

CASE STUDY

The cemetery of San Cataldo, Modena, Italy: a necropolis in a set of buildings (1971–6)

A cemetery in much of the world is a horizontal necropolis, sometimes consuming acres and acres of land. Cemeteries can also be buildings. Either way they are cities of the dead. They have an ambiguous position when it comes to urban design and architecture. The cemetery in Porto Alegre, Brazil (see Figure 6.13) is clearly a building, but that cannot be said for the cemetery at Modena, although its architect said that it was ‘considered as a building’.

Aldo Rossi, the Italian neo-Rationalist architect, designed the cemetery of San Cataldo for Modena. Many critics regard it as his masterpiece. It is an extension to an existing cemetery that has an ‘elongated east–west courtyard axis surrounded by brick neo-classical ossuaries’ designed by Andrea Costa in the mid-nineteenth century. The courtyard of that cemetery is a conventional burial ground.

The new cemetery has an axis to the west of that established by Costa. A Jewish cemetery and central services are located in between Costa and Rossi’s designs in a symmetrical pattern along the axis (see Figure 6.14a). Rossi’s design picks up on many features of Costa’s cemetery: its overall geometry, the termination of walkways at a wall of buildings and the overall composition of objects within a frame. A courtyard surrounded by ossuaries, lies beyond this central axis. These ossuaries are three stories high with external walls. The ground floor windows of the ossuaries are elongated but are aligned with the square windows above them. The ossuary walls are lined with

niches. The buildings within the courtyard are symmetrical about a central axis. At the northern end of this axis is a truncated cone and at the southern end a red cube.

The cone is a communal grave, the cube a house for the dead. The cone houses the unclaimed remains of those who have died in hospitals, jails and hospices. At the upper level is an amphitheatre where services can be held. Below is the common grave. The cube is an ossuary. It is built of brick with windows punched into it. Its appearance is that of a semi-abandoned building. It has brightly coloured metal balconies and stairs giving access to burial niches (see Figure 6.14b). It is open to the sky. One of the walls is solid. The square 1-metre by 1-metre windows in the other three walls have neither frames nor panes. The centre of the cube is the location of funeral services.

The 14 buildings lining the central spine within the courtyards have niches on the side so that they face each other across the space they enclose. The southernmost of these buildings forms a large Euclidean U. The height of the buildings depends on their location within the triangular layout. Rossi explained his design using an analogy. ‘The longest element is therefore the lowest whilst the shortest is the tallest . . . thus a shape analogous to the vertebrae of some osteological formation results’ (Rossi cited in Broadbent, 1990: 188). The cemetery has a second and narrow spine immediately to the west of this group. This spine is raised on two-storey septa (dividing