form of closure]. In this way life becomes merely additive. Death presupposes that life itself has a conclusion, so if you deprive life of any possibility of conclusion, it will end at the least opportune moment. [...] In spaces endowed with infinite possibilities of access, conclusion becomes impossible.

The Tempio consists of two squares connected by a square representing the threshold. The first square houses the Sala del Commiato, an undivided hall preceded by a portico and defined by an internal peribolos of columns leaning against the walls and supporting a coffered roof from which the light illuminating the celebrant's ambo can enter. The smaller intermediate square, which connects the room to the crematorium proper through a high opening, is a «zenithally lit chamber of light, completely empty. The body thus disappears into the light», a sacellum that sacralises the passage and detachment with the forms of architecture. As Han points out:

rites shape the fundamental passages of life [and] rites of passage, *rites de passage*, structure life like the seasons. Whoever crosses a threshold concludes one phase of life and enters a new one. Thresholds as passages rhythm, articulate and narrate precisely space and time, they make possible a profound experience of order. It is the thresholds, temporally intense passages, that are now being torn down in favor of accelerated communication and production without fractures. In this way we impoverish ourselves of space and time: in the attempt to *produce* more space and time, we end up losing them. [...] Thresholds speak. Thresholds t*ransform*. Beyond the threshold lies the *Other*, the *Outsider*. Without the fantasy of the threshold, without the magic of the threshold, there is only the *hell of the Equal* (Han 2021, pp. 50-51).

Fig. 4
Paolo Zermani, Cremation Temple, Parma, 2010.
Project perspective drawing..

Fig. 5
Paolo Zermani, Cremation Temple, Parma, 2010.
Plan of the second floor. Critical redrawing by Oreste Lubrano.

This is a work by Paolo Zermani, who has repeatedly grappled with the theme of the sacred and forms capable of manifesting the ritual – think of the refined and diaphanous chapel in the woods, or the cemetery of San Sepolcro, the monument to the first Christian martyrs, the church of San Giovanni in Ponte d'Oddi or the new entrance to the Medici chapels in San Lorenzo in Florence –, which masterfully renders in form the difficulty of transforming ritual into form, the impalpable matter of the sacred into "architetturato" space, detachment and death manifested through a calibrated sequence of acts and thresholds rhythmed by light to bear witness to the presence of the divine.
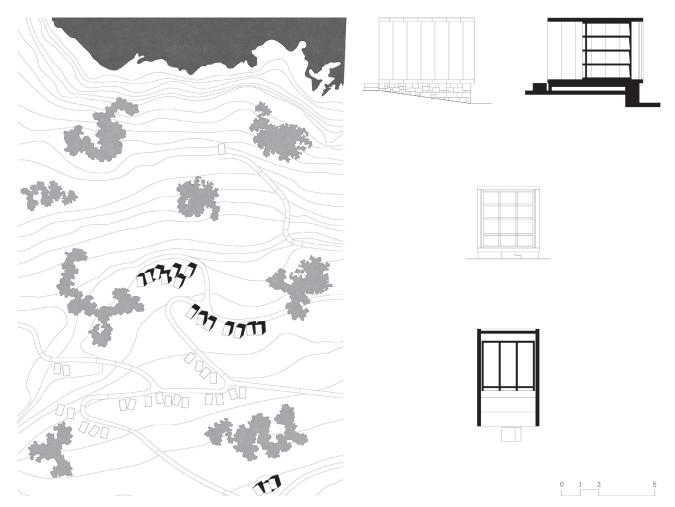
Figg. 6 a-b
César Portela, Cemiterio de Fisterra, Coruña, Spain, 1998-2000.
Drawings by Claudia Sansò.

The Cemiterio de Fisterra[4], called to guard the cape of the same name towards the ocean, revolutionizes the consolidated idea of the cemetery as a hoped-for, marginal, confined place defined by chapels or burial grounds inside an exclusionary enclosure in an articulated, discontinuous place obtained by the syncopated repetition of rooms, or rather of stereometric *cajas*, with different positions to follow the shape of the ground, open on one of the six sides towards the horizon. Rooms, open sacellums «that lie on the ground trying to conquer the view of the ¬ocean, where there are no limits between the places for the living and those for the dead, but the only threshold is a sacred border that marks the end of the earth, announcing infinity» (Sansò 2021, p. 43). For Portela «The image of the cemetery is that of a path that crosses a cluster of houses, a snake that slithers down the mountainside to the sea, adapting to the sudden changes in the terrain [...]. It is a work to lose the fear of death» (Portela 2010) so that:

the cemetery has a tragic character, of course, but in Galicia there is a great habit of visiting the cemetery not only at a certain time of year, but every week or every day. The relatives of those who are buried meet there [...] They establish ¬relationships. I wanted to encourage this, I didn't want it to be just a place where you pay homage to the dead, but where the living behave like the living: they talk, they walk, they sit [...]. (Trujillo e Ferreirós 2017).
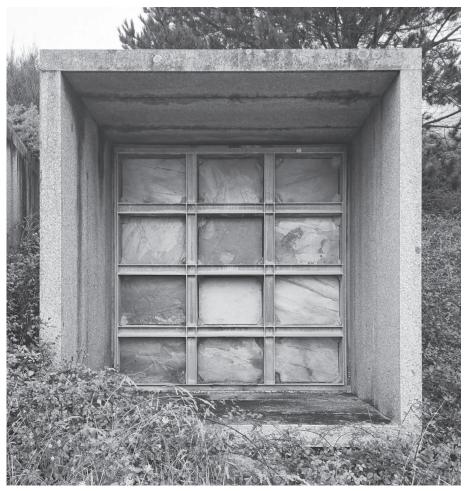
As Claudia Sansò has appropriately pointed out, it is «an "apotropaic" architecture, confident in its reconciliation ¬with the natural vastness that is the source and intimate ¬hotel of everyone's life» (Sansò 2021, p. 45). Here too, as in Parma, there are places for the recomposition of remains and for meditation and prayer.

Figg. 7 a-b-c-d
César Portela, Cemiterio de Fisterra, Coruña, Spain, 1998-2000. Photo by Giovanni. Menna.

A small chapel rotated with respect to the two joined with a single slit in a Cor-ten slab, like a Fontana composition, from which to observe the sea, three Fates inhabiting the space lit from above by a skylight and then the 14 *cajas* sino up to a longed-for *mirador* – unfortunately not realised – which should have concluded the ritual path. A happy place, teeming with life, in which to celebrate the memory of the deceased in the presence of nature, for as Carlos Martí Arís (2010) «[…] The funerary caskets, like granaries of memory, transmit not so much a feeling of sadness and gloom but a strange sensation of serenity and reconciliation with life, with that precarious and fragile transitory victory over death which we call life». A place where the repose of the dead, accompanied only by the lapping of the waves and the rustling of the trees, allows those who honor them to enjoy, in the words of Nietzsche (1882), the «sublimity of meditation and seclusion». A place where the threshold moves to the extreme border of the sea and the abyss which, as Galimberti (2006), tells us «[…] underlies all things, and wants us to love the world in this way. The lines of the sea are in fact the "depth" of the abyss and the "borderless" of the horizon, two dimensions that disturb man».

César Portela's architecture is adamantine, as is Zermani's Tempio, in which he succeeds to the highest degree in sacralising death and, at the same time, life, projecting its meaning towards that horizon which separates and unites heaven from earth, the divine from the mortal, where «in the silence of the great space [of Nature] there arises not the yearning to lose oneself, but the hope of finding oneself again» (Schwarz 1927, p. 289).

Notes

[1] As Rangon reports, «According to W. Croocke funerary rites can be classified into 13 categories: 1. cannibalism; 2. dolmens and other stone monuments; 3. abandonment to ferocious animals and other predatory birds; 4. burial under piles of stones; 5. in a cave; 6. in a house; 7. immersion in water; 8. deposition in a tree; on a platform; 10. in an urn; 11. contracted position; 12. in a niche. in a cave; 6. in a house; 7. immersion in water; 8. deposition within a tree; on a platform; 10. in an urn; 11. contracted position; 12. in a niche; 13. secret burial with concealment of all outward signs» (Author's translation). W. Crooke, *Death and Disposal of Dead*, Encyclopedia of Hasting, s.d., cited in M. Rangon, p. 11.

[2] Cfr. entry "culto", in A. Nocentini, A. Parenti, *L'Etimologico. Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, Le Monnier, Florence 2010. Author's translation.

[3] On César Portela see the very recent monograph: Sansò C. (2021) – *César Portela. Estremo atlantico*, intr. by Barrionuevo Ferrer A.. Clean, Naples.

[4] The cemetery, designed in 1998 and built in 2000, has received numerous awards over the years and has been the subject of various publications. Unfortunately, twenty-one years after its construction, partly as a result of poor reception by the inhabitants and various controversies, it is still unused. In 2011, director Alejandro Gaspar dedicated the film *El cementerio marino to,* borrowing the title of a well-known collection of poems by Paul Valéry (Valéry P. (1947) – *Il cimitero marino*, Sansoni, Florence).

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