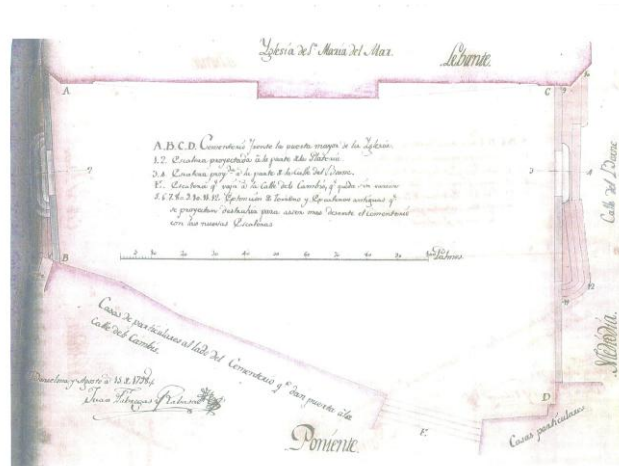


All About Location: The Space of Death in Barcelona, 1819-1972

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Burial practices and sites changed radically in all of Europe during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Until that moment, churchyards were the main burial sites in the city.



Aristocrats, preeminent social and ecclesiastical figures and the wealthy were also buried inside churches, in crypts and convents. The demographic growth of cities during the eighteenth century directly affected these old burial sites. By 1800 they were full to overflowing, which created what at the time were denounced as insanitary conditions that spread diseases. The solution proposed at the time and implemented was the closing down of the overcrowded churchyards and the construction of new burial sites outside the city walls.

The concern with hygienic conditions and the prospect of converting all those churchyards into urban and public spaces were signs of the bourgeoisie's radical new attitude toward both death and the city. As has been pointed out, the decision to create new burial grounds outside the city has to be understood as one of the new

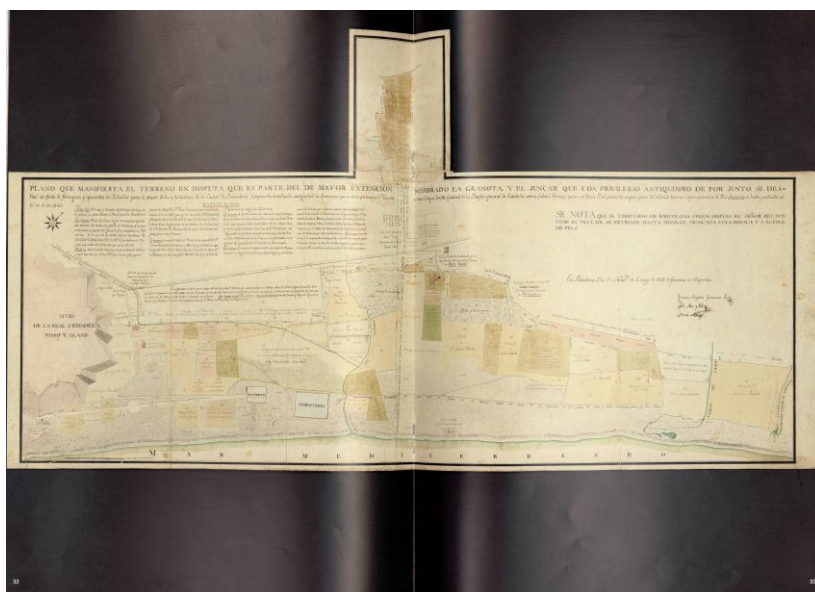
practices of exclusion and confinement of all non-productive individuals that characterized enlightened thought. There was, as José B. Monleón has said, 'a general cleaning up of the urban centers, emptied of their hospitals and cemeteries' (1990: 27).

Moreover, Thomas W. Laqueur, in 'The Places of the Dead in Modernity,' has related the creation of the new modern cemeteries to 'the long Enlightenment battle against clerical control of the spaces of death' (2002: 26). This is the case in Spain, where municipalities tried repeatedly to gain control over the dead, snatching control away from the Church from the late eighteenth century up to the Constitution of 1978 (we should not forget that control over the dead was also a very lucrative business). In this regard, the Spanish legislation on cemeteries suffered the 'alternancias de la confesionalidad del Estado' that have characterized modern Spain since the Constitution of 1812 or, more to the point, since the proclamation of the *Estatuto Real* in 1834 (*Gran Enciclopedia Rialp*, 1991: 482).

The insalubrity of the burial grounds and the fight against 'superstition,' both offensive to the sensibility of the new enlightened bourgeoisie, marked a new relation between the living and the dead based on the fear of death. As Archdeacon Hale put it in the mid-eighteenth century: 'nothing is so painful' to modern man 'as the thought or sight of death' (qtd. in Laqueur, 2002: 27). According to Laqueur, the new bourgeois order brought along a 'new regime of the hidden body:' '(D)octors and the enlightened public retreated in the case of death's now exclusively materialist realities: Death, in other words, lost its lineage – its metaphysical centrality' (2002: 27). The attack against superstition, the materialist realities of the corpse 'now carefully hidden' (2002: 27), sustain the particular modern fear of death, i.e., 'the fear,' as William Hazlitt put it in 1930, 'of no longer mattering in the world of affairs and, projecting back, of never having mattered at all' (qtd. in Laqueur, 2002: 29). What is disturbing 'is death as being forgotten. Memory is its antidote, and the cemetery made possible an undreamed of elaboration of personal commemoration and contemplation' (2002: 29-30). The body would appear, thus, only 'in its representation, in the new memorial practices linked specifically to the disappeared body' (2002: 27).

This essay analyzes the geographical movements of burial sites away from the city as a result of both the bourgeois/capitalist exclusion of all non-productive individuals from the city proper, and the memorial practices of the ‘disappearing body.’ A brief look at the locations and general landscape of Barcelona’s three main and largest burial grounds –the *Cementiri del Poblenou* (1819), the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* (1883) and the *Cementiri de Collserola* (1972)– reveals significant displacements and associations in the position cemeteries occupied and occupy in the modern social imagination. In particular, it shows the radical and progressive vanishing from view of the three largest burial grounds in Barcelona. It also manifests the transformation of the cemeteries from sites of highly symbolic significance for the city to spaces of oblivion, where representational and memorial practices are devoted to the erasure of the materiality of the body and, with it, that of the modern sense of self. As Marx and Engels famously stated regarding modernity in *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘All that is solid melts into air.’

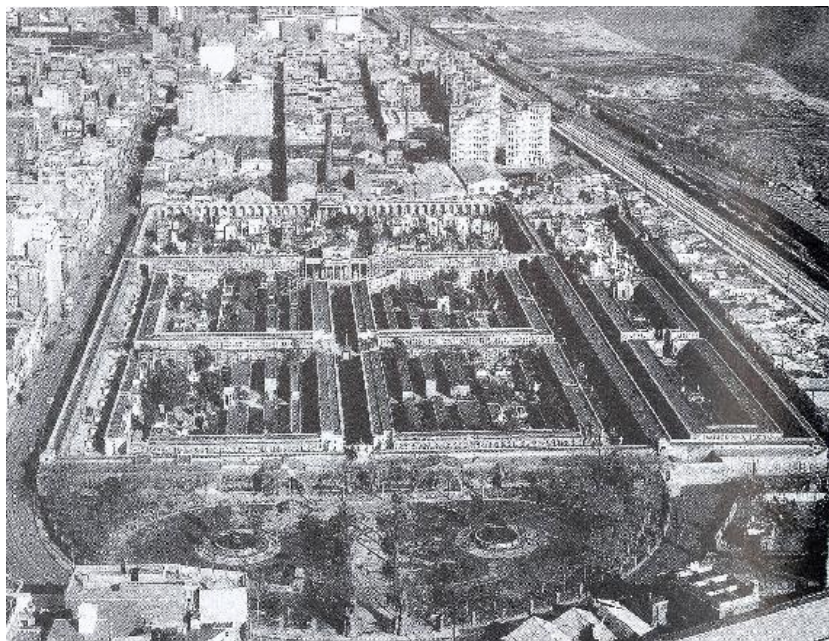
Barcelona’s first modern cemeteries –both the short-lived burial site built in 1775 and the 1819 *Cementiri de l’Est* or *del Poblenou*– responded clearly to the enlightenment expulsion of all non-productive individuals from the city and the general cleaning up of the urban space. These first modern cemeteries were built in a spot dedicated to residual activities of the city and used as a depository of its waste: next to the *Camp de la Bota* –a site for shooting practice–, the *Llazaret* –the hospice for the leprous–, the ossuary, and among *camps d’indianes* –fields used to dry large pieces of dyed cotton. The cemetery was situated some three kilometers outside the eastern gate of the walled city (*la Porta de Sant Carles*).



Nevertheless, regardless of its isolated location, the entrance of the cemetery still fully faced the city and, after an initial popular resistance, the new burial ground soon became a relevant urban space for the new modern city, as well as central to its social imagination and practices. By the 1830s, the new burial ground received the frequent visits from individuals and families. Moreover, it gave rise to new (modern) funeral traditions and articles –among others, the visit to the cemetery on November 1st (All Saints’ Day), the epitaph, the mausoleum as family sepulcher, and the funeral carriages– and facilitated the transformation of death into a commodity by creating new funeral services.

The proximity and fundamental availability of the Cementiri del Poblenou also explains its full integration within the urban space. The working-class neighborhood of *El Poblenou* with its many factories –the ‘Catalan Manchester,’ as this nineteenth-century urban and industrial development of Barcelona was known– grew around it. The demolition of the *Camp de la Bota* –a shanty town built around the cemetery walls by poor immigrants who arrived in the city during the 1950s and 1960s–, to give way to the latest urban development of

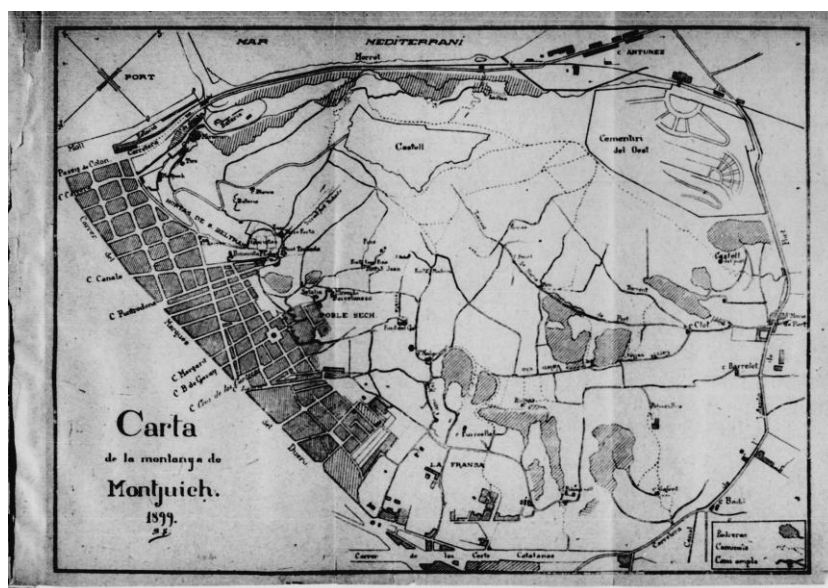
the city along its seashore, ended definitively the urban exclusion of the cemetery based on its foundational residual location.



Its current integration into the urban space is best exemplified by both the housing surrounding it and the recent construction of a hotel opposite its west wall, whose rooms directly overlook the cemetery. Only the walls of the old burial ground still mark its separation from the rest of the city or, more specifically, and as Foucault (1986) would say, its inerasable heterotopic – counter-site – character with regard to the city.

The *Cementiri del Sud-Oest o de Montjuïc* (1883) is a different story. It was located on similarly uninhabited and service-oriented land, on the southwestern side of the Montjuïc Mountain. At the time, that area was sparsely occupied by bootleggers and low-level criminals. But the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*'s geographic location marks a radical distancing of the city from its burial ground, a separation substantially different from that of the *Cementiri Vell* or *del Poblenou*.

The highly aesthetic character of this location – facing the sea – does not hide the real position of the burial ground with regard to the city: its seclusion from it. The cemetery is built with its back to the city: it is hidden –not visible– from the city.



The walls have been replaced by insurmountable barriers: the hill on one side, and the sea on the other. Around it, a network of roads and warehouses kept and keep the cemetery apart from the city. Thus, the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* has been impermeable even to the pressure of the spectacular demographic growth and recent building frenzy of *Can Tunis* and *Zona Franca*, where new working-class developments have replaced the fields and the dilapidated buildings that once housed poor immigrants, gypsies, and socially marginalized groups. Walking out of the burial site, one steps into an unkempt wasteland used only by prostitutes and drug addicts, and is overwhelmed by the feeling of entering an urban void.

The only gate connecting the cemetery to the city –located in the top section of the burial ground, on the *Via de Sant Lluís*, with access to the *Passeig del Migjorn* (one of the many roads that traverses Montjuïc’s recreational areas)– is always kept locked,

marking the irreconcilable divide between the city's public spaces and its cemetery. Moreover, large boards, placed all around the top section of the cemetery, obstruct the view of the burial site from most recreational spots in the Mountain of Montjuïc from where it is partially visible. The boards were built for the 1992 Olympic Games. At a time when Barcelona was projecting itself internationally both as a modern capital and a tourist destination, the cemetery was deemed an eyesore to the splendid images the city had to offer to the world during the games.¹ Reassuringly, the location of the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* guarantees the isolation and segregation of the site from the rest of the city. It is, and will remain, an alien, confined spot, pretending to be unrelated to the city.

Narcís Oller, in his great novel of 1891, *La Febre d'Or*, is well aware of the apprehension the city felt toward its newly built cemetery. Describing the inauguration of Barcelona's new racetracks, he introduces a character –who plays no part in the novel's plot–, who Oller characterizes as 'un senyor de bon regent, barceloní fins al moll dels ossos.' (1993: 216) He is a respectable man representative of the middle classes of the city, whose only function in the novel is to complain about the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*. Disregarding the memorial practices of the bourgeoisie –at the time, busy spending fortunes on spectacular and expensive mausoleums–, this respectable *barceloní* openly expresses the city's deep-seated fear and profound detachment from its new burial ground. From where he is sitting and while waiting for the race to start, he regrets that the cemetery blocks the view of Barcelona and, as the new racetracks indicate, the city's modern splendor:

'Francament, això fa de mal veure', diu Era per a ell com una obsessió que li crispava els nervis i ofegava son esperit dins d'un mar de tristesa i d'angúnia. El mateix turó, aquell Montjuïc tan verdós i alegre del cantó de llevant, no era allí sinó un embaràs lleig que amagava la vista de la ciutat . . . Ell hauria volgut poder, de cop, alçapremar la muntanya i arruar-la mar

¹ The *Mirador de Migjorn* – a sparsely used recreational area – provides the only unblocked view from the hill of the burial ground.

endins, on no hagués destorbat la vista, i li hagués, sobretot, amagat aquell cementiri impertinent (1993: I, 216-217).

‘Frankly this is not a nice sight,’ he said . . . It was an obsession that got on his nerves and drowned his spirit in a sea of sadness and wretchedness. That hill, a green and happy place on the eastern side (the city’s side), was on the western side embarrassingly ugly and hid the city from view. He wished he could take the mountain and throw it far into the sea, where it would not have interfered with the view of the city and, most importantly, where the impertinence of that burial ground would have stayed hidden away’.²

Moreover, the *Cementiri del Poblenou*, with its beautiful Neoclassic chapel and façade, its central monument dedicated to “civic virtues”, and the later addition of the Romantic gate, is, regardless of its deviations from Ginesi’s original design, a finished project.



In contrast with the city’s first modern burial ground, the outstanding feature of the *Cementiri de Montjuic* is the extreme incompleteness of its execution vis à vis the ambitious and highly ornamental project designed by Leandre Albareda.

² Author’s translation.



The lack of political will –more than the financial difficulties– to carry out the project designed by the municipal architect, Leandre Albareda, and approved by the city council, is in itself a highly telling indication of the ambiguous attitude, almost indifference, already present at the very moment of its creation. A rudimentary and supposedly provisional chapel and gate –la *Porta de Santa Eulàli* – were built in a hurry just a few weeks before the official inauguration of the site on March 17th, 1883.

The provisional gate stayed on and it is still today the only gate built for the cemetery. The original chapel was replaced by a new one as rudimentary and functional as the old one in the mid-twentieth century. The abandonment of Albareda's design of the cemetery as a site of collective commemoration and, more particularly, the city's refusal to build even the most basic and symbolic of the burial ground's public spaces –its entrance and chapel– are compelling and highly unusual, especially when compared to other cemeteries in similar cities.

The *Cementiri de Montjuïc* did provide a new urban space for the exhibition of family wealth and private initiative; but, as a public space of modern Barcelona, failed to capture and participate in the social imagination of the city. The splendor of the private mausoleums thus contrasts sharply with both the slovenliness of the few constructions marking the collective areas of the cemetery and the uncanny effect of their provisional intention and unfinished character

made permanent. There was –there is– no magnificent entrance, no central plaza ornamented with a grandiose chapel and elegant arcades and no train connection with the city, as specified by Leandre Albareda –not even a trace of his highly symbolic design for the city of the dead. As a collective enterprise, the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* was and still is, a depository ground for city waste.³ From the very moment of its foundation, the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* was fatally marked by oblivion. Abandonment soon fell upon it to fully realize the extent and implication of the modern strategies of the hidden body.

The third cemetery, the *Cementiri de Collserola*, was inaugurated in 1972 to alleviate the shortage of sepultures caused by the demographic growth of the city during the twentieth century, a growth based on successive waves of immigrants. The cemetery is located in a wooded area of 180 hectares on another mountain, in the northwestern part of Collserola (between the municipalities of Barcelona, Cerdanyola and Montcada i Reixac).



³ Besides the commemorative tombs of significant public figures, the only collective memorial site in the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* is the *Fossar de la Pedrera*, built in 1984-1986 by the architect Beth Gali. This memorial garden, dedicated to the victims of the Francoist Dictatorship, was the result of the collaborative initiative of public institutions, civic associations and individuals.

This in 'between' geographical location, its de-territorialization with respect to the city, marks the new preeminence of the metropolitan area, as well as a new degree of separation between the city and its burial grounds. Unlike the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*, whose monumental stone quality makes it hard to miss from certain spots on the Montjuïc Mountain, or if you are paying attention while driving by on the *Ronda Litoral*, the *Cementiri de Collserola*, situated in the middle of thick woodland, completely vanishes from view. Hidden amid the vegetation, it is also designed to look like one of the sprawling new suburban urbanizations of the 1970's.

There are no walls anywhere, not even mountain slopes. There is no need. The *Cementiri de Collserola* is hard to see. It is so well hidden in the woods that often you find yourself wondering if you are within the limits of the cemetery or just driving along one of the mountain roads. Isolated, even lonelier than the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*, it can be totally missed or ignored. Moreover, the *Cementiri de Collserola* is also well hidden from view in the woods by a design that erases any distinctive marks of a burial ground. Opposing Leandre Albareda's highly symbolic project for the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*, the *Cementiri de Collserola*'s design seems conceived to ignore death itself. The refusal to acknowledge the site as a space for the dead is realized by rejecting all notion of the cemetery as a symbolic –heterotopic– adjunct of the city. On the contrary, the burial ground pretends to literally resemble a city. It conceals death and the dead by dressing up as a suburban *ciutat dormitori* –bedroom community– and by eliminating all forms of collective sociability and memorialization practices. Its pretense of a literal suburban layout of empty streets and plazas, building-like *columbaris*, and bus stops, create the effect of a ghostly and forsaken space. In the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*, the traces of Albareda's project still manage to provide some symbolic order and reference points. By contrast, in the *Cementiri de Collserola* only traffic signs and directional boards can be found.

The *Jardí Americà* –the American Garden–, an increasingly popular spot in the *Cementiri de Collserola* to deposit ashes, reveals the later stages of the radical vanishing of the body and that of representational and memorial practices in modern or, more properly,

post-modern burial grounds. Responding to the increasing demand for cremation, the American Garden provides a space where ashes can be deposited. There the ashes –those unerasable traces of the body– are covered by earth and surrounded by nature. A small plaque, flat on the ground, marks the location of the ashes, indicating the name and the dates of birth and death of the deceased.



Radically different from the biographical notes or emotional expressions in epitaphs, or from the accumulation of personal objects often found in niches, this burial ground is designed as an administrative record. The inscription simply bears aspects of individual identity –name and dates– readable, meaningful, as entries in a bureaucratic notebook. Around the discreet plaques we find the only concession to representation: a false nature, a masked Elysian field, hidden under a pretense of naturalness. It is a representation that denies itself –its cultural referent– by proclaiming a supposedly self-evident truth (and meaning) of nature, and that of man in it.

In the *American Garden*, nature is postulated as the only meaningful referent, hiding its origin in culture and, thus, its contentious meaning. The pretended natural beauty of nature suggests the conformity –the harmonious and rightful place– of man in the world. It substitutes for the individual identity –its historicism– and erases all traces of human struggle and conflict. It ignores also the special place of death in our search for meaning: death as ‘metatrophe for representation,’ i.e., as the ‘incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers’ and, more importantly, to ‘its uses for the polis’ (Goodwin and Bronfen1993: 4). The destruction of the materiality of the body and that of its sepulture –the disappearance of the body– is the dissolution of individual and collective memory, and that of his/her society and culture. All that is left –all there is– are ashes. And they are hidden. Or not exactly. Virtual cemeteries are the latest result of the disappearance of the body effected by cremation. These new post-modern spaces of death seem to be reacting to burial sites like the *Jardí Americà*, and also to the conservation or spreading of the ashes in unmarked sites (in nature or in closets at home). They are a radical new stage in the modern –enlightened– fear of death and its regime of the hidden body. At the same time, they seem to be a return –with a vengeance– of representation and memorial practices. The return of the repressed –the corpse: not only hidden but also erased– has found in the radical immateriality of virtual cemeteries a way to express the fear and pain of death, that is, that of our insignificance, of our lack of meaning or, as William Hazlitt put it, our fear of being forgotten.

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