WAS THE CEMETERY ONCE PUBLIC SPACE?

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Death is not an event in life:
we do not live to experience death.
If we take eternity to mean
not infinite temporal duration
but timelessness,
then eternal life belongs to
those who live in the present.

Ludwig Wittgenstein,
"Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus"

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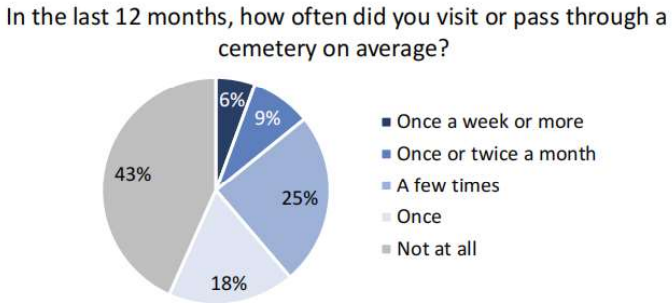
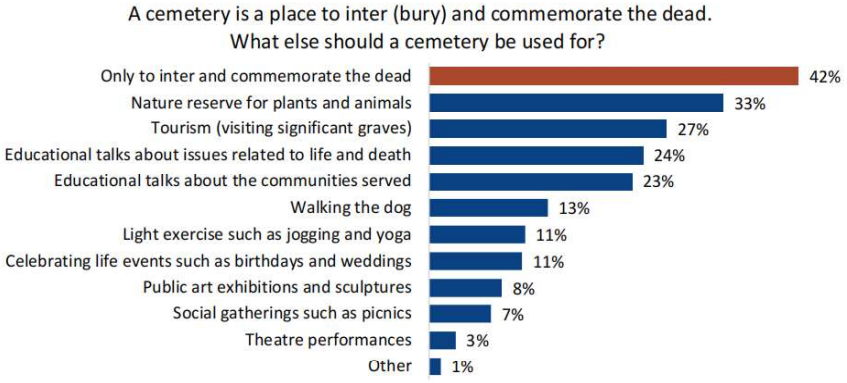
Chapter 1

Introduction

Everyday experience in the city is increasingly marked by indifference; by temporary consumption and a lack of the spontaneous and meaningful social interaction in which the public space becomes a social form allowing broad and unrestricted access to the most different voices and forms of appropriation (Sennet 1992; Delgado 1999; 2008; Deutsche 2007). The Charter of Public Space (2013) defined public spaces as all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive. Each public space has its own spatial, historic, environmental, social and economic features. Public spaces consist of open environments and in sheltered spaces created without a profit motive and for everyone's enjoyment. Both when they possess a clear identity, can be defined as "places". The objective is that all public spaces should become "places".

However, when considering the various places we classify as public spaces, cemeteries rarely come to mind. Is the cemetery a public space? According to the Charter's definition, publicly owned cemeteries should indeed be considered public spaces. Yet, in reality, cemeteries have long been absent from everyday community life. A survey of 1,053 respondents conducted in 2021 by the DeathTech Research Team of the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford (Allison et al. 2021) showed that as many as 85% of citizens rarely visit or even pass by cemeteries. Nearly half of the people believe that cemeteries are only for burying and commemorating the dead, and only less than 13% believe that cemeteries can be involved in our daily lives.





This reflects a broader trend: people no longer frequent cemeteries, just as discussions about death have faded from everyday conversation. Yet the need to mourn is still present in contemporary society, evident in the roadside memorials marking tragic accidents, online expressions of grief after disasters, and public rallies or marches in cities to commemorate death. These acts of mourning, which could have once taken place within cemeteries, now often occur outside them. This shift prompts a critical question: how did cemeteries become invisible in urban public life?

This study will explore the publicity and accessibility of the concept of cemeteries from a historical perspective, examining how their role has evolved from ancient Roman times to the present day. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines archaeology and architecture, the study will focus on four key aspects of cemeteries as public spaces:

1.1 Place: The location of cemeteries in different historical periods and their relationship with urban boundaries.

1.2 Private Activities: The various private activities that have spontaneously taken place in cemeteries.

1.3 Public Activities: Public events and activities historically held within cemeteries.

1.4 Memorials: Monuments and commemorative practices associated with cemeteries.

Through this lens, the paper aims to understand the shifting place of cemeteries in urban life and how they might regain their visibility and relevance as public spaces today.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This study examines cemeteries not only as architectural entities but also as evolving public spaces throughout Western history. The study explores how cemeteries have transitioned from purely functional burial grounds to sites of social, cultural, and urban significance. By analyzing their transformation within the context of public space, the paper highlights the cemetery's dual role as both a sacred and communal space.

2.1 Literature Study

The primary research method employed in this study is extensive literature study, covering a wide range of topics. These include the concept of public space in general, archaeological studies of ancient Roman cemeteries, typological research on various cemetery forms, and urban planning literature relevant to the spatial integration of cemeteries. Specific research focuses on the publicity and openness of cemeteries across different historical periods, offering insights into their role in community life.

Fortunately, historical texts and ancient manuscripts from various periods provide some insights. These documents often describe cemetery-related activities or public events that occurred in or around these spaces. By analyzing these records, the research is able to bypass some of the gaps in quantitative data. References cited in related documents also help to streamline the research process, reducing the need for exhaustive primary source reading.

2.2 Archaeological Insights and Phenomenology

Archaeological discoveries, when analyzed through the lens of phenomenological methods, provide crucial insights into the use of cemeteries as public spaces. This approach allows the study to explore how people in different historical periods may have interacted with these landscapes. As Tilley (2004) explains, phenomenology involves examining how a conscious individual experiences a landscape, offering fresh interpretations of cemeteries' roles and significance in the past. This method is closely aligned with landscape archaeology, which posits that the social practices of historical communities not only influenced but were also shaped by the physical landscapes they inhabited (Layton and Ucko, 2003: 11).

By considering both archaeological evidence and phenomenological interpretations, this study explores the multifaceted roles cemeteries played in the lives of past societies. Cemeteries were not only spaces for mourning the dead but also places for community gatherings, rituals, and social interaction, reflecting their broader role in shaping public life.

In studying cemeteries as public spaces, this research highlights the complex interplay between burial practices, urban development, and social interaction. Although data limitations present challenges, the combination of literature review, archaeological evidence, and phenomenological analysis offers a rich understanding of how cemeteries have functioned as public spaces throughout Western history. By focusing on the evolving roles of cemeteries, this study sheds light on their continued importance in the social and cultural fabric of urban life.

Chapter 3

Place

Cemeteries from different periods are located in different locations due to laws, beliefs and other historical backgrounds. The relationship between cemeteries and cities in Western history follows a distinct trajectory: before the Middle Ages, cemeteries transitioned from being outside the city to within its boundaries, while after the Middle Ages, they gradually moved from within the city to the suburbs.

3.1 Beyond the City Wall: The Migration of Cemeteries and Shifting Beliefs

In the Twelve Tables, enacted by the Roman Senate in 451 BC, the first provision under the sacred laws of Table X explicitly states: “A dead person shall not be buried or burned in the city”. This established the basic pattern of cemeteries in ancient Rome: cemeteries were distributed outside the city walls. This is because the Romans believed that death would bring pollution, so they advocated washing and cleansing the dead body and keeping it away from the living.

The Romans believed that the souls of the buried dead were immortal. So in these suburban cemeteries, there are many funerary monuments and graves designed to communicate directly with the living, thus perpetuating the memory of the deceased. This is why cemeteries in ancient Rome were called necropoleis, meaning city of the dead(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). Naturally, these displays need to be in visible and frequently visited locations to be most effective. Necropoleis were therefore mostly located along busy roads through the suburbs, both to allow family members continued easy access to the tomb or tomb and to increase visibility and opportunities for interaction with strangers. The great cemetery of Isola Sacra and the tombs that line both sides of the Via Appia Antica offer notable examples of roadside cemeteries(Toynbee, Death and Burial, pp. 73–74, 93–95).

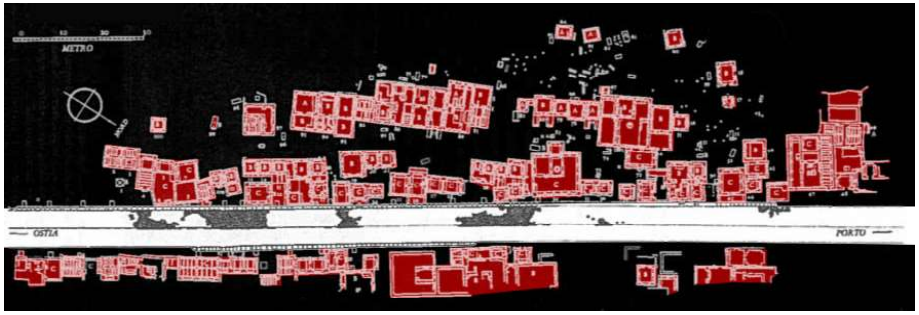


Figure 1

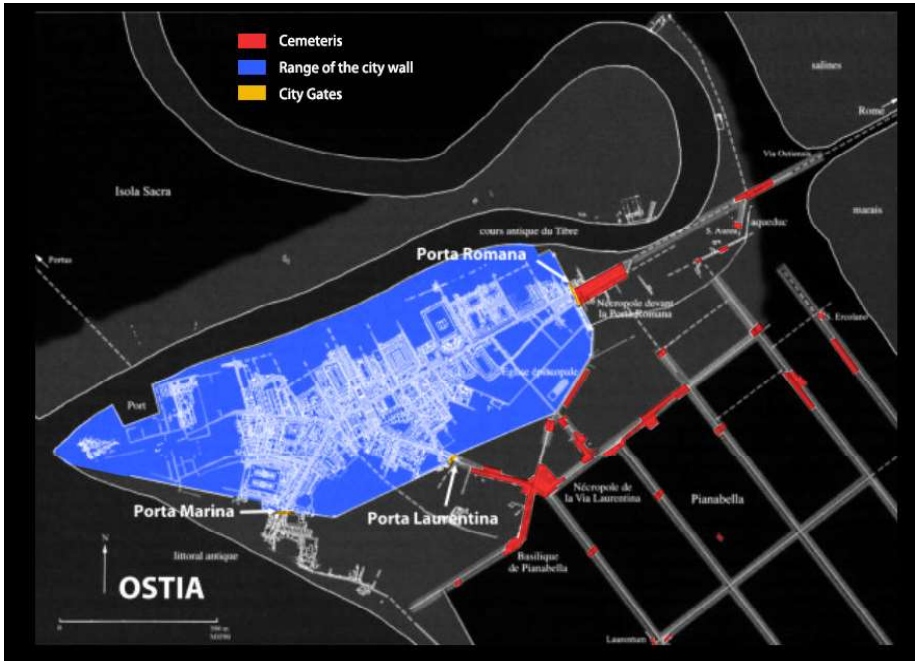


Figure 2

The cemetery of Isola Sacra, built predominantly between A.D. 100–250, is located between the two major imperial ports of Ostia and Portus, approximately 23 kilometres southwest of Rome. Excavations by Guido Calza in the early twentieth century uncovered a stretch of approximately 330 metres of the busy coastal road which linked the two ports and was flanked on both sides by tombs(Figure 1). We can see that these tombs are freely distributed on both sides of the road like houses in the cities of the living. All the cemeteries were built outside the city walls, as can be seen in the Plan of Ostia (Figure 2). In order to allow as many people as possible to see and pass by these cemeteries, they were built on sides of the main roads outside the city, and some were even placed directly near the city gates, where people had to pass through.

These open-air roadside public cemeteries were open to everyone. The law ensured the burial rights(iussepulchri) of Roman residents: any Roman who requested it had the right to be buried, even a prisoner. So even before the third century AD, when Christianity was illegal and Christians were generally persecuted, Christians had the right to be buried in these public cemeteries. The Gospel of Matthew records that shortly after Death of Jesus, John of Arimathea came to ask for his body, and “Pilate ordered it to be given to him” (Gospel of Matthew 27:58). The bodies of Jesus' disciples Peter and Paul were also buried after their martyrdom. However, because cremations were often held in public roadside cemeteries, Christians who believed that burial could preserve the body until resurrection were not willing to be buried there. From the second century, the church began to build cemeteries exclusively for Christians.

Even with dedicated cemeteries, Christians still needed to find ways to bury the increasing number of bodies due to limited funds for land purchase and the expanding population. Catacombe (catacumba) emerged in this context. The church raised funds to buy a piece of land and hired people to dig, when there was enough underground space in the cave, the gravediggers began to carve niches in the walls to bury the dead. Catacombs make good use of space, with many niches being carved out on one wall to store bodies. In addition, these underground spaces were also used as places for Christians to hide and conduct covert activities during the period of Christian persecution.

The Catacombs of St. Callixtus originated in the second century are the typical example of the catacomb, as a part of a cemeterial complex which occupies an area of 90 acres, with a network of galleries about 12 miles long, in four levels, more than twenty meters deep. In it were buried tens of martyrs, 16 popes and very many Christians. From the 2nd to the 3rd century, the Catacombs of St. Callixtus buried a large number of martyred popes, bishops, deacons and disciples (nearly half a million), becoming a holy resting place in the hearts of Christians for people coming to hold funerals, pray or express their grief. Especially during the persecution of the church, the Catacombs of St. Callixtus were crowded with Christians who gathered in them and celebrated the sacraments around the bones of the martyrs. At the beginning of the third century, the deacon Callixtus was appointed by pope Zephyrinus as the administrator of the cemetery and so the catacombs of St. Callixtus became the official cemetery of the Church of Rome.

After Constantine's edict of toleration in 312 secured Christianity's legal status, churches began to be built over the catacombs of some respected martyrs. Ambrose Bishop of Milan was buried under the altar of the basilica later named S. Ambrogio (Dassmann 2004). Although Ambrose himself considered burial in a church to be a privilege of the priests and to symbolize and emphasize the connection between Christ and the priest who performed the sacrifice, the custom was later extended and gradually gained universal acceptance. By the time of Pope Gregorius, the pope himself also considered church burial to be valuable because the relatives of the deceased and the people could remember and pray for the deceased when they glimpsed the church.

In the Middle Ages, as the influence of Christianity grew, being set up in church yards gradually became the main form of cemeteries. These cemeteries are called graveyards or churchyards. Literally, churchyards followed churches to the politically and culturally significant city centers. Let us take Paris, a city that holds a very important position in European history, as an example. Holy Innocents' Cemetery has always been the main public cemeteriy of Paris before the emergence of the famous Pere Lachaise. The Holy Innocents Cemetery once stood in the grounds of the Church of the Holy Innocents, although the church was destroyed in 1787 and the cemetery was replaced by a herb and vegetable market, we can still find evidence of its former location in the city center through its remains, The Fountain of Innocents, located in what is today Place Joachim-du-Bellay, a famous public square near the center of Paris.

Where the cemetery once was. Author: Indefini – CC BY-SA 3.0

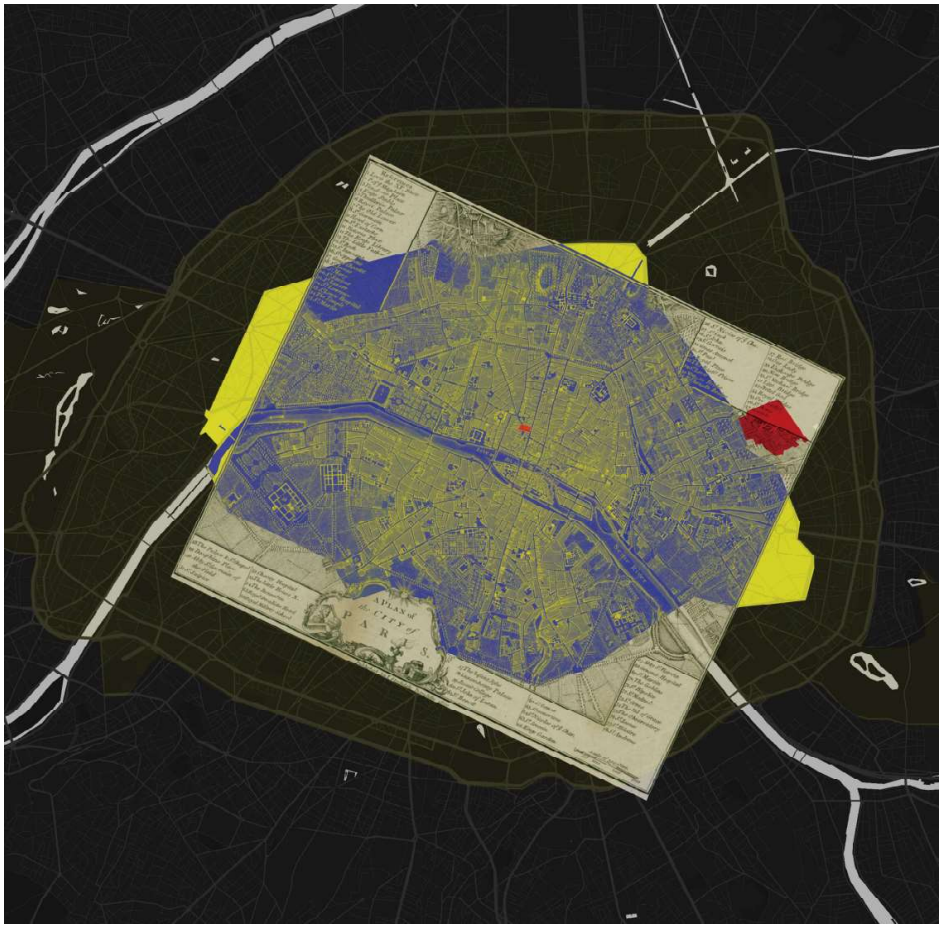
3.2 The Fall of Downtown Cemeteries: From Holy Innocents to Père Lachaise

Holy Innocents' Cemetery, called Cimetière des Innocents, was located next to the central market as the official burial place at the time. Due to the limited space in the church yard in the city center and the large number of dead, it was transformed from a cemetery with individual sepulchers into mass graves, meaning that around 1500 bodies were buried in the same pit. Though arched structures called charniers or charnel houses along the cemetery walls were constructed by citizens to relieve the overcrowding of the mass graves in the 14th and 15th centuries, this did not fundamentally alleviate the crowded situation of burial sites and the various problems that came with it. Every deadly plague that swept across Europe, including the Black Death, brought countless new corpses into churchyards like Holy Innocents' Cemetery. Not only did the rapid increase in the number of corpses in a short period of time put great pressure on the limited burial space, but the stench from the decaying corpses buried in the city center also had a negative impact on citizens' lives. Many perfume shops in the central market near the church were forced to move out. During the reign of Louis XV, inspectors recorded accounts of the difficulties in conducting business in the area due to the unsanitary conditions of the cemetery, caused by overuse and incomplete decomposition of bodies. The diseased bodies buried in the city center also polluted the city's groundwater system.

During the reign of Louis XVI, a decree was issued to move the cemetery out of the city, but it was not implemented due to resistance from the church. Until heavy rains and the corpses which number overtook the limit of the cemetery's capacity destroying the underground walls of the cemetery in 1780, the churchyard in the city center which buried more than two million corpses was finally closed. The same year, a law prohibited burials in Holy Innocents' Cemetery as all cemeteries in the Paris area.

In 1804, Père Lachaise Cemetery, the largest cemetery in Paris, the most visited public cemetery, and the first public cemetery in our modern sense was established. If overlapping the map of Paris city in 1800 on today's Paris, we can see that Père Lachaise Cemetery was built outside the city boundaries of Paris at that time and was much larger than Holy Innocents' Cemetery in the city before, which were prominent features of the new generation cemeteries what we called Rural Garden Cemeteries. Later, in the process of urban modernization, the scale of cities had further increased and the boundaries of cities had further expanded, so that “Rural cemeteries” like Père Lachaise had once again entered the scope of the city.

From the history of the places of the cemetery at different times, it can be observed that the relationship between the location of cemeteries and urban boundaries is in constant change. In early history, cemeteries moved from outside the city boundaries to the city center under the influence of religion and belief. However, both the roadside cemeteries in the ancient Roman period and the churchyards in the Middle Ages were easily accessible and visited. In modern times, the limited space in the city gradually became insufficient to meet the burial needs that grew simultaneously with population growth and urban development. Cemeteries became larger and were relocated to the lands outside the city. Later some of rural cemeteries were then re-included within the city boundaries as the city expanded further. In this process, the accessibility of public cemeteries has declined significantly compared to early history, but has recovered to a certain extent with the development of transportation. The history of cemetery locations and city development reveals intriguing overlaps between opinions and practices. Medieval churchyards in city centers, plagued by poor medical and sanitary conditions, provide empirical evidence to reflect the ancient Roman belief that death was unclean. Similarly, the large rural cemeteries that emerged in the 19th century and were situated in suburban areas resemble the Roman practice of placing cemeteries along roadsides outside city walls. These historical parallels prompt us to consider whether we can draw from the past to revitalize contemporary cemeteries, transforming them into vibrant public spaces.



Map of Paris city (1800s-now)

Chapter 4

Private Activities

HOLD PICNICS IN CEMETERY.

Burying Ground Selected by Christian Endeavorers for Jolly Gathering.

ST. LOUIS, Mo., Aug. 30.—Picnic parties in a cemetery are the newest North Side social thrill. The young people make merry in the subdued light of parti-colored Japanese lanterns and occasionally seek diversion by strolls among the monuments for the dead. So popular are these neighborhood fetes that an invitation to spend an evening in famous Bellefontaine Cemetery is rarely declined. The graveyard is especially favored for church society festivals largely because of the hospitality of Mrs. Burgess, wife of the assistant superintendent of the cemetery. One of these picnics was given by a Christian Endeavor Society recently and passersby from other parts of the city were amazed at the sight of girls and boys and their chaperons enjoying themselves with music and games in the burying ground. Mrs. Burgess declares that the dead are less to be feared than the living and she does not worry about ghosts.

When discussing public space in Cities For People, Jan Gehl highlighted the significance of unplanned, spontaneous activities in enhancing the publicity and openness of a space. “Unpredictability and unplanned, spontaneous actions are very much part of what makes moving and staying in city space such a special attraction. We are on our way, watching people and events, inspired to stop to look more closely or even to stay or join in”(Gehl, 2010, p. 20). Discussing private activities in a cemetery might seem unusual today, as cemeteries are primarily visited for public events like funerals. For simplicity in this article, we will categorize these unplanned, spontaneous actions as private activities of individuals. While discussing such private activities in a cemetery might seem unusual today--given that cemeteries are primarily visited for public events like funerals, and activities such as walking the dog or having lunch are generally avoided out of respect for the deceased and adherence to social etiquett--it is important to consider historical practices and contexts. Old newspaper reports reveal that over a century ago, it was not uncommon for people to visit cemeteries for picnics, a practice quite different from modern customs. In fact, such private activities, including dining or picnicking in cemeteries, date back to ancient Rome.

4.1 Public Environment for All: The Ancient Roman Roadside Cemetery

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, in ancient Rome people believed that the souls of the dead were immortal. To ensure that funerary monuments and graves effectively perpetuate the memory of the deceased, they were often designed to communicate directly with the living, in other words, these displays need to be in visible and frequently visited locations to be most effective. As a result, Roman cemeteries were typically situated along busy roads in suburban areas, allowing easy access for family members and enhancing the visibility of the tombs to passersby, thus increasing opportunities for interaction with strangers.

Such considerations are reflected not only in the choice of location but also in terms of publicity and accessibility. Roadside cemeteries were even more open than modern Western graveyards. They did not have walls and gates to define their scope and opening hours, but rather served as part of a public environment open to all members of the community as well as to strangers passing by. They were so public that Martial (Epigrams, I. 34. 8; III. 93. 15) even described how beggars, thieves, and prostitutes occupied these cemeteries to inhabit and serve as cover for illegal activities. Although that was an extreme scenario, it allows us to imagine passing visitors nonchalantly strolling through these graveyards or stopping to admire the epitaphs, or even just to find shade under the tombstones to cool off. In the City of the Dead, everyone passing through can use the cemetery as a public space, freely engaging in personal activities without concern for disturbing others or the dead.

The openness and publicity of roadside cemeteries can be conveyed by their form and layout. A large part of the ancient Roman tombs was reflected in the form of houses and referred to as “house tombs”. As the name suggests, these tombs echoed the houses of the living; they included the architectural elements of doors, windows and were usually square or rectangular in shape (Hope, 1997). the necropoleis were developed to become cities of the dead by creating tombs shaped like houses for the dead ancestors. Sites such as the Necropoli della Banditaccia in Cerveteri and the Necropoli del Crocefisso del Tufo in Orvieto, were typical necropoleis which were laid out in a form similar to the cities, with streets and roads (Steingraber 2013). The Romans, driven by their belief in the immortality of the soul, built a city of the dead that mirrored their own society and city. It was not only a resting place for the deceased but also a space where the living could visit and interact freely.

The interaction between the living and the dead even includes dining and drinking with the dead. Ovid(Fasti, II. 533–542) records that during the Parentalia, a nine-day festival took place in February of rites and rituals celebrating deceased family ancestors, and later developed to include all the dead, Families would bring food and wine to the cemetery and dine with the deceased after some prayer ceremonies, and even get drunk. In the article “Cities of the Dead? A Study of the Roman Necropoleis at Ostia” (2017) (unfortunately, the author's name is not provided in the source I accessed), the author compiles information from Ostia-Antica [online], Meiggs (1973), Hope (1997), Graham (2005), and Borg (2013), revealing evidence of the existence of dining customs in ancient Roman cemeteries which is dining-related furniture found in multiple tombs (see Table 1).

Furniture	*Number of structures in the Isola Sacra*	*Number of Tombs with Access to Furniture*	*Tomb Number*
Ovens	5	8	16, 34, 80*, 81*, 86, 88*, 89*, 90*
Wells	4	6	16, 34, 75, 88*, 89*, 90*
Biclinium	13	13	13, 14, 15, 31, 54, 55, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 87, 90
Benches	7	7	23, 30, 69, 85, 88, 89, 90
Tables	7	7	23, 55, 69, 72a, 73, 80, 81
	Total: 36	Total: 41	

Table 1

In the design of ancient Roman cemetery architecture, dining furniture such as tables, benches, and bicliniums -- sloped couches that allowed diners to recline while eating (Graham, 2005) -- were often placed outside the entrance of tombs and are particularly noteworthy. The fact that these structures were designed outside the house tombs rather than inside suggests that they were intended for use by the living as seating and dining areas at the graveside, rather than serving as ritual or ceremonial devices for the deceased. This indicates that, unlike modern cemetery rituals, which are often viewed as private acts, the ancient Romans sought visibility and even participation when they gathered or dined at cemeteries. We can imagine a scene in our mind, when an ancient Roman walking along the road outside the city gate, hearing the lively sounds from a roadside cemetery, and and catching sight of a group dining and drinking on bicliniums at the graveside. He might stop to observe or engage in conversation, or even join the gathering. This This echoes his Gehl's statement mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, that "spontaneous behavior in a city space would inspired people to stop to look more closely or even to stay or join in". Ancient Roman cemeteries were no different from other highly free public spaces, very similar to the fluid and dynamic public areas in the city. However, unlike other Ancient Roman public spaces that often served people of specific wealth or rank, cemetery activities involved all members of society especially allowed ordinary people to actively participate, which coincides with our understanding of the relationship between community life and the public environment.

4.2 Precursors to Urban Parks: 19th Century Rural Cemeteries

In a review of "Is The Cemetery Dead?" by David Charles Sloane, Sam Holleran noted that "Rural cemeteries became immensely popular with those seeking weekend outings, strolling lovers, and tourists. By the mid-19th century, a streetcar delivered a half million visitors to Green-Wood annually. (It was the second most popular tourist site in the state, topped only by Niagara Falls)" (Holleran 2018). Suppose we conclude that ancient Roman cemeteries became vibrant public spaces where the dead drew the living together due to the beliefs of the time. In that case, the 19th-century suburban cemeteries, which became popular picnic spots as recorded in the newspaper mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, more likely represent an inevitable outcome of historical development and a natural progression toward modern urbanization.

Before the emergence of Père Lachaise in the 19th century, urban burial grounds in Europe were primarily religious, confined to small plots and churchyards within city limits. However, with the rapid growth of urban populations due to the Industrial Revolution, the sanitary conditions in these burial grounds deteriorated significantly. Cemeteries became unhealthy overcrowded, with graves stacked upon one another (Greenfield 2011). Embalming did not gain popularity until after the Civil War, and cemeteries often reeked of decomposing bodies (Greene 2008). As described, "the popular city cemetery had grown so overcrowded with rotting corpses that some produced fetid odors that wafted into nearby neighborhoods and, according to prominent physicians of the day, spread disease-causing miasmas" (Harris 2007). David Charles Sloane stated the cemeteries as "once central to the urban scene, a necessary, but not necessarily a desirable, neighbor in the suburbs" (Sloan 1991).

Cities were calling for new types of cemeteries, and landscape planning during this period was undergoing significant changes. The 18th-century British landscape movement sought to move away from the symmetry and formal solemnity of French gardens, favoring vast, informal, and idealized natural spaces (Allain, Christiany 2006), which influenced landscape design in Europe and even the United States. Building on this, the rise of Romanticism in the 19th century fueled a desire to create "pleasant" and "memorable" cemeteries for the deceased. In 1831, the opening of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston, Massachusetts, marked the beginning of the Rural Cemetery Movement (Greenfield 2016), which was later described as “a pleasure garden instead of a place for graves” (Kemble 1833). Inspired by Père Lachaise Cemetery, Americans moved away from the grim, overcrowded, and barren urban cemeteries of the past. Instead, they designed suburban cemeteries with naturalistic landscapes, featuring woods, hills, and lakes, creating park-like settings that invited reflection and offered a more romantic and pleasant experience.

Not only did the design style of cemeteries change with this movement, but so did the cultural view of death in America. In the early 19th century, William Cullen Bryant reflected a somber attitude toward death in his poem Thanatopsis, where he lamented the loss of individual identity: “lost each human trace, surrendering up / Thine individual being” (Bryant 1811). However, by the time of the Rural Cemetery Movement, Bryant’s perspective had shifted, as seen in his later poem The Past: “All that of good and fair / Has gone into thy womb from earliest time / Shall then come forth to wear / The glory and the beauty of its prime” (Bryant 1828). Through the lens of Romanticism, death was no longer solely viewed as a tragedy but was instead portrayed as an integral and even beautiful part of life. Since then, cemeteries have transformed from dark, morbid burial sites into bright "new homes" for the dead, designed with beautiful natural elements. This shift, coupled with a new understanding of death, brought comfort to the living, offering a chance for reflection on life and mortality. Cemeteries became places of solace rather than avoidance -- inviting mourners and visitors. No longer seen as negative spaces to be shunned, they emerged as meaningful public spaces embraced by society.

A small group picnics on ledger-style tombstones in Historic St. Luke's Ancient Cemetery. The photo is not dated but is believed to have been taken prior to St. Luke's 1957 Pilgrimage Service.

Despite evolving ideas about death, high mortality rates remained a stark reality in the 18th and 19th centuries. Data from the U.S. National Library of Medicine indicates that infant mortality during this period exceeded 30%. Additionally, among those who survived past the age of five, only about 50% lived beyond 50 years old (Taylor 2020). The rapid urbanization driven by the Industrial Revolution led to population growth that far outpaced housing construction, causing infrastructure development to lag behind. As a result, urban living environments and sanitary conditions deteriorated, exposing citizens to the threat of epidemics (Gavin 2011; Cranz 1989; Jellicoe 1979). Poor public health conditions drove people to seek nature and wellness, especially in industrial London, where overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, and pollution fueled the spread of diseases like tuberculosis, cholera, and typhoid. Following the first major cholera outbreak in 1833, the Select Committee on Public Walks proposed legislation to establish public parks in city centers (Schuyler 1986, Thompson 2011). These parks were viewed as a remedy for the city's health crises, offering open space and fresh air. Similarly, in the United States, Olmsted advocated for the restorative benefits of nature, warning that artificial environments negatively affected "the mental and nervous systems, and ultimately on (a person's) entire physical organization" (Olmsted 1886, Thompson 2011). However, the first true public parks in the United States did not emerge until the creation of Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1858. Before that, Rural Cemeteries served as predecessors to parks, offering serene, green spaces that functioned as the closest urban retreats for city dwellers.

In this context, sites like Mount Auburn near Boston and Green-Wood in Brooklyn played a crucial civic role in rapidly growing cities that lacked public spaces. Designed as attractions with curvilinear roads, hillocks, and ponds, these rural cemeteries became popular destinations for weekend outings, leisurely strolls, and tourists (Holleran 2018), serving as "pleasure grounds in the absence of public parks" (Birnbaum 2000). This trend extended beyond New York and Boston, appearing in cities across the country. Notable examples include Lowell Cemetery in Massachusetts (1841), Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati (1845), and Oakland Cemetery in California (1864). As Jackson and Vergara (1996) observed, "These pastoral pleasure grounds provided a place where visitors could escape the grime and bustle of urban life for the serenity of a garden displaying the best in art and architecture."

Graveyard Picnics, c. late 1800s-early 1900s. Image: Library of Congress.

Rural cemeteries became popular scenic retreats for city dwellers and visitors, significantly influencing the development of public parks, residential subdivisions, and the professionalization of landscape architecture in the United States (Birnbaum 2010). However, the rural cemetery movement only temporarily satisfied public demand for naturalized open spaces. By the second half of the 19th century, commercialization and sterility diminished their role as urban sanctuaries, a function soon assumed by the emerging urban park movement, unlike rural cemeteries, which emphasized a strict physical separation between city and nature, the urban park movement aimed to bring nature into the city itself (Koonce 2009).

Overall, the rural cemetery movement was a period that was critical not only for the development of cemeteries but also for the evolution of the landscape design and planning professions. Many pioneers of American landscape architecture began their careers designing rural cemeteries. Key figures from this era, spanning the 1830s to the turn of the century, included Jacob Bigelow (Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass.), Henry A.S. Dearborn (Laurel Hill Cemetery, Boston, Mass.), John Notman (Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, Pa.), Adolph Strauch (Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio), Alexander Wadsworth (Woodlawn Cemetery, Chelsea, Mass.), and Downing Vaux (Rose Hill Cemetery, Hartford, Conn.) (Birnbaum 2000). These designers shared the belief that "burying and commemorating the dead was best done in a tranquil and beautiful natural setting" (mountauburn.org), ideally in a space designed for the living as well. Bigelow’s work, in particular, "articulated the philosophical, aesthetic, and practical rationale for a naturalistic, multifunctional place" (Birnbaum 2000).

Chapter 5

Public Activities

Jan Gehl looking at the city as public space from a historical perspective, described how urban spaces have long served as vital meeting places for city dwellers. People gathered to exchange news, make deals, arrange marriages, watch street performers, and buy or sell goods. Public events—both large and small—were held in full view, including processions, displays of power, celebrations, and punishments. In this sense, the city itself functioned as a central meeting place (Gehl 2010). The focus on urban life here emphasizes the public activities that transform cities into gathering spaces, aligning closely with the social role of public spaces.

Coincidentally, the public events Gehl described bears a strong resemblance to the activities that historically took place in cemeteries, underscoring that cemeteries were once highly active public spaces as well. This overlap highlights the cemetery's historical role as a significant social gathering place.

5.1 The Religious Life in Churchyards

In the study Churchyards and Cemeteries throughout the Centuries — Praxis and Legislation (2018), Grete Swensen and Jan Brendalsmo noted that by the 11th century, graveyards had increasingly evolved into multifunctional public spaces. A wide range of communal activities took place within these sanctified grounds, from everyday events to significant social functions. According to the customs and beliefs of the time, certain actions were thought to be more meaningful when conducted in the graveyard, especially near church portals or even within the church itself. These activities included property transactions, public punishments, the proclamation of official decrees, religious plays, and, on occasion, meetings of the Thing—a local assembly.

The sanctification of the graveyard during its establishment lent a heightened sense of importance to these actions, as the site was regarded as spiritually and legally protected. The churchyard was not only a sacred space for burials but also a stage for essential societal functions, reflecting its central role in the public and religious life of medieval communities (Brendalsmo 2006). This convergence of sacred and secular activities highlighted the churchyard's function as a hub for both communal and legal affairs, making it a unique space where spiritual significance and everyday life intersected.

5.2 The Celebrations in Roadside Cemeteries

Although roadside cemeteries in ancient Rome were not typically used for political activities like the church cemeteries in medieval towns, they were still central to many celebrations and festivals. One notable tradition was the novemdialis, observed on the ninth day after a person's death. During this ritual, the family returned to the grave to share a commemorative meal, a practice that continued on significant dates such as birthdays, anniversaries, and religious festivals. Additionally, during the Rosalia festival in May or June, roses were placed on graves in honor of the deceased.

Ovid, in his Fasti (II. 533–542), describes the Parentalia, an annual February festival dedicated to honoring deceased family members. This week-long event culminated in the Feralia, a day of public ceremonies where families brought simple offerings of food and flowers to the graves. After saying the appropriate prayers, they would partake in a meal similar to the one consumed at the funeral. These gatherings were not only somber but also festive, with families sometimes becoming "boisterously drunk" as they dined alongside the spirits of their ancestors (Hopkins 1983: 233). It was widely believed that the dead were spiritually present during these celebrations (Cumont 1922: 54), reinforcing the idea that these communal feasts helped maintain an ongoing relationship between the living and their departed relatives.

Floral Tribute for Venus (1690 or earlier), attributed to Abraham Brueghel

5.3 Gates Reopening in Modern Cemeteries

Most modern cemeteries have become specialized spaces, and even those that once functioned as public alternatives to parks were restricted for a period. In the 1990s, for example, visitors to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn were often turned away unless they were there to lay flowers for a loved one, according to the cemetery's president, Richard Moylan. Moylan recognized the potential consequences of this exclusivity, especially as cremation became more common. "We realized that could be the end of us," he said. "As we bury fewer people, visits decrease. People might visit their parents a few times a year, but will they visit their grandparents or great-grandparents? (Williams 2014)"

This realization prompted Green-Wood to reimagine its role as a public space, reinvigorating its community presence. Since 2014, the cemetery has opened its gates not only for tours but also for a range of public activities, including yoga classes, film screenings in the historic chapel, hot toddy gatherings, and live performances on its open grounds. Green-Wood is part of a growing trend among cemeteries embracing public use. Large annual events account for about a third of Oakland Cemetery's operating revenue. Oakland Cemetery has hosted several annual "Voices from the Cemetery", a music festival that draws about 4,000 people. It also hosts an annual 5-kilometer run, "Run Like Hell," and Halloween tours, a popular event at many cemeteries (Williams 2014).

Performance of "Angels and Accordions" at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn; Credit: Michael Dolan

Lantern lighting festival at Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum; Credit: Mark Dumont

Hollywood Forever Cemetery screenings

The annual Day of the Dead celebration at Hollywood Forever Cemetery, held in late October or early November, transforms the cemetery into a vibrant cultural space, featuring parades with marchers in elaborate costumes, intricate altars, live music, art installations, and a variety of festive activities. In addition to this event, Hollywood Forever regularly screens films on the mausoleum's wide facade near the Fairbanks Lawn, where visitors are welcome to bring their own food, beer, and wine (though hard liquor is prohibited). The cemetery also serves as a performance venue, with the historic Masonic Lodge and cemetery grounds hosting live concerts by artists such as Lana Del Rey and Beach House (Styles 2024).

Embracing public use can mean the difference between succumbing to degradation and becoming a thriving part of the community (Williams 2014). While many older cemeteries continue to sell plots and perform burials, even those with substantial endowments recognize that their future as solely burial grounds is limited. The growing popularity of cremation and other alternatives, combined with the inevitable depletion of available space, highlights the need for cemeteries to adapt. By diversifying their offerings and welcoming community activities, these cemeteries can avoid falling into neglect and instead transform into vibrant cultural spaces. This shift is crucial in ensuring that they remain relevant and well-maintained, serving not just as places of mourning but also as vital parts of the community’s cultural and social fabric.

Chapter 6

Memorials

Dr Margaret Gibson described road death as a kind of atopia (atopos) -- neither here nor there but an in-between place or space, in other words, the memorial turns “space” into place -- by assigning meaning and anchoring a space with specific identity and memory scape (Gibson 2007). In this sense, the act of placing the memorial transforms an otherwise non-descript area into a public space filled with personal or collective significance. The creation of such memorials anchors memory in a physical environment, thereby transforming abstract space into a meaningful place of remembrance.

In cemeteries, monuments and tombstones perform this same function, giving shape and public meaning to the space they occupy -- they turn the burial ground into a place of public and personal memory. This concept aligns with ancient Roman roadside cemeteries, where tombstones and memorials lining roads invited passersby to pause and reflect. These tombstones, with their epitaphs and sculptures, transformed a roadside into a public space, drawing attention and invoking memory, thus reinforcing the cemetery’s public nature. Therefore, by examining the forms and functions of monuments across different historical periods, we can better understand the evolving role of cemeteries as public spaces. The design and visibility of monuments reflect changing cultural attitudes toward death, memory, and public commemoration, offering rich insights into how these spaces have served communities throughout time.

6.1 Memorials in Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, while cemeteries were technically open to all, the way individuals were memorialized in cemeteries revealed stark social distinctions between the wealthy and the poor. The rich could afford grandiose tombs and elaborate monuments, such as house tombs or dining couches (triclinia), which were often built as a display of their social status and wealth. These elaborate memorials were placed in prominent locations, such as near the city gates, where they were visible to more visitors--demonstrating a status hierarchy even in death. The closer a tomb was to the city, the more prestigious its location, as land in these areas was highly sought after.

In contrast, the poor were buried in much simpler graves. They often had amphora burials, where a reused jar or amphora held the remains, or they were placed in tomba a cassone -- coffin-shaped stone chests. These modest graves were typically located in less prestigious areas of the cemetery. An example of this can be found in the Isola Sacra cemetery, where a section behind tombs 38-43, known as the campo dei poveri or "field of the poor" (as identified by archaeologist Guido Calza in 1933), was designated for the less wealthy. This spatial segregation underscored the social divisions that persisted even in burial practices.

Graveside memorials in ancient Roman cemeteries included not just tombstones, but also epitaphs and statues, which crowded the suburban landscape. As described by Nicholas Purcell (1987), these memorials competed for space and attention in built-up areas, often designed to convey a narrative about the deceased. Through inscriptions, reliefs, and imagery, tombs communicated directly with the living, preserving the memory of the dead while emphasizing their social identity. Tombs and epitaphs often glorified the deceased, presenting them and their families as possessing certain virtues, wealth, or political power, thereby reinforcing their status in both life and death. In this way, Roman burial practices served not only as personal memorials but also as public declarations of identity and social standing.

Ancient Roman monuments, collected by the author from the Internet

6.2 Memorials in Middle Ages

When church cemeteries first emerged, particularly in the early Christian period, they primarily served as burial grounds for Christians who desired to be buried close to the church. The belief was that proximity to the church would allow the deceased to receive blessings and increase the likelihood of resurrection during the Second Coming of Christ. As a result, early Christian graves were often marked by simple symbols of faith, such as crosses, fish (an early Christian symbol) (Temperman 2012), or just unadorned stones, rather than any personalized details about the deceased.

In this period, the focus was on communal Christian identity rather than individual legacy, which explains why tombstones often lacked the name, personality, or achievements of the deceased. The practice of inscribing personal information, such as names and dates, was not common, as it was believed that the church's sanctity and the religious significance of the site were more important than personal commemoration. Although individual tombstones existed, they were typically reserved for the more noble or affluent segments of society (Ariès, 1989).

Monuments from the 2nd to 10th century, collected by the author from the Internet

As Christianity evolved, the practice of commemorating individuals with personalized gravestones became increasingly common, especially with the development of elaborate church monuments in the medieval period. By the 12th and 13th centuries, personalized inscriptions, including the names of the deceased, began to appear more frequently in churchyards and cemeteries. From the 13th to the 17th century and beyond, the personalization of death became more pronounced through the use of images, inscriptions, and sculptures on graves and monuments. These markers served to affirm the deceased's social status both during their lifetime and after their death. The visual and textual elements added to tombstones were not just commemorations, but also statements of prestige and legacy.

This shift reflected a broader societal transformation in how death was viewed, with an increasing emphasis on individuality. The identity of the deceased was preserved and highlighted in these personalized memorials, allowing them to retain a distinct presence in the afterlife. Furthermore, the responsibility for shaping the deceased's image in the afterlife gradually transferred from the church to the family. Families took on a larger role in creating and managing the legacy of the deceased, moving away from the strictly religious interpretations of the afterlife. The shift illustrated the growing importance of personal and familial identity over purely ecclesiastical control (Ariès, 1989). This evolution coincided with changes in social structures and belief systems, as individuals and their families began to have more control over their own memories, secular personal public life became increasingly influential on funeral customs, and the identity of the deceased in the family, community, and society surpassed the church's influence.

Monuments from the 12th to 16th century, collected by the author from the Internet

6.3 Memorials in 18-19C

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Romantic movement and the rural cemetery movement transformed attitudes toward death and burial practices. Cemeteries became more inclusive, opening their gates to the general public and allowing citizens of all backgrounds to be interred. This period saw a surge in the personalization and artistic expression of cemetery monuments. Rural cemeteries, such as Père Lachaise in Paris, began to feature elaborate and colorful tombstones that reflected the identities and achievements of the deceased. Monuments and sculptures dedicated to prominent figures like musicians, sculptors, and poets often took on artistic forms, turning these cemeteries into places of cultural significance.

Today, these cemeteries serve as both memorial sites and destinations for visitors and scholars interested in exploring the interplay of art, history, and personal legacy. The artistic and individualistic nature of the monuments enhances their appeal, making them rich subjects for study and reflection. Their unique designs not only commemorate the deceased but also offer insights into cultural values and artistic trends of their time.

Monuments from the 18th to 19th century, collected by the author from the Internet

6.4 Memorials from the 20th Century to Present

Since the 20th century, the dead have almost all been buried in newly built cemeteries called "memorial parks". Great lawns with graves set in the ground and monuments kept to a minimum. Like the rural cemetery, whose curvilinear roads presaged early subdivisions, the memorial park anticipated the highly manicured environment that would later be deployed on a much broader scale. The lawn — in some cases acres of untrodden turf — debuted in urban parks and cemeteries, quickly proliferating in the spotless yards that have come to define suburban settlement. The memorial park's flush-to-the-ground graves made for an uncluttered visual space. Memorial parks emerged at a time when death became increasingly removed from daily life (Holleran 2018). expansion of the highway system and the spatial logic of ever-expanding suburbia challenged the rationale of cemeteries. Old cemeteries were stuck in decaying inner suburbs, just as families were becoming more geographically diffuse. advances in medicine were extending life spans and dramatically decreasing child mortality, and care of the sick and dying was moving to isolated, institutionalized spaces like hospitals and nursing homes. Sloane sternly rebukes memorial parks as the epitome of "striving for conformity" in the "culturally constructed and constrained spaces" that dominated the first half of the 20th century (Sloane 2018).

Monuments in the 20th century, collected by the author from the Internet

However, this trend toward standardization is increasingly met with resistance. Margaret Gibson, in her study of memorial culture, observed that in postmodern society, memorial practices are becoming more personalized and individualized, both in physical and virtual spaces (Clark, Cheshire 2004). Similarly, Sloane has documented a shift in American public memorial culture toward more personalized forms of remembrance. These can take the form of handcrafted items like quilts or interactive design spaces where people leave messages, objects, or other mementos.

Standardized tombstones are often rejected in favor of more personalized memorials, such as laser-etched images that reflect the identity of the deceased. People are increasingly using objects to personalize cemetery spaces (Sloane 2005), with memorials placed at the sites of road deaths, suicides, or other tragic events.The rise of mass media and social media has further transformed mourning practices. It is now common to grieve online or within virtual communities, and spontaneous memorials often emerge at the sites of violent incidents or accidents, reflecting a more immediate, collective response to death in the modern world. Concepts like digital cemeteries and online mourning communities are also gradually becoming integrated into modern society.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Historically, from Ancient Rome to 19th century, cemeteries were vibrant public spaces, deeply integrated into the social fabric of communities. Over the past century, however, they have largely retreated from public life. The roles cemeteries once played -- serving as gathering places, sites of community memory, and spaces for both private reflection and public rituals -- have gradually been absorbed by more specialized facilities such as public parks, communication hubs, and dedicated memorial spaces. Additionally, as cities and suburbs continued to expand and modern life became increasingly mobile, cemeteries, often located on the city's periphery, became less central to daily existence. This shift is also closely linked to the broader societal withdrawal from the subject of death. With advances in medicine and increased life expectancy, death has become less visible in everyday life. As a result, cemeteries have slowly faded from public consciousness, becoming spaces we visit only occasionally, if at all.

Yet, despite this decline in their everyday presence, cemeteries hold irreplaceable cultural and commemorative significance. According to the Charter of Public Space (2013), one category of public space is defined as "places of individual and collective memory, where the identity of the people is mirrored and sustained, allowing them to grow in the knowledge that they are part of a community." Cemeteries undoubtedly belong to this category. They are sites of human connection, serving as bridges between the past and present, between individuals and their communities. Cemeteries offer a unique space for reflection on mortality, memory, and the legacy of those who came before us.

Throughout history, cemeteries have evolved in response to societal changes, and today they are poised for yet another transformation. In an era marked by wars, pandemics like COVID-19, and increasing social divisions, there is an opportunity to reimagine cemeteries as public spaces once again. By incorporating contemporary elements—such as digital memorials, interactive spaces for collective mourning, or environmentally sustainable burial practices—cemeteries can be revitalized as places of both remembrance and renewal. As sacred spaces that hold profound emotional and historical meaning, cemeteries have the potential to reconnect with the community, providing a place for healing, reflection, and cultural exchange in the modern world. It is time to integrate the values and challenges of the new era into the cemetery, restoring its role as an essential part of public life.

References