

## ARCHITECTURE, DEATH, CARE AND FUNCTIONALITY: THE FUNERAL SERVICE BUILDING

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**Abstract.** Death and euphemism have always been intimately linked. The closeness of Western culture to the faith promulgated by the Catholic Church through the death of Christ for more than two millennia has favored the link with death. But is this commemorative architecture the only expression of the funeral art? Or is there a “functional building” adapted to the needs of the times? The funeral service building has opted for models that seek to combine the sacredness

of the moment of one and the laity of others with functionality, seeking to welcome the mourners in a maximum exercise of adaptation to the needs that the moment has inserted. At present, centers such as the Funeral of Monuta in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, the Crematory Meiso do not die from the Kakamigahara cemetery in Japan or the Mortuary of León in Spain are clear examples of this new “architectural conception of memory”.

Some people consider death as the “end of human life” or the “absence of life.” Others as a “step to another place”. Death, commonly known, refers to the death of a living being; As a concept understood by Sartre, it would be explained as a simple fact like birth. When death is considered as something that happens to human existence, it is possible to appreciate several conceptions about it. So, we

can find: 1) Death as the beginning of a new existence. This is a religious conception that presupposes that the soul is immortal. In the act of death, it is separated from the body to carry out another type of existence; 2) Some Eastern religions consider death as the return to the world from which we have come; hence the well-known quote “earth you are and on earth you will become”, and also the idea of “eternal return”; 3) Death understood as a limitation of existence. For the existentialist Karl Jaspers, death is the limit situation, unavoidable to every single man. In this sense, it is decisive, essential and linked to human nature as such an unequivocal sign of ending; 4) Death is the fundamental problem of the human race. The mere fact of becoming aware of death is enough to engender anguish and characterize human existence. Existence, as a concept, includes life plus the awareness of death.

We all consciously know that death has always been an important state in the history of humanity. Egyptians, Mochicas, Incas or even the first inhabitants of the Canary Islands have been, since ancient times, worried about death in many different ways. The “memory” has been a constant in death that has materialized in buildings or monuments of considerable relevance at times. The last one that I have mentioned, the funerary monument, constitutes a funeral commemoration dedicated to the one who has left, passed away. Both, its dimensions and the space created in its interior are what make it be considered funeral architecture. Sometimes it can be a grave or burial in which the corpse is present inside (complete remains, mummified or not, or the ashes product of cremation). When the monument contains several tombs, it receives the name of pantheon, and it is different from the collective tombs or collective burial that are not monuments. For instance, the megaliths (typologies of menhirs, dolmens, corridor tomb, cromlechs, talayots, navetas, Stonehenge sites, Karnac alignment, The Thousands, The Argar, The Tomb of the Giants, etc). However, it may not contain a corpse while simulating a tomb, what is called a cenotaph. Also, we can find a memory without reference to the grave, which we call memorial or commemorative monument. Moreover, and to conclude defining these concepts, we must highlight the monuments that contain only a minimum of remains of one or several corpse. They are the reliquaries, that in numerous occasions are furniture art of very varied sizes, present in numerous churches.

During the Middle Ages, death occupied a privileged place in the mental structure of man, because it generated feelings of concern, awareness and fear towards what was unknown. In this way, a whole system of ritual beliefs and behaviors

were developed to face it, giving answers and counteracting the loss of the loved one. During the Renaissance, there were important changes, because the man abandoned the concern about the existence of ultraterrestrial worlds related to a metaphysical nature to fix his attention on nature as a source of knowledge and artistic creation. In the European Renaissance, painters, poets and musicians celebrated death as the *ars moriendi* (the art of dying). Death, like the Renaissance, was seen as part of the cycle of life, even a cause to celebrate the salvation of the soul. The eighteenth century is the historical moment when religious buildings such as churches, convents or monasteries, cease to be burial places because of space needs and hygiene issues. They started enabling enclosures and cemeteries for these tasks in the outskirts of cities that reached a splendid artistic sense, even urbanistic or as a landscape during the nineteenth century. After, they started losing their earlier explicit religious characterization (crosses, angels, crowns...) to now become places where people of all beliefs (or absence of it) give their last goodbye to their deceased.

But, what has happened to the discourse of death today? All the contemporaries of the prelude of the twentieth century are a reflection of the crisis of values that fragments European societies. The gap between the technological mutations, the material conquests and the strength of the traditions is more or less pronounced, according to the countries. The concept of dying, from a philosophical perspective, can be accepted as the description of the being of every person, it has a strictly limited sense in its specific use in the hospital environment. It is common for death to happen within a social order; thoughts, interests, activities, projects, plans and hopes of others that are more or less linked to the person who dies and the fact of his death. The nature of this link is given, in part, by the place that the person occupies within the social structure, providing several degrees of importance to the anticipation of death and the establishment of actions that seek to anticipate the fact of death. The way in which the temporary specifications of predictions of death commit those who make them, in a variety of professional, organizational and interaction problems. "Dying" becomes a remarkable and important process insofar as it provides others, as well as the patient, with a meaning to orientate towards the future, to organize activities, according to the expectation of death, to "prepare for it".

Currently, the funeral homes, crematories and cemeteries have a common asepsis both in their volumes and in their spaces and dependencies, lacking the external symbols that until nowadays had always been present. They, the symbols,

have abandoned their religious exclusivity to protect all those beliefs that are present in multiple cultures and creeds. Thus, each individual lives his spiritual experiences in a unique, exclusive and private way, a situation that continues at the moment of death. Examples are the Tanatorio de Bonaduz, designed by Rudolf Fontana and Christian Kerez in 1993 or those of de Monuta in Apeldoorn, in the Netherlands of Atelier Zeinstra Van der Pol and León, completed in 2001 following the direction of Jordi Badia and Josep Val. Despite being embedded in disparate societies, both have in common an independent creativity trying to belong to urban planning as part of everyday equipment with a simple objective: to remember the ending of the human being. Thus, the Bonaduz building is located on a small hill referring to the city making its architecture "invisible or visible": the first one seeks privacy and refuge in the kingdom of the god Hades, while the second uses glass to illuminate naturally its interior and exterior during the night. And it is here, inside, that minimalism is prioritized, together with the diaphanous spaces built with pure white materials in which light plays a fundamental role. The effect caused in the visitor is a respectful aseptic withdrawal.

Monuta is committed to the private part of its modern rooms that seek the privacy of the domestic space. Comfortable and informal, lack in religious symbol that associates him with some creed, adjusting to the needs of the Dutch population. Like Bonaduz, the building is conceived as part of the heart of the urban fabric. It is designed in a single elongated volume of low height, covered by wood and glass that connect with open spaces, patios, which try to connect with the infinite like the Tanatorio de León. Like its counterparts, it is part of the city, co-existing with a new residential area. Pure forms camouflage the architectural block by means of a compact slab and a sheet of water that, in an environment surrounded by arboreal vegetation, reflects the sky and creates a natural park that also works as a protective roof; thus, the facade becomes the only part of the architectural structure that becomes visible. A ramp allows the "symbolic access" that starts from the hustle and bustle of the city to introduce the individual into the interior tranquility of the building that invites meditation and the memory of the one who departs.

The stay in the funeral home gives way to burial or cremation. The last one is increasingly growing as one of the most requested elections in European countries. The recent chrematistic architecture takes as reference the Eastern tradition. Two are the most outstanding examples: the Crematorio Meiso did not die from the Kakamigahara cemetery in Japan, designed between 2005 and 2006 by Toyo Ito,



**Fig. 1.** View of a side of the Tanatorio of León.

and the Kaze no Oka Crematorium from Nakatsu, made by Fumihiko Maki between 1995 and 1997. The first one is committed to integrate nature in construction, harmonizing them and erasing the limits between them. An elegant concrete roof becomes the upper enclosure that in the facade is made of glass, opening up to the surrounding landscape and to a nearby artificial lake that provides serenity and tranquility. The second, the building designed by Maki, is made according to oriental tradition for its marked return to nature. It's made by a minimalist space that puts emphasis on everything that surrounds him. Of sober and austere lines,





Fig. 2. View of a side of the Tanatorio of León.

it uses a compact volume with sculpture on an architectural scale, it is divided into two clearly defined parts: the funerary brick chapel and the concrete waiting room. Peace and respect are the most common characteristics in the whole design of the building, whose stones harmonize as well as the musical notes in a pentagram. Because, as Ludwig van Beethoven would say, “architecture is a music of stones and music, an architecture of sounds”.

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