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AN URBAN CEMETERY: WEAVING AN ARCHITECTURAL THREAD BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE CITY

by

Anthea J. Selkirk

A thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Architecture

Major: Architecture

The University of Memphis

May, 2014



An Urban Cemetery: Weaving an Architectural Thread between the Sacred and the City

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Anthea Selkirk

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of the Master of Architecture

Major: Architecture

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# dedication

I would like to dedicate this to David, Luca, Mom and Dad, with love.

# acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members; Michael Chisamore, Jim Williamson and Tim Michael. Your time, input, words of encouragement and good advice were invaluable.

I would also like to thank Michael Hagge and Sherry Bryan for your support over the years.



# abstract

**AN URBAN CEMETERY:  
Weaving an Architectural Thread between the Sacred and the City**

by Anthea J. Selkirk

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE  
at the UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

April, 2014

Michael Chisamore Thesis Chair

Death is a taboo subject in our society and our cemeteries are a reflection of our collective repression of the idea of death. Contemporary culture has desacralized our built environment by moving our sacred cemeteries from the center of the city, to the outskirts where they are forgotten about. Is there still a place for the cemetery in everyday life? If so, how does one create a place that speaks equally to the aspects of life and death? This thesis is based on the conviction that burial grounds can be integrated into everyday life, and that there should be a place for the sacred in the increasingly secular city.

The site is in the South Main Arts District of Memphis, Tennessee, on the grounds of a former cemetery.

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# introduction

The practice of design is driven by constraints. Boundaries and requirements challenge us to look at problems from new perspectives to find creative solutions to problems. However, as designers, and especially as Westerners, we find it difficult to acknowledge the most fundamental constraint of all: that nothing is permanent and everything comes to an end. Death is perhaps the beginning of architecture and religion. When a person dies, we have to decide what to do with the body. Do we leave it for the animals, build a pyramid, a ziggurat, or an earthen mound? Perhaps the beginning of religion starts when we ask ourselves the question: ‘What happens to the soul of the departed?’ It could be argued that the cemetery was perhaps the beginning of the first cities. In his book, *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford writes:

*The dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling, ... [a place] to which the living [could return regularly to visit their ancestors] ... Food gathering and hunting did not encourage the occupation of a single site, the dead at least claim that privilege. Long ago the Jews claimed as their patrimony the land where their forefathers were situated; and the well attested claim seems to be a primordial one ... [Thus], the city of the dead is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city.*<sup>1</sup>

Not only did death begin to shape the first cities, death and its rituals have always been a mirror of a society’s cultural values. According to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “We have never been able to study humans seriously without considering the essential fact of their mortality. This is because death and its rituals not only reflect social values, but are an important force in shaping them.”<sup>2</sup>



fig. 01 Picturesque Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee. Example of the rural cemetery movement.



fig. 02 Elmwood Cemetery

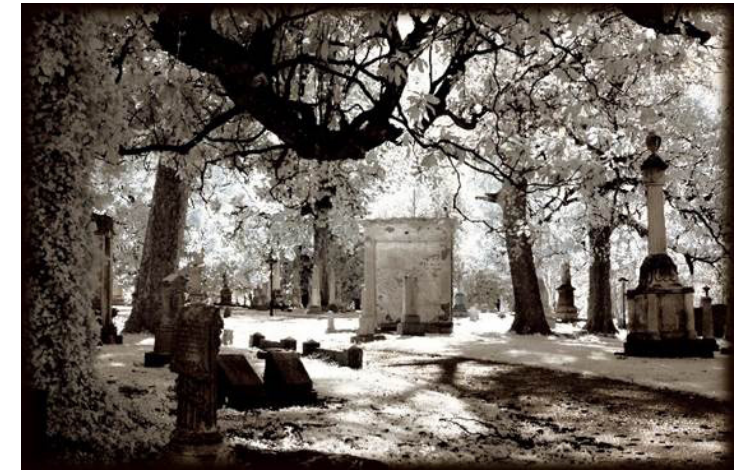


fig. 03 Elmwood Cemetery



fig. 04 Elmwood Cemetery



fig. 05 Elmwood Cemetery

1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, quoted in Kenneth T. Jackson, *Silent Cities* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), 4.
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, quoted in Kenneth T. Jackson, *Silent Cities* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), 3.

Death is natural, inevitable and certain, however, in contemporary American society, a great deal of work is done to deny our mortality and repress the knowledge that our time on earth is limited. It could be argued that cemeteries are collective representations of deeply shared attitudes about death. Once an integral part of a city, our cemeteries have now been pushed to the outskirts. “New cemeteries are usually unwelcome in the neighborhoods of America...[there are] several reasons for their outlying locations.”<sup>1</sup>

Cemeteries were once a part of our everyday lives, a spiritual connection to our ancestors. A excellent example of this is the Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee (see figs. 01- 05). Built during the Victorian era, the Victorians were much more comfortable with death, and they lovingly cared for the burial plots of their ancestors. Now many contemporary cemeteries are simply storage places for dead people, devoid of meaning and place (see fig. 06.) Most cemeteries today emphasize standardization, profit and ease of upkeep instead of memory, individuality and emotion. Benjamin Franklin once said, “Show me your cemeteries, and I will show you what kind of people you have.”<sup>2</sup> This thesis is based on the conviction that it is worthwhile to examine our contemporary cemeteries and reflect on our current view of death in America.



fig. 06. Typical contemporary cemetery, a prime example of “the landscaped lawn.” Note the artificial flowers.

1. Thomas Harvey, “Sacred Spaces, Common Places: The Cemetery in the Contemporary American City.” (2006), 295.
2. Benjamin Franklin, quoted in: Meg Greene, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*. (Minneapolis: Twenty- First Century Books, 2008 ),116.

# thesis questions

The design of this cemetery was approached with three questions in mind:

LIFE & DEATH

Can burial grounds be integrated into everyday life?

MEANING

Is there a place for the Sacred in the City?

DESIGN

What is an appropriate response to the current view of death in our society?



# death in america

“Everything has been figured out, except how to live.”  
-Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>1</sup>

Fear of death is universal. “Nobody wants to die. Even people that want to go to heaven don’t want to have to die to get there.”<sup>2</sup> Even though death is certain and inevitable, we spend our lives avoiding it. We wear seatbelts, we take multivitamins, and even preserve our bodies using cryogenic suspension.<sup>3</sup> Even though we have conquered nature and space, we have come no closer to conquering death. This ending of the self is the ultimate mystery, and perhaps the most anxiety producing phenomenon. In our postindustrial world, we have managed to sterilize our cities of death, we quite often hear of death, but we almost never see it. Our denial of death affects our behavior and is central to our cultural constructions. Culturally, we collectively attach meaning to life and death. We invest ourselves in cultural or religious symbols that live on after individuals die, and this collective sense of immortality helps us to cope with death.<sup>4</sup>

Americans collectively and unconsciously repress the idea of death. Few of us think about death on a day-to-day basis. This can have negative repercussions. When one does not come to peace with death, and then is forced to confront it, it can produce a tremendous amount of anxiety and anger. For example, when the World Trade Center, a powerful symbol of American capitalism and power was struck down in 2001, it resulted in the murder of an Indian Sikh, who had no affiliation with the Muslim faith because he was seen as different, a threat to our culture, a symbol of our collective immortality. An event like 9/11 not only produces an aggressive reaction because of its anxiety- producing provocations about death, it causes people to find solace in symbols. People bought more American flags and went to church in droves. We live and die by our symbols because our symbols and affiliations transcend death.<sup>5</sup>

Our isolation from death produces anxiety. Modern medicine has played a large role in this new “age of avoidance”<sup>6</sup>. Not too long ago, we were born and we died in our homes. Medicine has taken death out of the home and institutionalized it. When one thinks of death, most likely the image of sterile white walls and life support systems comes to mind. Medicine has blurred the line between life and death, and perhaps even changed the definition of it.<sup>7</sup> In ActV, scene 3 of Shakespear’s *King Lear*, Lear enters carrying Cordelia, howling. Lear knows she is dead, but in desperation or madness still looks for signs of life.

*Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones. [295]*  
*Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so*  
*That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone for ever.*  
*I know when one is dead, and when one lives.*  
*She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass.*  
*If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, [300]*  
*Why then she lives.*<sup>8</sup>

1. *Flight from Death*. Directed by Patrick Shen (Burbank, CA: Transcendental Media, 2003.), DVD.
2. Steve Jobs. *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005, Stanford University, [www.stanford.edu](http://www.stanford.edu).)
3. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Silent Cemeteries: The Evolution of the American Cemetery*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), 2.
4. *Flight from Death*. Directed by Patrick Shen (Burbank, CA: Transcendental Media, 2003.), DVD.
5. Ibid.
6. Clifton D. Bryant (*Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 320.
7. “Radiolab.” *Radiolab supported by WNYC- National Science Foundation*. <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91680-after-life>, 2009.
8. William Shakespeare. *King Lear*. (MIT. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/full.html>, 1603.)



Lear uses a mirror to determine if Cordelia is still breathing because that is how we used to confirm death. But in the late 1960s, life support to keep patients alive became standard practice. With all this new technology, intensive care units were filled with purgatorial Cordelias, floating somewhere between life and death in a comatose state. In 1968 a prominent physician, Henry Beecher decided to change the definition, to move the line between life and death (see fig. 07) when he invented the concept of “brain death.” Some sects of Orthodox Judaism and Roman Catholicism, however only go by heart death. So the definition of death is no longer dependent on whether or not the heart is beating, but on the view of a religious institution or a doctor.<sup>1</sup>

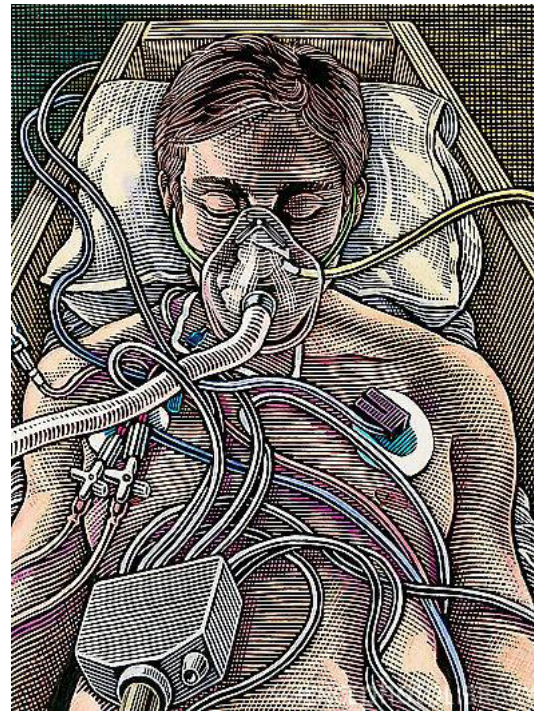


fig. 07. Life Support blurs the line between life and death

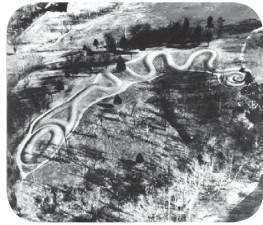
In this modern era, the internet also affects the way we view death, and helps us deal with death in a world where no one really dies. Facebook pages can be memorialized. Blogs can update a person’s age even after they have died. The internet even bridges mortality with a service called “death switch”, an automated system that prompts one for a password on a regular schedule to make sure one is still alive (deathswitch.com). When someone does not enter a password for some period of time, it assumes he or she is dead and automatically emails pre written emails to those named by him or her. One can do this to send letters to someone for many years after they die. It allows a part of us to live on in a type of afterlife. Some people predict that in the future we may even be able to download our consciousness to the internet and live on as a type of avatar in a virtual world.<sup>2</sup>

The social meaning of death continues to evolve rapidly. As a culture in the midst of this transition, it is important to open up conversations about death and not avoid it as a society. This is important because when one stops to think about it, death clarifies life.

1. “Radiolab.” *Radiolab supported by WNYC- National Science Foundation*. <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91680-after-life>, 2009.

2. David Eagleman. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. (New York: Random House, 2009), 66.

# A Short History of the American Cemetery:<sup>1</sup>



**Native American Indians** practiced a wide range of burial practices from above ground burials in trees, on boxes or stilts, to burial in graves directly under the house of the deceased and mounds in the shapes of animals.

For the **Early Colonials** Survival was the main objective. Most of the time the dead were buried unmarked and with little ceremony, in order to make it difficult for Native Americans to know how many settlers had been killed.

1500s

**Colonial Spanish** Cemeteries were a little more elaborate. They were usually enclosed with a fence and followed ancient Christian Traditions. Gravestones faced east toward the rising sun to be ready for Judgment Day.



**Colonial New Englanders** did not believe in ornamentation of any kind. For them, the body was just a temporary shell. They used their cemeteries to remind people of the shortness of life and the constant presence of death. To the Puritans, the graveyard symbolized the wilderness, which was the source of chaos, darkness, and death. By the mid 1600s, a growing Puritan emphasis on death led to more elaborate cemetery art. The Puritans began to carve images of winged skulls and crossbones into their headstones.

1600s

In the **American South**, it was not uncommon to have a family burial plot. Family burial plots were considered a home below the ground, and sometimes, when a family moved, the burial plot was dug up and relocated to the new home.

1600s



**Slave cemeteries** were often referred to as 'God's Little Acre', a piece of land given to the slaves by the white master. Because the slaves were forced to work all day, many burials took place at night. Bodies were often buried facing east, in the direction of Africa. Symbolic practices included the killing of a white chicken, which symbolized the spirit world. Planting evergreens on graves assured the dead a restful sleep. Families hung empty bottles on trees to keep away evil spirits.

700 A.D



1600s



## The Rural Cemetery

1830- 1855

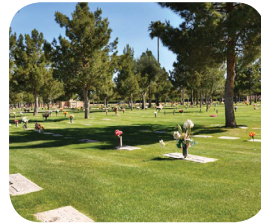
Colonial settlements quickly grew into cities, which presented a problem for burial grounds. Large numbers of colonists died in the American Revolution and from diseases such as yellow fever. Cemetery land began to run out and coffins were sometimes buried on top of coffins.

## The Burying Ground

1775- 1830



Post Industrial Revolution American cities saw explosive growth. As cities grew, the lack of space for burials became a crisis. On top of this, the graves were often semi - exposed to vandals and grave robbers. Embalming was not yet a common practice and foul smells often arose from the ill - maintained crypts. This led people to look for better ways to bury their dead. In 1831, a citizen's group in Boston led by Jacob Bigelow proposed the first formal burial ground outside the city known as Sweet Auburn.



## The Landscaped Lawn

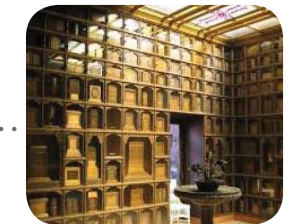
1855- 1917

It is in places like this that the culture of maintenance overrides all. Markers are all flush to the ground to allow for lawnmowers to roll over the graves. To support the weight of the lawnmowers, each plot must be lined with a concrete vault that in turn supports a layer of turf that can be cut away during a burial. These are places of pure storage, devoid of memory and sentiment.

## The Isolation of Death

1917- 1949

Once a seldom- used practice, cremation is gaining in popularity in the United States, and continues to grow every year.



## Present Day

1960- Present

Medicine starts to blur the line between life and death. Life support systems are able to keep a person alive in a vegetative state, which in turn has forced the medical community to devise expressions such as "brain death". We no longer die in our homes as we once did, which hides death from us even more. The internet and technology continue to change our relationship with death.

1. Meg Greene. *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*. (Minneapolis: Twenty- First Century Books, 2008.)

# site of new morris cemetery

“No people who turn their backs on death can be alive. The presence of the dead among the living is a daily fact in any society which encourages its people to live. Huge cemeteries on the outskirts of cities, or in places that no one ever visits, impersonal funeral rites, taboos which hide the fact of death from children, all conspire to keep the fact of death away from us, the living...”<sup>1</sup>

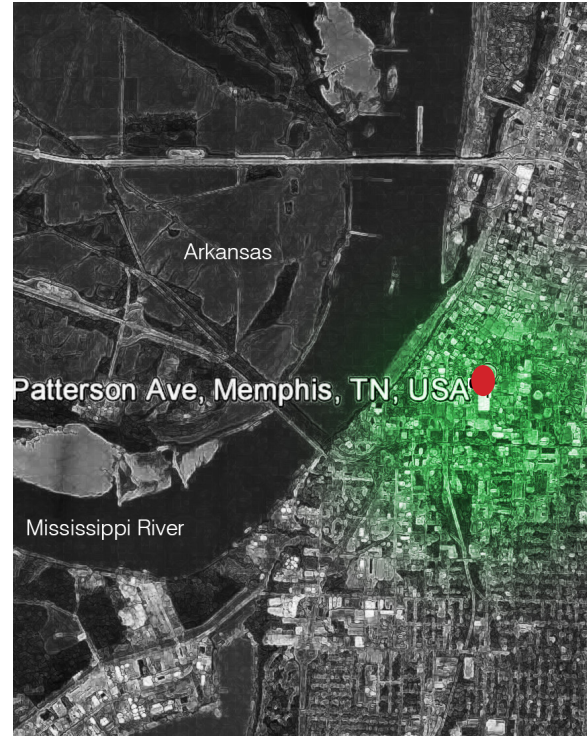


fig. 18. Downtown Memphis Aerial View and location of site.

The South Main District of Downtown Memphis, Tennessee consists of roughly 182 acres and stretches roughly along South Main between Riverside Drive on the west, Abel Street on the east, Linden Avenue to the north, and Webster Avenue to the south. Today, approximately 2500 people live in the South Main district and enjoy its walkability and close proximity to downtown and its amenities. The South Main district was formerly an industrial and warehousing district. It is now a thriving mixed use district; however, it is characterized by an abundance of vacant land and structures. The neighborhood, with its gritty charm, has been the site of many movies including: *Mystery Train*, an indie movie by Jim Jarmusch, *The Firm*, *Walk The Line*, *Great Balls of Fire*, *Elizabethtown*, *Hustle & Flow*, among others. Although there are still several vacant, overgrown lots, today the neighborhood is a thriving arts district, with many restaurants, residences, businesses, boutiques, art galleries and public transportation. The streets are well maintained and pedestrians and cyclists flock to this neighborhood to experience the upbeat atmosphere.<sup>2</sup>

This neighborhood was chosen because of the location of the former Morris Cemetery that existed here in the late 1800s.

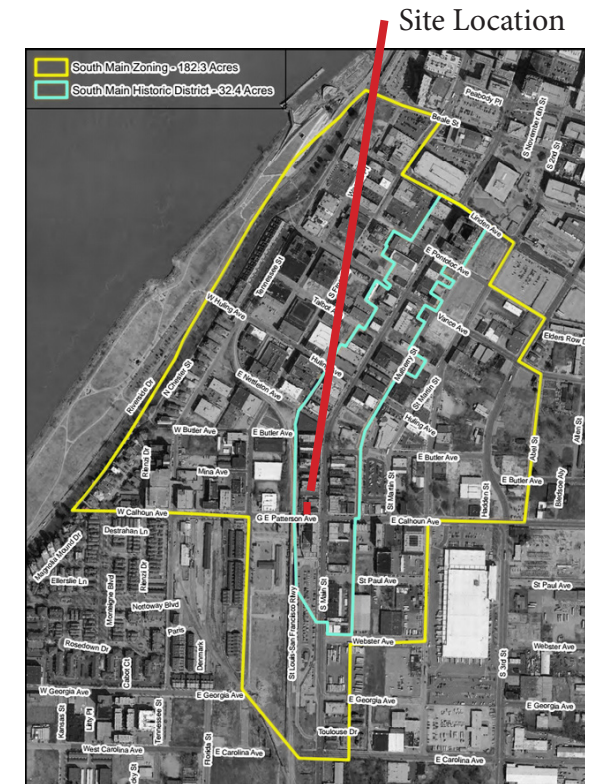


fig. 19. South Main Historic District of Downtown Memphis.



fig. 20. View of site from across the street, former location of Morris Cemetery and the Arcade Hotel



fig. 21. Site view facing north



fig. 22. Site view looking southwest, Central Train Station in background

1. “Downtown Memphis Commission.” *Downtown Memphis Commission Board*. <http://www.downtownmemphiscommission.com>

2. Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, et al., *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, (Oxford University Press, 1977), 36.

# 450 mulberry st.

The **Lorraine Motel** in Memphis, Tennessee, is less an iconic place than an iconic monument. In April 1968 the world awoke to a photograph, now etched in the collective American consciousness, of three men on a motel balcony pointing upward across the street while another crouched down with a dying Martin Luther King Jr. Just outside Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel about six o'clock in the evening of April 4, 1968, an assassin's bullet had struck down the leader of the American Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup>



fig. 23. Memorial Plaque to Martin Luther King Jr. outside of the Lorraine Motel.



fig. 24. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and others on the balcony of room 306 moments before the assassination

The nondescript motel balcony instantly became, in that terrifying moment, the place of martyrdom for one of America's most heroic, and most controversial, leaders.



fig. 25. Watercolor aerial view of the Lorraine Motel. Dashed line represents the possible path of a person walking through the city (See fig. 102.)

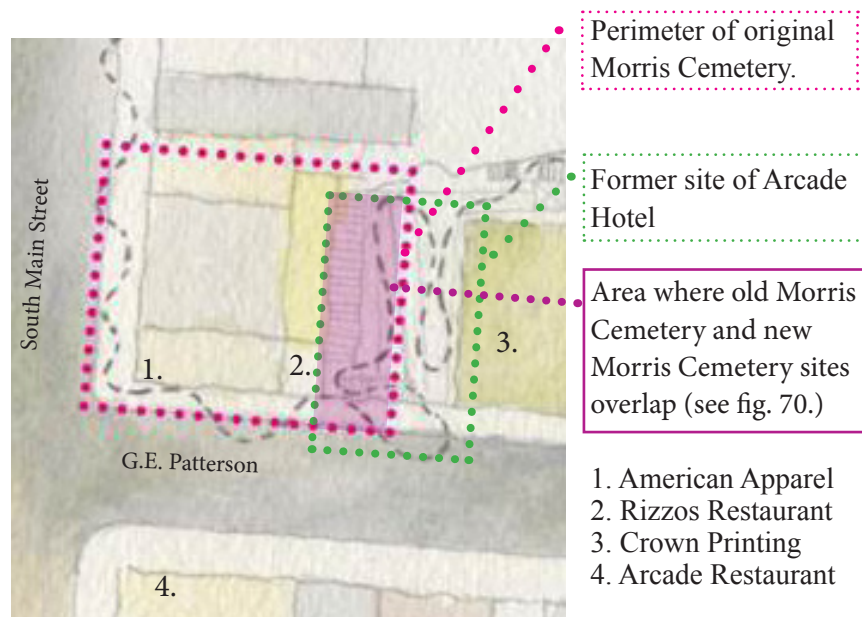


fig. 26. Watercolor aerial view of the intersection of South Main Street and G.E. Patterson. The pink dotted line represents the boundary of the original Morris Cemetery built in the 1800s. The green line delineates the site of the former Arcade hotel.

1. National Civil Rights Museum. <http://wwwcivilrightsmuseum.org>



fig. 27. Scene from the movie Mystery Train, with the Arcade Hotel in the background.

The Northeast corner of Main and G.E. Patterson, where American Apparel is located today, was once the site of the old Morris Cemetery. But when two train stations opened in 1912 and 1913, hotels, restaurants, and businesses needed the space. Morris cemetery was on a family farm, as the character of South Main was more suburban in the 1800s, before the city of Memphis grew and annexed the area. The graves were relocated to Elmwood Cemetery, where they remain today.

The site currently is located next to American Apparel and Rizzo's Restaurant, and was once the site of the Arcade hotel, before it caved in on itself in the 1980s. Because of the rich history of the site, (and the fact that a cemetery had once been located on this ground before it was moved in the name of progress,) it made sense to reinsert the cemetery into the public realm in this specific space.

# a walk through south main

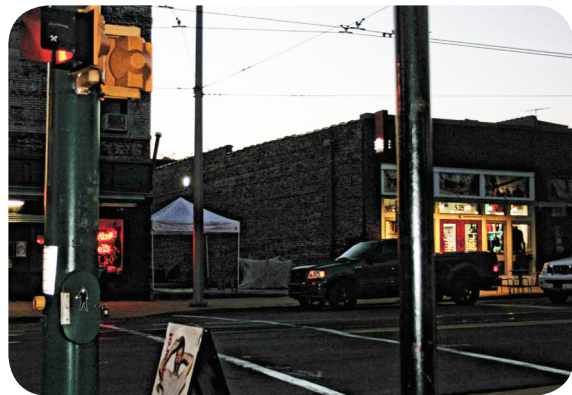


fig. 43 View of Main Street



fig. 41. Corner of G.E.Patterson and Main Street



fig. 39. Facade of American Apparel on G.E. Patterson

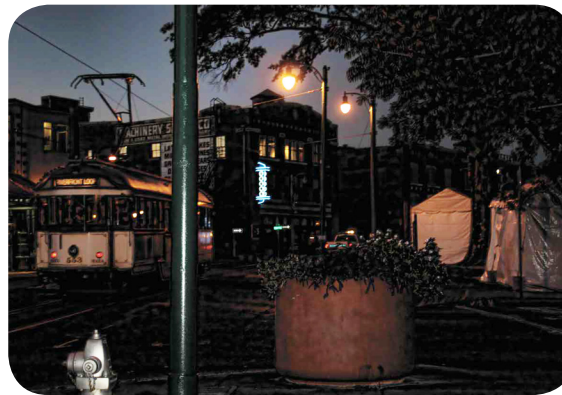


fig. 44 View of Main Street trolley

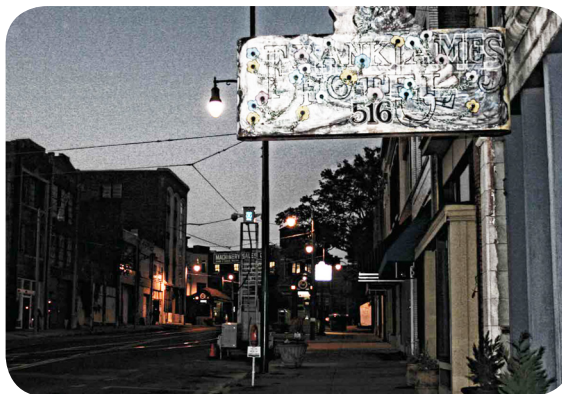


fig. 42. View of Main Street

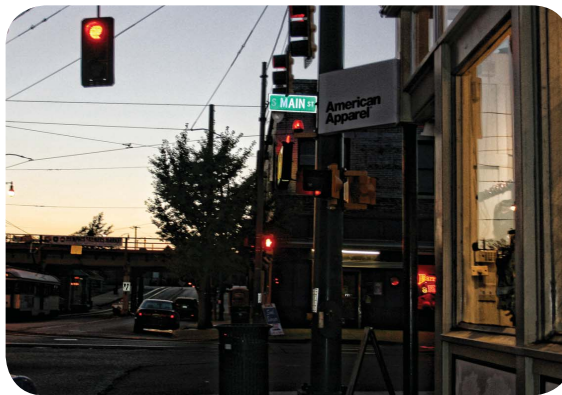


fig. 40. Corner of G.E.Patterson and Main Street



fig. 38. G.E. Patterson facade of new Morris Cemetery



fig. 45 View of Lorraine Motel



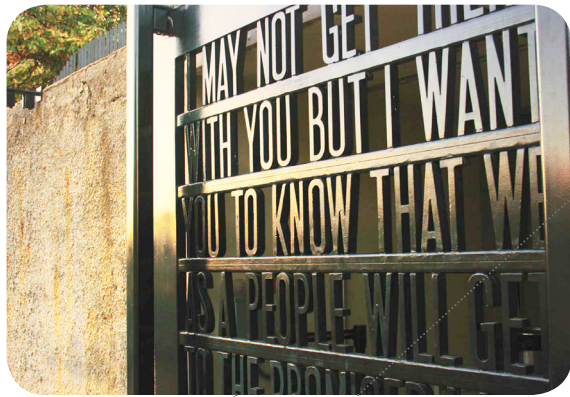


fig. 28. Gate featuring an MLK quote outside of the Lorraine Motel



fig. 30. View down Mulberry Street



fig. 29. View down Mulberry Street



fig. 31. Lorraine Motel



fig. 32. Lorraine Motel

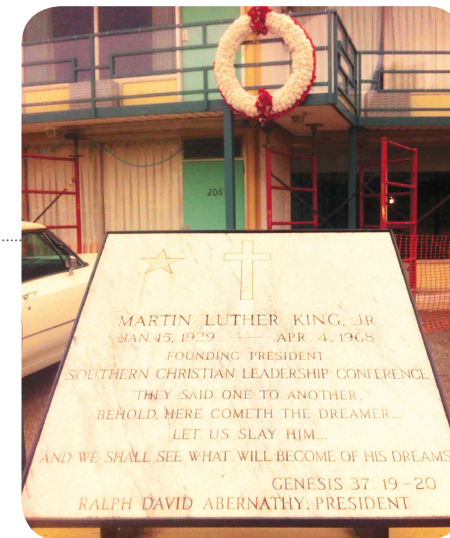


fig. 33. Memorial plaque outside of Lorraine Motel.



fig. 34. Lorraine Motel



fig. 36. Mulberry entrance of new Morris Cemetery

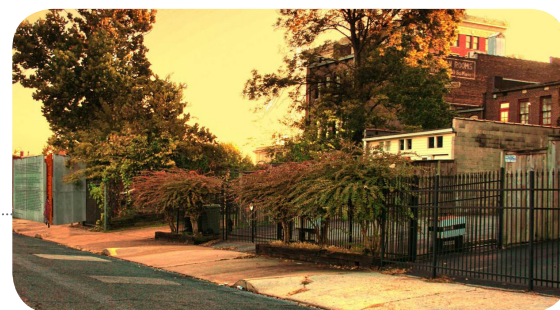


fig. 35. View down Mulberry Street towards site entrance.

This photographic exploration of the South Main district describes the experience of a person walking from the Lorraine Motel, a sacred site, to the New Morris Cemetery and back around the block. The design of the new Morris Cemetery makes conscious gestures towards other significant surrounding places. Perhaps the most significant gesture the cemetery makes is with an inflection of the north portion, and entrance opening onto Mulberry Street (the same street the Lorraine Motel is located on) towards the Civil Rights Museum. The rest of the design is based on the orthogonal grid structure of the city, but this intentional incline is a very strong acknowledgement of this sacred site. This conscious weaving together of the cemetery and the surrounding context adds another layer of significance and meaning.



fig. 46. *Husband and Wife buried in seperate Protestant and Catholic Cemeteries side by side.*

*Holland, 1880*

# the sacred nature of the cemetery

The urban cemetery has an unusual and complex significance. One can expect to find a cemetery close to almost any town or village, and vice versa. The cemetery is a place where the living and the dead converge. The word cemetery is derived from the Greek word for sleeping chamber, as the ancient Greeks believed the dead were temporarily resting, awaiting the day of the Judgment when the chambers would be emptied.<sup>1</sup> Most Christian graves face east for this reason. Until recently cemeteries have always been central to community life and the continuity of families. “By the early 1900s, American attitudes towards death and burial had undergone vast changes...strangers not family, buried the dead and maintained the grave site.”<sup>2</sup>

Cemeteries provide a venue for people to reflect on the past and to remember those who are no longer with the living. The Greeks had a concept called, *ars memoria*, or the art of memory: “Simodines knew the name of every person at a banquet because he could see in his mind the location where everyone sat.”<sup>3</sup> An essential function of the cemetery is to retain memories. And a cemetery is a sacred place, often rich with symbolism. Unlike graveyards, cemeteries are not attached to churches. They tend to be secular, municipal communities, serving a geographic region, community or ethnic group. However, despite the fact that they may not be associated with any religion, or that the people buried in these cemeteries may have been long forgotten, they are still considered sacred. What is the importance of a sacred space in a city? How does one define the word ‘sacred’? And how does this definition translate into architecture?

A cemetery holds an important place in a city because it is an idealization of a community: “Sacred space is according to Chidester and Linenthal, a heterotopia, a place that “represents contests and inverts.”<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, the creator of the term heterotopia, “...agrees that the cemetery is such a space.”<sup>5</sup> Seeing it as a space that is ‘connected with all the sites of the city state or society, or village’ and one that “[i]n Western culture... has practically always existed.”<sup>6</sup> The cemetery is not unlike a mirror that reflects a very unreal image of the place; the physical heterotopia reflects an idealization of society. The cemetery is perceived as a symbolic space representing ideals.

The sacred is the opposite of the profane or secular and hints of a spirit world or the *ganz andere* (another spirit world). Mircea Eliade used the word *hierophany* to describe manifestations of the sacred in our secular world: “A hierophany may range from some ordinary object such as a stone or a tree to the complex such as the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ. At each extreme we are confronted by the same mysterious act - the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”<sup>7</sup>

This idea can translate spatially and architecturally. According to Eliade, for the religious man, space is not homogenous, for in it he experiences interruptions and breaks and some areas of space are qualitatively different from others. According to Exodus 3:5, the Lord says to Moses: “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground”. Eliade believes that not all space is created equal. As we move through space and time, we experience pockets of significant space surrounded by expanses of meaningless space. Not only does the sacred space manifest itself as a break from profane space, but there is usually a fixed point to represent absolute reality. “Properly speaking, there is no longer any world, there are only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, govern and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.”<sup>8</sup>

1. Meg Greene. *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*. (Minneapolis: Twenty- First Century Books, 2008), 7.

2. Ibid, 54.

3. Wright, Elizabeth A. *Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/ Space*. (Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Vol 35, No.4 Fall, 2005), 51.

4. Ibid, 55.

5. Ibid, 58.

6. Ibid, 54.

7. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion, The significance of religious myth, symbolism, and ritual within life and culture*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), 52.

8. Ibid, 20.



One can find examples of this non-homogeneity of space in any religion, and in order to separate these two modes of being, we employ the architectural device of a **threshold**. Eliade uses the example of a church in a modern city where the interior of the church is in a different mode of being from that of the street, and the door serves as the threshold between the two. The Dogon tribe in East Africa have highly decorated gates to their villages to ward off evil spirits. Certain palaeo-oriental cultures (Babylon, Egypt, Israel) also have thresholds with guardians. Thresholds have great religious importance, "...for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of passage."<sup>1</sup>

Every sacred space has at least one of these hierophanies. A common hierophany is the image of an **opening to above**. This in the case of many religions, ensured communication with the gods. This communication is often expressed through something Eliade terms the **axis mundi**, or the image of a universal pillar. The purpose of the *axis mundi* is to connect and support heaven and earth, and its base is fixed in the world below. It is expressed in many forms. When Jacob in his dream saw a ladder reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending, he awoke and called the place Bethel, the house of God. It is also expressed as mountains (the ziggurat was literally a cosmic mountain), vines, and trees and in Egypt the obelisk. The axis mundi not only connects the underworld, earth and heaven, and facilitates communication with the gods, it defines the center of 'our' world.

For the religious man, nature is fraught with religious symbols and values, and throughout history humans found the sacred through the structures of the natural world. "...a sacred stone is venerated because it is sacred, not because it is a stone; it is the sacrality manifested through the mode of being of the stone that reveals its true essence."<sup>2</sup>

Some examples of hierophanies are natural phenomena such as the **sky**. The **sky** is the dwelling place of the gods in just about every religion. "The supreme divinity of the Maori is named Iho; iho means elevated, high up. Uwo-lul-wu, the supreme god of the Akposos Negroes, signifies what is on high, the upper regions."<sup>3</sup> The idea of a remote, mysterious god that lives in the sky is common to many religions, and the sky is the home of many of the celestial symbols that dominate religious symbolism.

**Water** is a dominant symbol for two reasons. (1) The waters existed before the earth (as in Genesis 1:2, "Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"). (2) By analyzing the religious values of the waters we shall better grasp the structure and function of symbols. Contact with water always brings about regeneration. We are made of water, baptisms are performed in water, and we start life in the womb surrounded by water. Water is such a powerful symbol because it is undeniably alive, full of germs and the ability to sustain life or demolish it. Cities are almost always built near bodies of water.

**Terra Mater**, or the earth, has always been a symbol of fertility, the mother of all. It is customary to give birth on the ground in places like Australia, China, Africa and South America. In ancient Egyptian texts the phrase "to sit on the ground"<sup>4</sup> meant to give birth. Not only is the earth associated with birth and life, but with death, the final resting place of our bones.

If one were to define a sacred place, as a place that has meaning, it is impossible to deny these symbols that are the property of all mankind. History constantly adds new layers of meaning, but it does not destroy the structure of the symbol. It is through symbols that the world becomes transparent; it through symbols that we are able to show the transcendent.

1. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane*. (1957), 42.

2. Ibid, 48.

3. Ibid, 59.

4. Ibid, 67.



**AXIS MUNDI:**

The point of orientation, connects and supports heaven, earth, and the underworld.



**THRESHOLD:**

Separates two spaces or two modes of being, the profane and the religious. Usually highly decorated. Usually has a guardian. Really important because they are symbols and vehicles of passage at the same time.



**SIGN:**

Clearly marks a sacred place.



**WATER:**

Healing/ We are made of water/ Death and Rebirth/ Baptism/ Wash away sins. The ancient Greeks believed that spirits were unable to cross water.

**PONDS:**

Source of Life/ Womb

**RIVER OF LETHE:**

River of Oblivion, significant in Greek Mythology



**COSMOGENY:**

World within a world



**CARDINAL DIRECTIONS:** Means of orienting oneself in the Universe



**SKY:**

God lives in the sky

**OPEN TO ABOVE:**

Communication with God is made possible. Jacob's ladder, vine, tree, mountain.



**TERRA MATER:**

Mother Earth/ fertility/ birth/ final resting place/ circle of life



**LIGHT**

God is light



fig. 47 . Cross



fig. 48. Egyptian Obelisk



fig. 49. Entrance to a Dogon village in east Africa

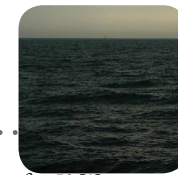


fig. 50 Water

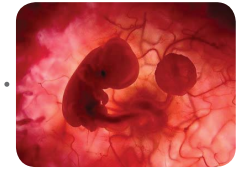


fig. 51. The womb

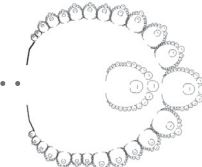


fig. 52. Organization of African Village



fig. 53. Sky



fig. 54. Mountain



fig. 55.



fig. 56.

# MEANING HIEROPHANIES

# precedent studies

## *Hierophanies in Practice*

### ***Precedent Study number 1: Carlo Scarpa, Brion Monumental Complex, San Vito d' Altivole, Treviso, Italy, 1969-78***

The Brion tomb is one of Scarpa's most well known and most visited works. It is a fusion of a garden, a cemetery, and a necropolis. His clients, Giuseppe and Onorino Brion, were devout Catholics and desired a final resting place that captured a sense of the countryside. Scarpa achieved this by raising the entire surface 30 inches from the ground, and fencing the complex with a wall angled 60 degrees to the ground. This allows those inside to observe the surrounding countryside while also giving them a sense of privacy.

**WATER:** Scarpa intended the composition to convey the notion of a journey or pathway which is symbolic of life. He uses the element of water to reinforce this idea.

**PONDS:** Symbolic of the source of life, the womb

**INTERLOCKED WEDDING RINGS:** Symbolic of the marriage of the Brions

**OPENINGS TO ABOVE:** Communication with God and a view of the sky is made possible through openings to above

### ***Precedent Study number 2: Aldo Rossi, Modena Cemetery, Modena, Italy, 1969-1978***

Aldo Rossi's design for the extension of a cemetery for the city of Modena is one of the most criticized and discussed in architectural discourse. One of the reasons is because Rossi's design contains a complex message that is portrayed through the use of symbols and hierophanies and allusions to other famous architects such as Piranesi, Boullée, Loos, Hannes, Mayer, Le Corbusier, and de Chirico. Rossi asserted that architects should be able to: "formulate clearly from what architecture our architecture is born."<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, this incredibly complex piece of architecture is a testament to universal truths about humanity.

**CUBE:** The empty holes in Rossi's cube, even though square, are analogous to the empty round holes in the Roman tomb.

**THE CONE:** The cone at Modena Serves two functions. An upper level is filled with an amphitheater containing seats to accommodate groups gathered for services. Below is the common grave, the final resting place of the bones of the indigent. By its placement and central plan, it recalls the Pantheon- like churches that dominated 19th century Italian cemeteries. The enormous oculus suggests the Pantheon itself (the burial place of Raphael and several Italian kings). However, the most obvious reference for the cone is Boullée's conical cenotaph. A cone is also reinterpreted as a smokestack, which brings to mind the cremation of bodies or factories.

**THE LABYRINTH:** Rossi was potentially influenced by several preceding labyrinths for the design of this cemetery. A labyrinth is a type of architectural trap, a place seemingly of no escape. Rossi was probably influenced by the labyrinth of Crete as depicted by Bernard Fischer von Erlach.

**THE TRIANGLE:** The triangle in Rossi's project takes on the form of a stepped pyramid, much like the funerary pyramids of Zoser at Saqqara. The triangular roof forms he employs are also references to the pitched roofs of Etruscan urns.

**THE REMAINS OF MAN:** The triangle and stepped pyramid resemble vertebrae because, when Rossi was first thinking of the cemetery project, he was in a hospital in Yugoslavia, recovering from an automobile accident. The triangle was composed of a spine with attached blocks that suggests a rib cage. The U-shaped porticoes form shoulders and arms.

### ***Precedent Study number 3: Miralles + Pinos, 1994, Igualada Cemetery, Barcelona, Spain***

The Igualada Cemetery is understood by the architects to be a city of the dead, where the dead and the living are brought closer together in spirit. As much as the project is a place for those to be laid to rest, it is a place for those to come and reflect in the solitude and serenity of the Catalonian landscape. Igualada Cemetery is an earthwork that blends into the landscape as if it were a natural aspect of the land. The cemetery was designed as a tiered landscape that unfolds as one continuous and fluid progression.

**AXIS MUNDI:** The poles at the entry are a reference to the crosses at Calvary

**OPENINGS TO ABOVE:** Communication with God, and a view of the sky is made possible through openings to above

1. Eugene J. Johnson. "What Remains of Man-Aldo Rossi's Modena Cemetery." (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Press, 1982), 48.

# Carlo Scarpa

Brion Monumental Complex,  
San Vito d'Altivole, Treviso,

1969 - 1978

"(Brion) shows some ways in which you could approach death in a social and civic way; and further what meaning there is in death."<sup>1</sup> - Scarpa

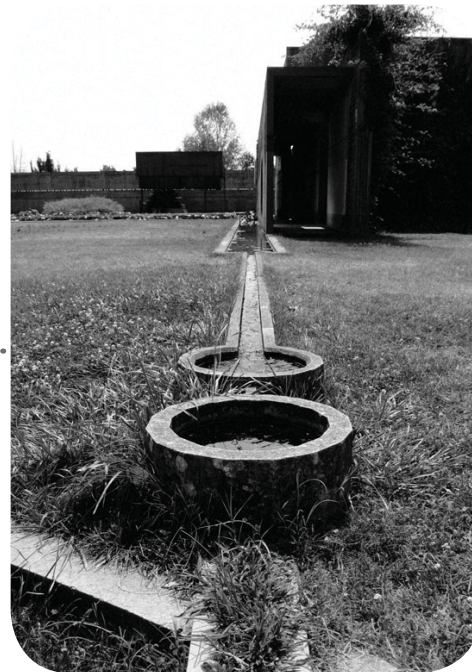
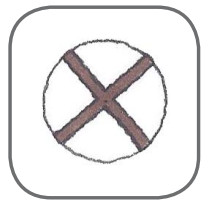


fig 58. Water feature outside neocropolis symbolic of the end of life



fig 57. Interlocking rings symbolic of the Brion's marriage



fig 59. Columbarium surrounded by water, symbolic of the womb, beginnings of life

1. Guido Beltrami. *Carlo Scarpa: Architecture and Design*. (New York: Rizzoli International, 1997), 55.

# Aldo Rossi

Cemetery of San Cataldo,  
Modena, Italy

1969 - 1978

"As opposed to a house, a school, or a hotel, where life itself modifies the work and its growth in time, the cemetery foresees all modification; in the cemetery, time possesses a different dimension (Rossi)."<sup>1</sup>

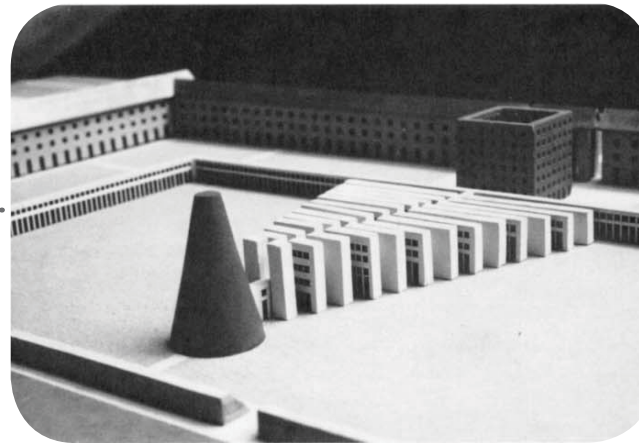
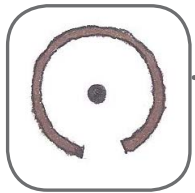
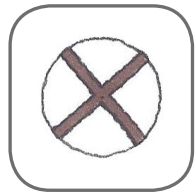
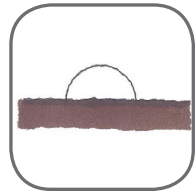
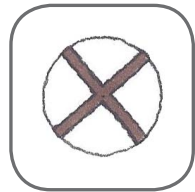


fig. 61. Triangular form takes on the character of a stepped pyramid.

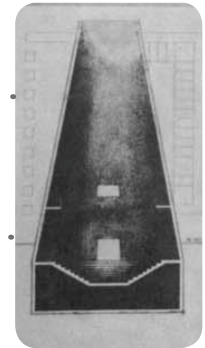


fig. 60. The cone at Modena serves two functions. The upper level is filled with an amphitheater containing seats to accommodate groups gathered for services. Below lie the common graves serving the bones of the indigent.

The enormous oculus suggests the Pantheon.

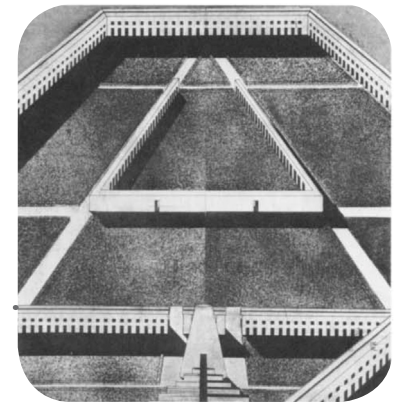


fig. 62. Threshold is comprised of housing and triangular shaped roofs which represent Etruscan funerary urns.

1. Eugene J. Johnson. "What Remains of Man-Aldo Rossi's Modena Cemetery." (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Press, 1982), 44.

# Miralles & Pinos

Igualada Cemetery,  
Barcelona, Spain,

1984 -1994

Conceptually, this cemetery is a poetic interpretation of the cycle of life, a link between the past, present and future.



fig. 63. Corten poles greet one at entrance. Represents crosses at Calvary.

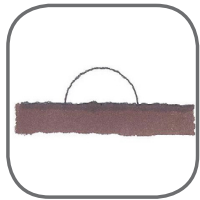


fig. 64. Light from above

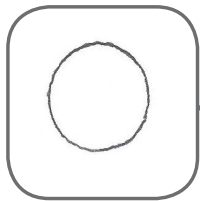


fig. 65. Light

**MEANING**  
**PRECEDENT STUDIES**

# design & program

Historically, cemeteries are afterthoughts and programmatically they are rarely more than places for human remains. However, the new Morris Cemetery attempts to create a place by taking both qualitative and quantitative aspects into account. Eliade's *heirophanies* were also an important influence on the program.

## Qualitative



- World within a world
- Integration/ separation of Cemetery w/ urban context
- Needs to be "different" from "profane"
- Serene/ Place of Rest/ Oasis
- Needs to convey some type of "meaning"
- Have a sense of "place"



- Needs to be visually "rich"
- Sense of a Metaphorical Journey

## Quantitative



- Below Ground Mausoleum
- Stairs Descending Down



- Threshold
- Elevator



- Water
- Scattering Garden
- Place to place casket during funeral



- Light from above
- Open to sky
- Places to sit and be with loved ones



fig 66. Selection of Materials

## materials palette

*"Weathering adds the 'finish' of the environment."*<sup>1</sup>

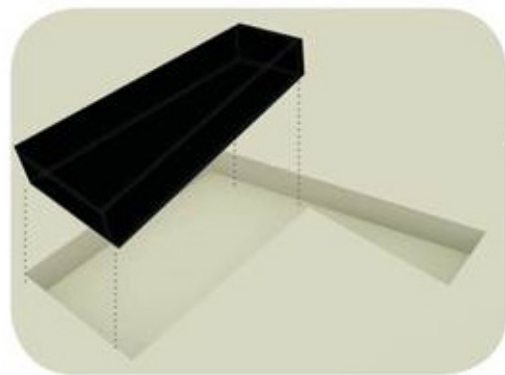
Materials were selected that would weather and wear over time. For example, the exterior concrete wall of the building contains a ground copper powder that turns green as it oxidizes and is exposed to moisture (see fig.66.), creating a stunning green patina. This is not unlike the lichen and moss that grow on gravestones. Grooves and overhangs will help direct water and weathering. Weathering steel, also sometimes known by as Corten, was selected for the three axis mundi, as well as various details used throughout the design. Black limestone (see fig.66) was selected for the 'coffin' or crypt where the human remains are located. The benches are fashioned out of rough hewn lumber, which will also poetically weather over time.

1. Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow. *On Weathering: the Life of Buildings in Time*. (London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), 16.

# diagrams

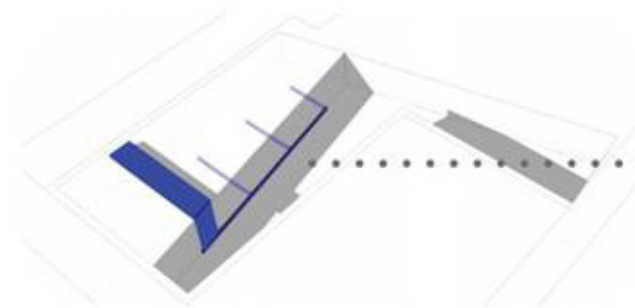
Four simple diagrams drove the design.

- 1.) **Coffin/ grave.** The site was excavated and a pristine black box resembling a coffin conceptually placed in it. This diagram illustrates the importance of the section in this design. It is important to note that diagrammatically, the human remains were all placed within this black box.
- 2.) **Life/ Death.** A clear line (where the material changes from earthy stone to concrete) delineates the street level from anything that was excavated below. Different materials are used above and below. No vegetation is used below in order to emphasize this idea, but above there is a garden and vines planted around the perimeter.
- 3.) **Water.** Water is highly symbolic in religion and architecture. The ancient Greeks believed that spirits could not cross water. Baptisms take place in water; we start our lives in water. In this diagram there is a reflecting pool in the garden (above the line that describes life and death). It then trickles down and splits into three thin rivulets of water. It then terminates in front of the mausoleum. The water is a metaphor for the journey of life as well as a means to comfort the mourning.
- 4.) **History.** The original Morris Cemetery that existed in the 1800s only overlapped a small portion of this site. Conceptually, all the human remains were kept within this original boundary.



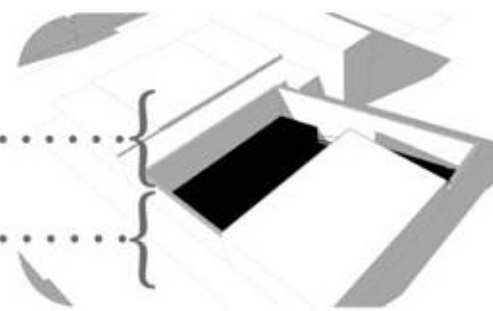
figs 67. - 70. Diagrams

.....COFFIN/ HOLE

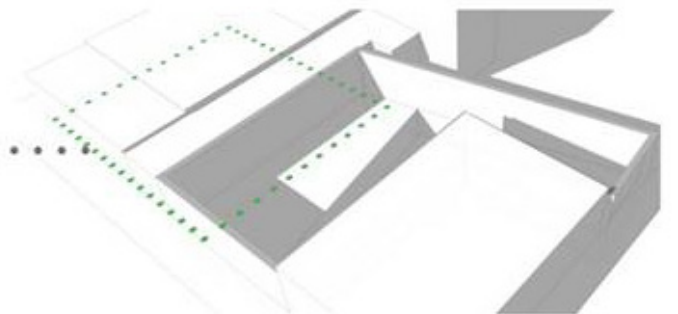


..... WATER

LIFE .....  
DEATH.....



HISTORY.....





# concept sketches

The concept was a weaving together of the context of the city, the history of the site, and an interpretation of our contemporary view of death. An effort was made to use symbolic language that was open to a number of interpretations.

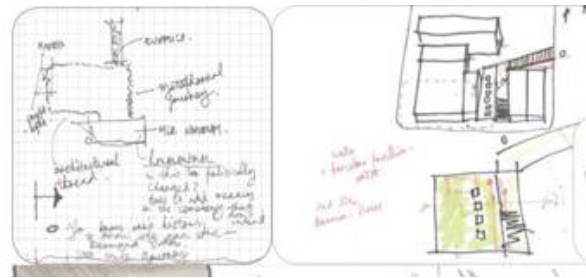


fig. 71. Ideas about weaving together the city and the site emerge.

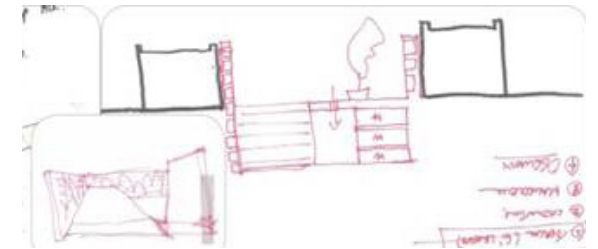


fig. 72. The use of water as a symbolic threshold.

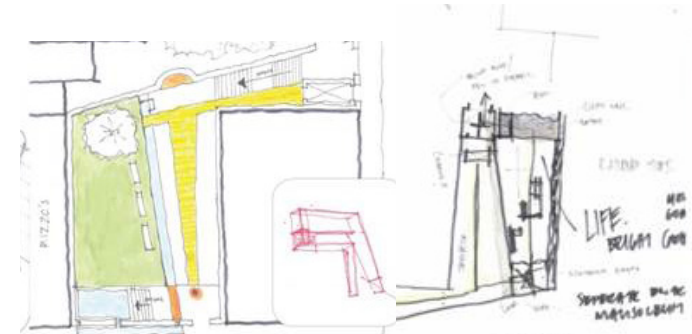


fig. 73. Early conceptual sketches exploring the section.

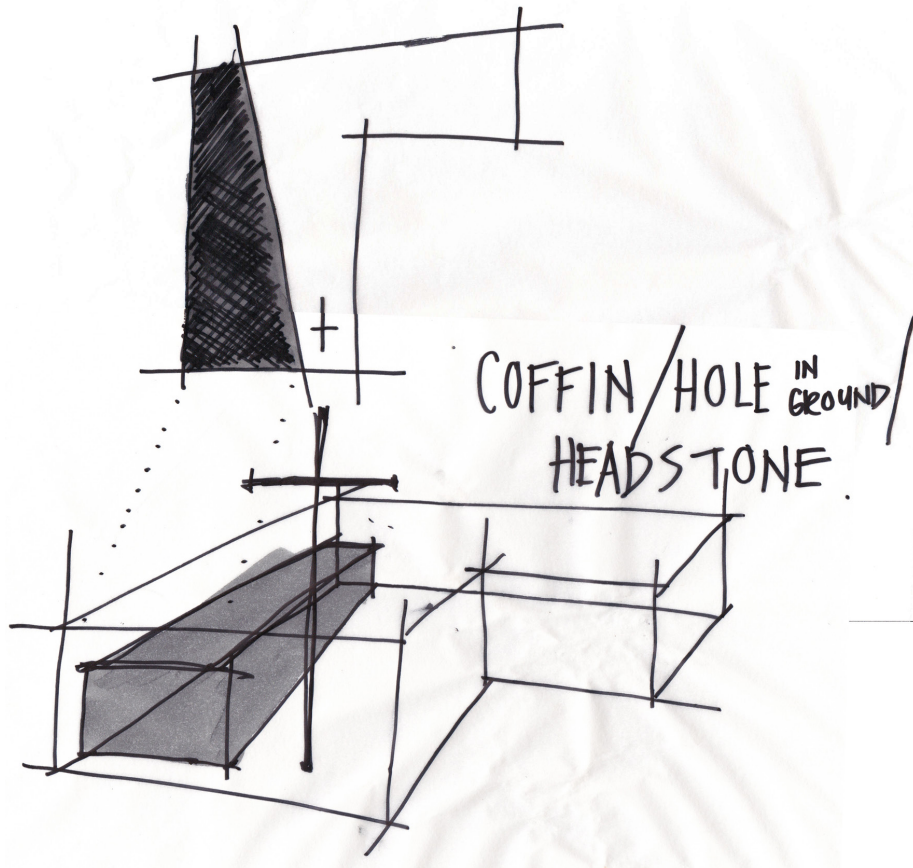


fig. 74. The parti: a coffin, a hole in the ground and a headstone drives the organization of the design.

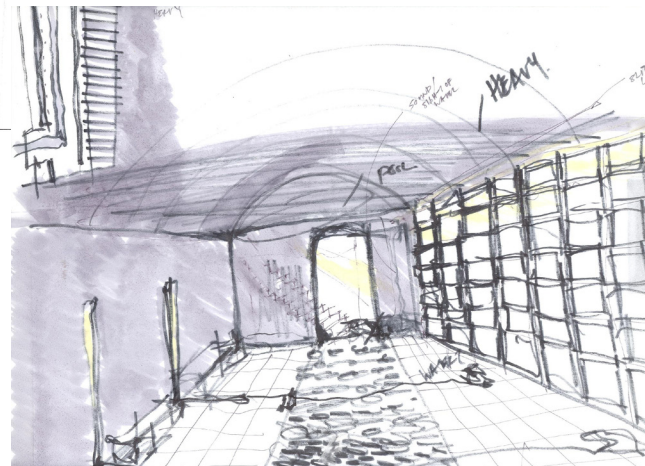


fig. 75. Early conceptual sketch of crypt.

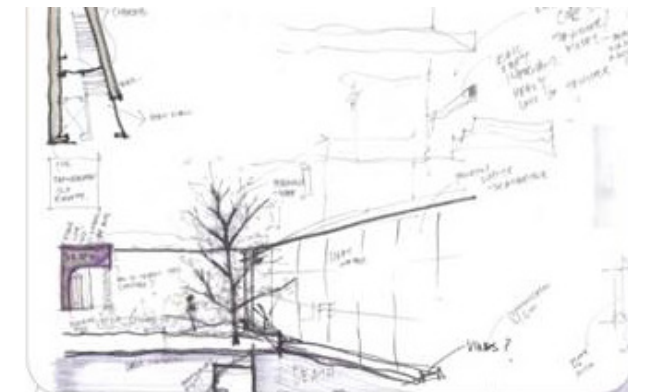


fig. 76. Line describing life above and death below. The idea of a tree above the entrance to the crypt.

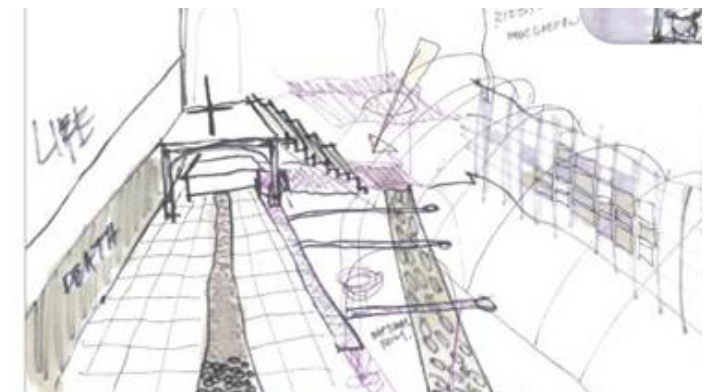


fig. 77. Path through internment area, crypt and up to G.E. Patterson.



fig. 78. An exploration of the water, the axis mundi, the entrance to the crypt and symbols.

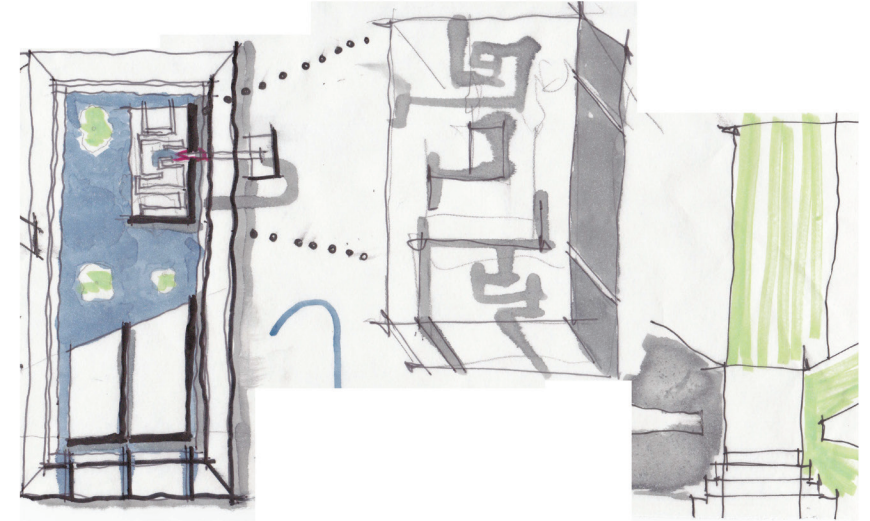


fig. 79. Pond details: stepping stones and a spigot for the water.

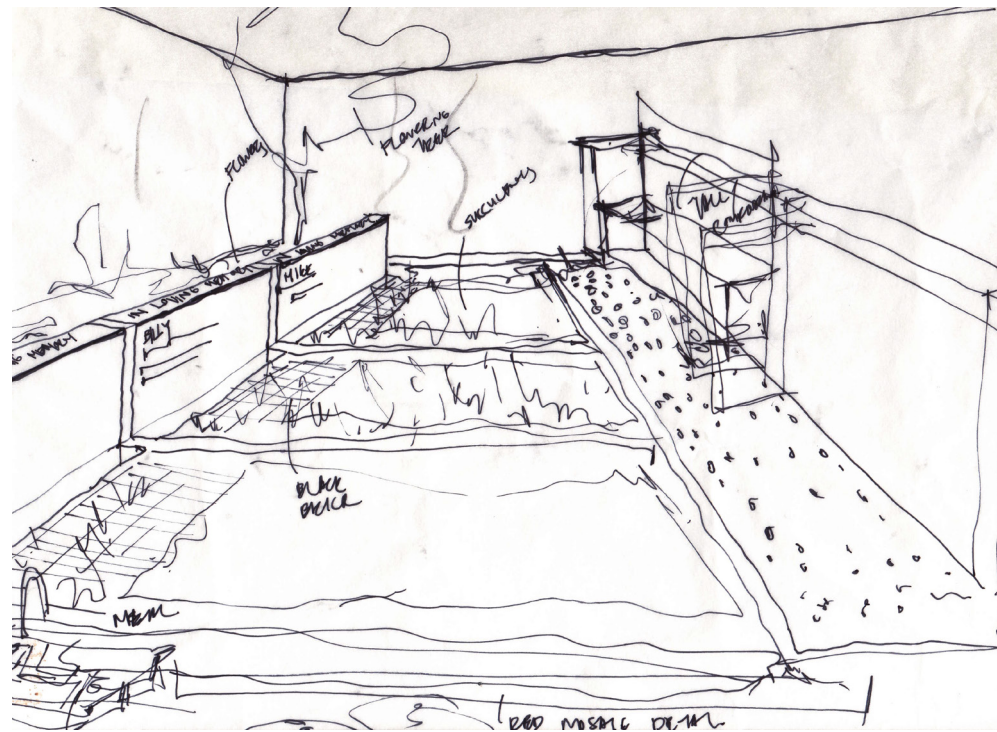


fig. 80. Scattering Garden and seating area sketches.

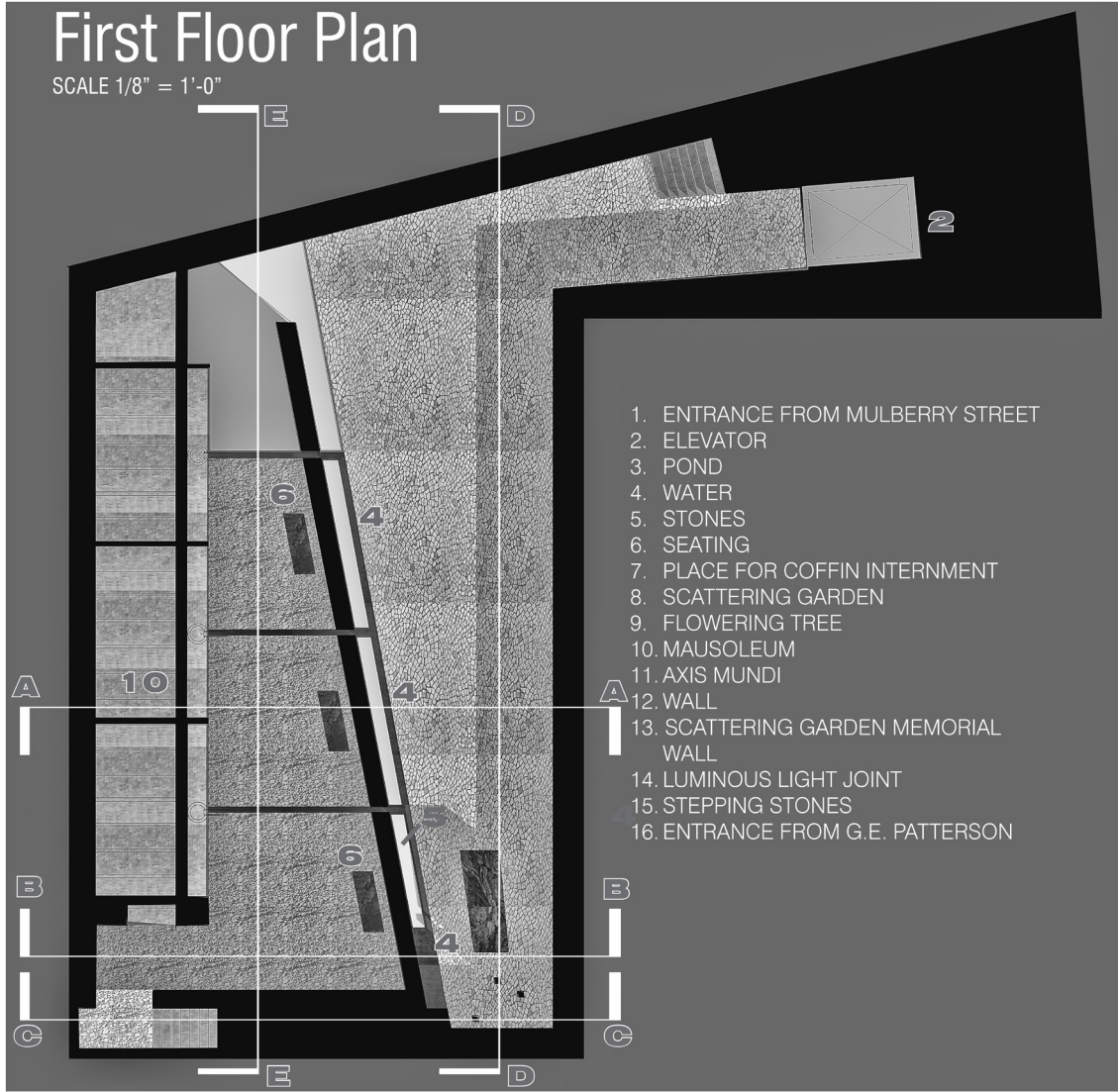


fig. 81. An exploration of materials and the labyrinth design.

# plans

## First Floor Plan

SCALE 1/8" = 1'-0"



## Upper Level Floor Plan

SCALE 1/8" = 1'-0"



fig. 82. Presentation Board- Below Grade Floor Plan



fig. 83. Presentation Board- Street Level Floor Plan



# sections



fig. 84 Section

A. Section facing West



fig. 85 Section

B. Section: South



fig. 86 Section

C. Section: North

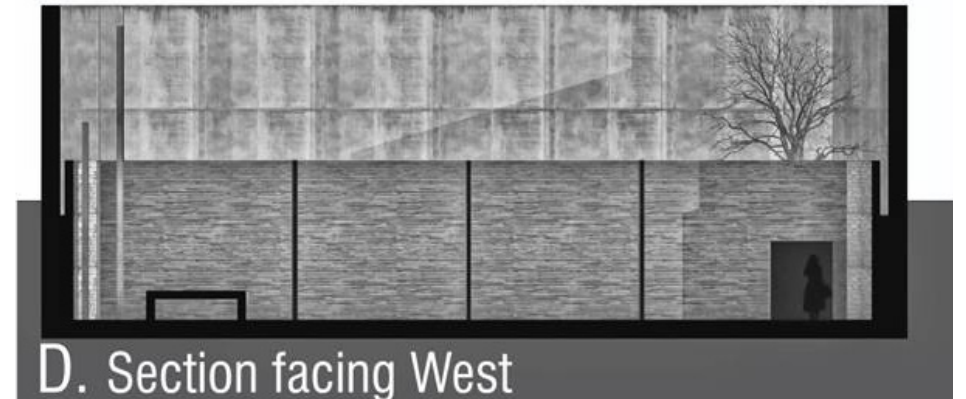


fig. 87. Section

D. Section facing West



fig. 88. Section

E. Section: North



# context

Once the site was selected, issues such as circulation, scale, privacy, materiality, and perhaps most importantly symbolism, had to be addressed. A small site was deliberately picked in a heavily trafficked area in order to encourage people to visit the cemetery on an everyday basis, and to participate in the un hiding of death. Located at the corner of G.E. Patterson and Mulberry Streets, the new Morris Cemetery has two entrances which allow one to weave in and out of the site and through the city. Conceptually the design is a simple, black box placed in a grave in the ground.

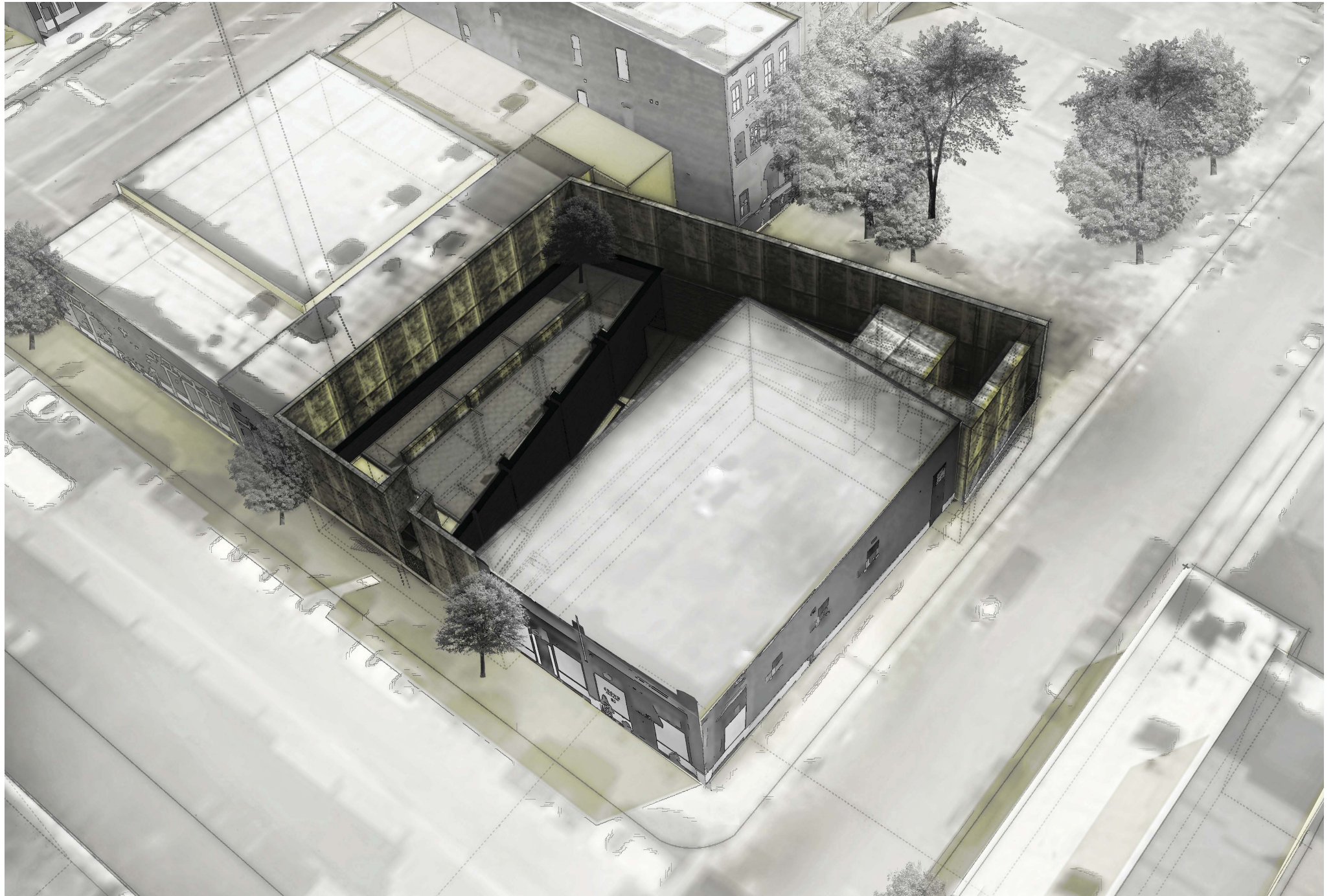


fig. 89. Diagram

# elevations

There are two main entrances to the cemetery, one on G.E. Patterson, and one on Mulberry Street. This allows for people to experience the space in a number of different ways. If someone were participating in a funeral, they would enter on Mulberry Street through the 20 foot high pivoting mahogany door (etched with a symbol of the labyrinth at Chartres) and descend down into the internment area. The facades are etched with contemporary poems about death and the afterlife by Sam Eagleman.



fig. 90. Mulberry Street Elevation

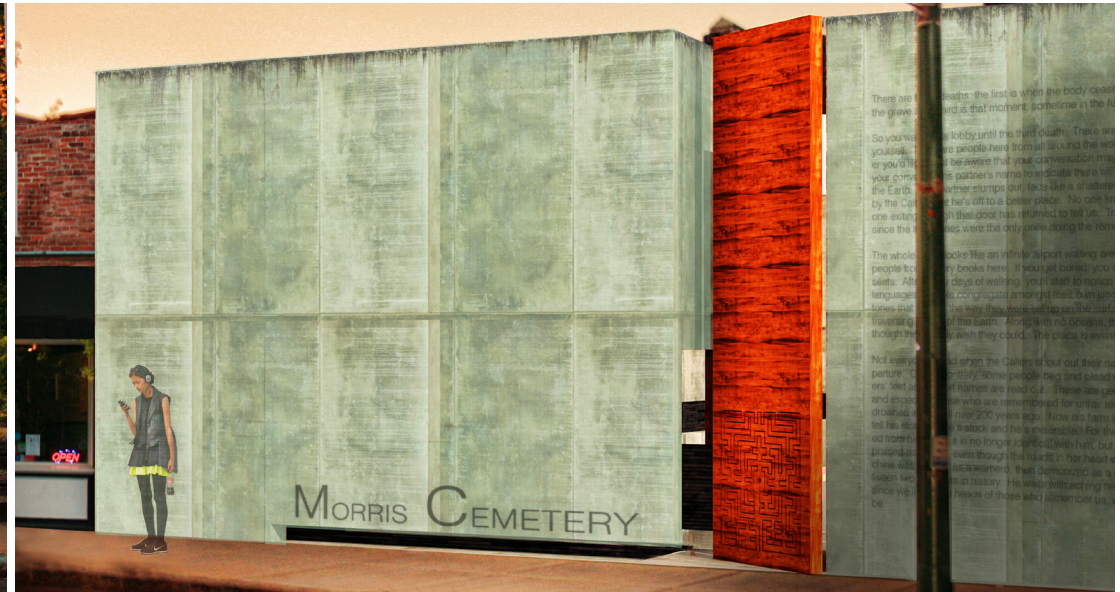


fig. 91. G.E. Patterson Elevation

## Ineffable

by Sam Eagleman

*When soldiers part ways at war's end, the breakup of the platoon triggers the same emotion as the death of a person—it is the final bloodless death of the war. This same mood haunts actors on the drop of the final curtain: after months of working together, something greater than themselves has just died. After a store closes its doors on its final evening, or a congress wraps its final session, the participants amble away, feeling that they were part of something larger than themselves, something they intuit had a life even though they can't quite put a finger on it. In this way, death is not only for humans but for everything that existed.*

*And it turns out that anything which enjoys life enjoys an afterlife. Platoons and plays and stores and congresses do not end—they simply move on to a different dimension. They are things that were created and existed for a time, and therefore by the cosmic rules they continue to exist in a different realm.*

*Although it is difficult for us to imagine how these beings interact, they enjoy a delicious afterlife together, exchanging stories of their adventures. They laugh about good times and often, just like humans, lament the brevity of life. The people who constituted them are not included in their stories. In truth, they have as little understanding of you as you have of them; they generally have no idea you existed.*

*It may seem mysterious to you that these organizations can live on without the people who composed them. but the underlying principle is simple: the afterlife is made of spirits. After all, you do not bring your kidney and liver and heart to the afterlife with you—instead, you gain independence from the pieces that make you up.*

*A consequence of this cosmic scheme may surprise you: when you die, you are grieved by all the atoms of which you were composed. They hung together for years, whether in sheets of skin or communities of spleen. With your death they do not die. Instead, they part ways, moving off in their separate directions, mourning the loss of a special time they shared together, haunted by the feeling that they were once playing parts in something larger than themselves, something that had its own life, something they can hardly put a finger on.<sup>1</sup>*

1. David Eagleman. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. (New York: Random House, 2009), 43.
2. David Eagleman. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. (New York: Random House, 2009), 68.

## Metamorphosis

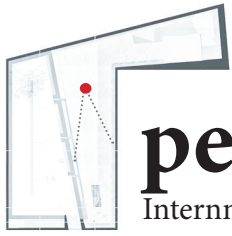
by Sam Eagleman

*There are three deaths: the first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.*

*So you wait in this lobby until the third death. There are long tables with coffee, tea, and cookies – you can help yourself. There are people here from all around the world, and you can try to strike up a conversation with whomever you'd like. Just be aware that your conversation may be interrupted at any moment by the Callers, who call out your conversations partner's name to indicate there will never again be another remembrance of him by anyone on the Earth. Your partner slumps out, face like a shattered and re-glued plate, saddened even though he's kindly told by the Callers that he's off to a better place. No one knows where that better place is, or what it offers, because no one exiting through that door has returned to tell us. Tragically, many people leave just as their loved ones arrive, since the loved ones were the only ones doing the remembering. We all wag our heads at that typical timing.*

*The whole place looks like an infinite airport waiting area, but the company is terrific. There are many famous people from history books here. If you get bored, you can strike out in any given direction, past aisles and aisles of seats. After many days of walking, you'll start to notice that people look different, and you'll hear the tones of foreign languages. People congregate amongst their own kind, and what one sees is the spontaneous emergence of territories that mirrors the way they were set up on the surface of the planet. With the exception of the oceans, you're traversing a map of the Earth. Along with no oceans, there are no time zones either. No one sleeps here, even though they mostly wish they could. The place is evenly lit by fluorescent lights.*

*Not everyone is sad when the Callers shout out their names, when they call as though announcing the next flight departure. On the contrary, some people beg and plead when the Callers enter. They prostrate themselves at the Callers' feet as the next names are read out. These are generally the folks who have been here a long time, too long, and especially those who are remembered for unfair reasons. For example, take the farmer over there, who drowned in a small river 200 years ago. Now his farm is the site of a small college, and the tour guides each week tell his story. So he's stuck and he's miserable. For the more his story is told, the more it drifts. He is utterly alienated from his name; it is no longer identical with him, but continues to bind. The cheerless woman across the way is praised as a saint, even though the roads in her heart were convoluted. The gray haired man at the vending machine was lionized as a war hero, then demonized as a warlord, and finally canonized as a necessary firebrand between two moments in history. He waits with aching heart for his statues to fall. And that is the curse of this room: since we live in the heads of those who remember us, we lose control of our lives and become who they want us to be.<sup>2</sup>*



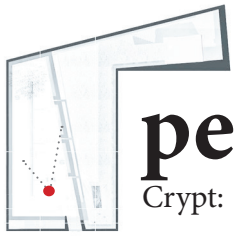
# perspective

Internment:

The walls of the internment space are lined with vines, which are symbolic of Jacob's ladder and communication with God. The space is open to the sky and tapers towards three weathered poles, which are symbolic of the crosses of Calvary. A water feature cascades down the face of the crypts and then splits into three paths which penetrate through the wall.



fig. 92. Perspective



# perspective

Crypt:

A person visiting may then choose to enter the dark crypt made of black limestone. The interior of the crypt is lined with gravel, which provides another threshold and an crunching sound. Light enters through three thin rivulets at precisely the same points where three streams of water penetrate the black limestone jewel box. The three streams of water terminate in large bronze bowls just in front of the face of the mausoleum.

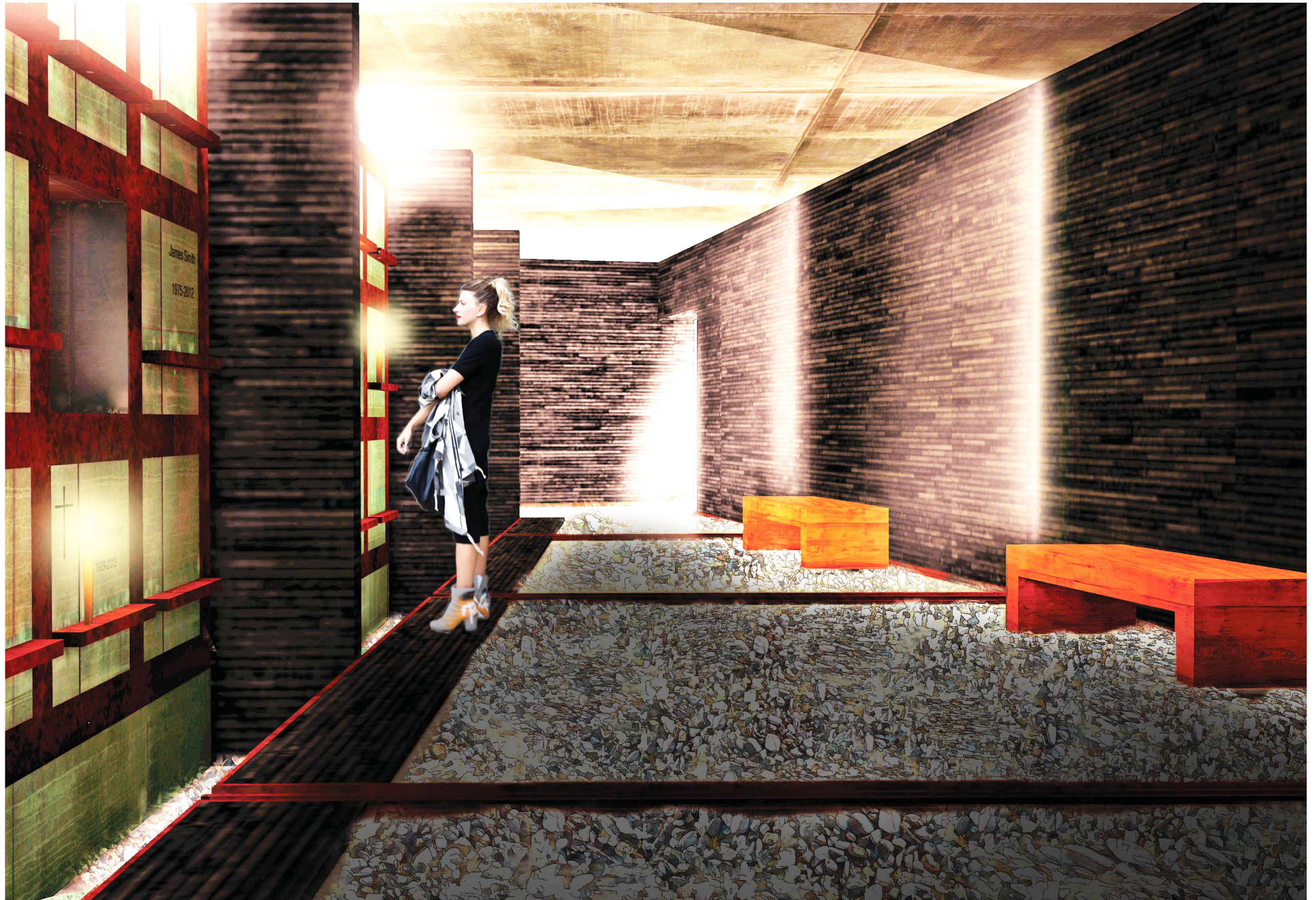
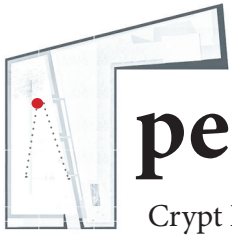


fig. 93. Perspective





# perspective

Crypt Detail:

The use of water is both symbolic and comforting; the termination of the water is a symbol of life ending, and the presence of water comforts those that come to grieve the loss of their loved ones. The faces of the mausoleum provide a shelf to place flowers or a candle.

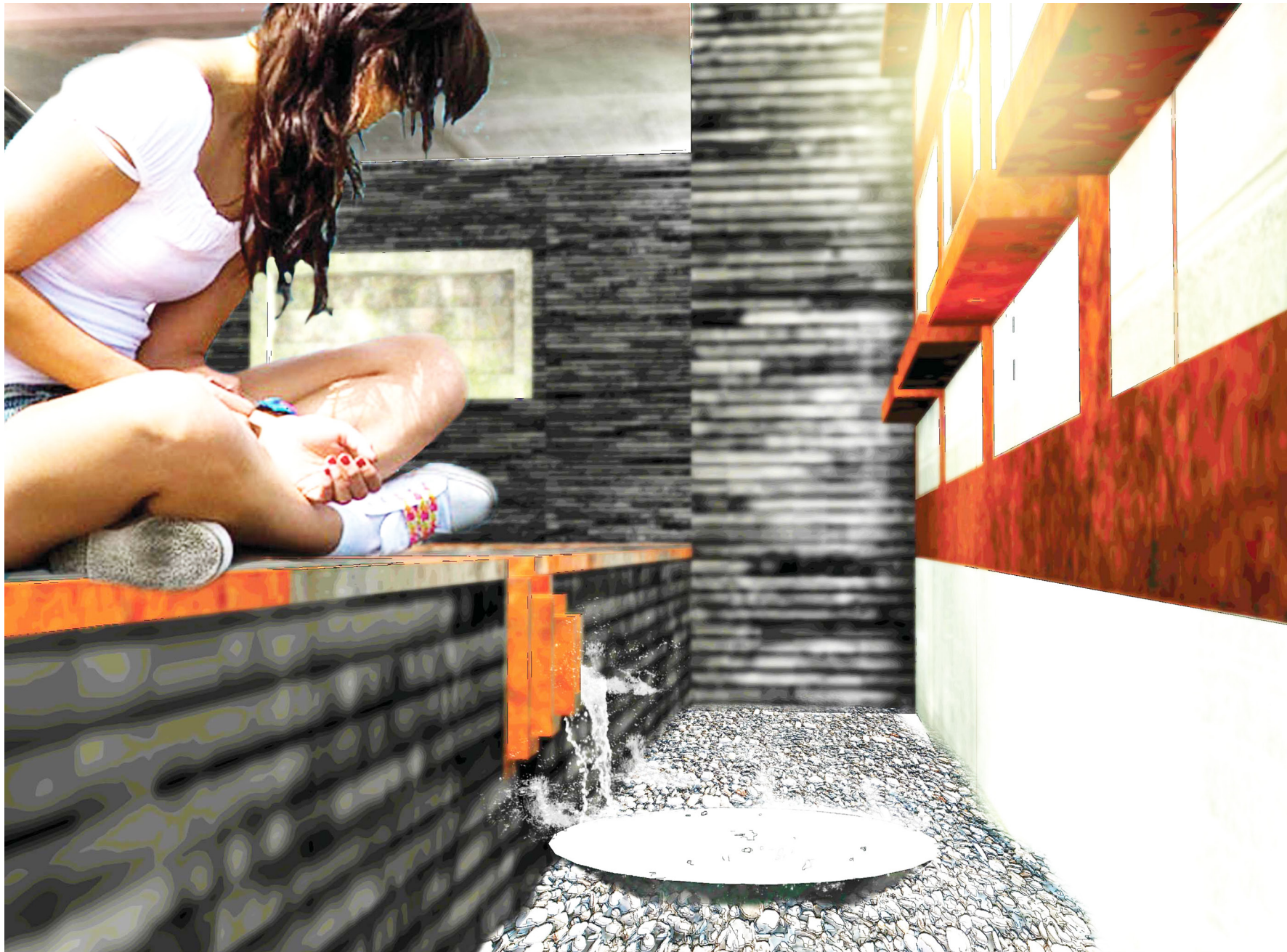
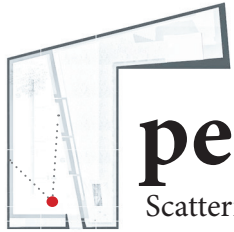


fig. 94. Perspective



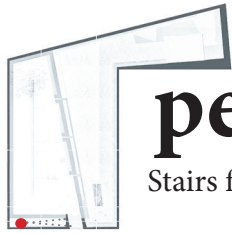
# perspective

Scattering Garden:

The scattering garden is a place to scatter the cremated remains of loved ones. It is located on the roof of the crypt, directly above the internment space of the bodies. There are a number of ways to interact with the site, and the garden may offer a welcome respite from the city, as well as a place to contemplate life and death. Various contemporary poems about death, dying, grieving and life are inscribed on the walls.



fig. 95. Perspective



# perspective

Stairs from the crypt to the main entrance and the scattering garden:

A space between the base of the exterior wall and the street and a space cut out by the reflecting pool creates an acoustical effect of footsteps and street noise on one side, and trickling water from the pond on the other.

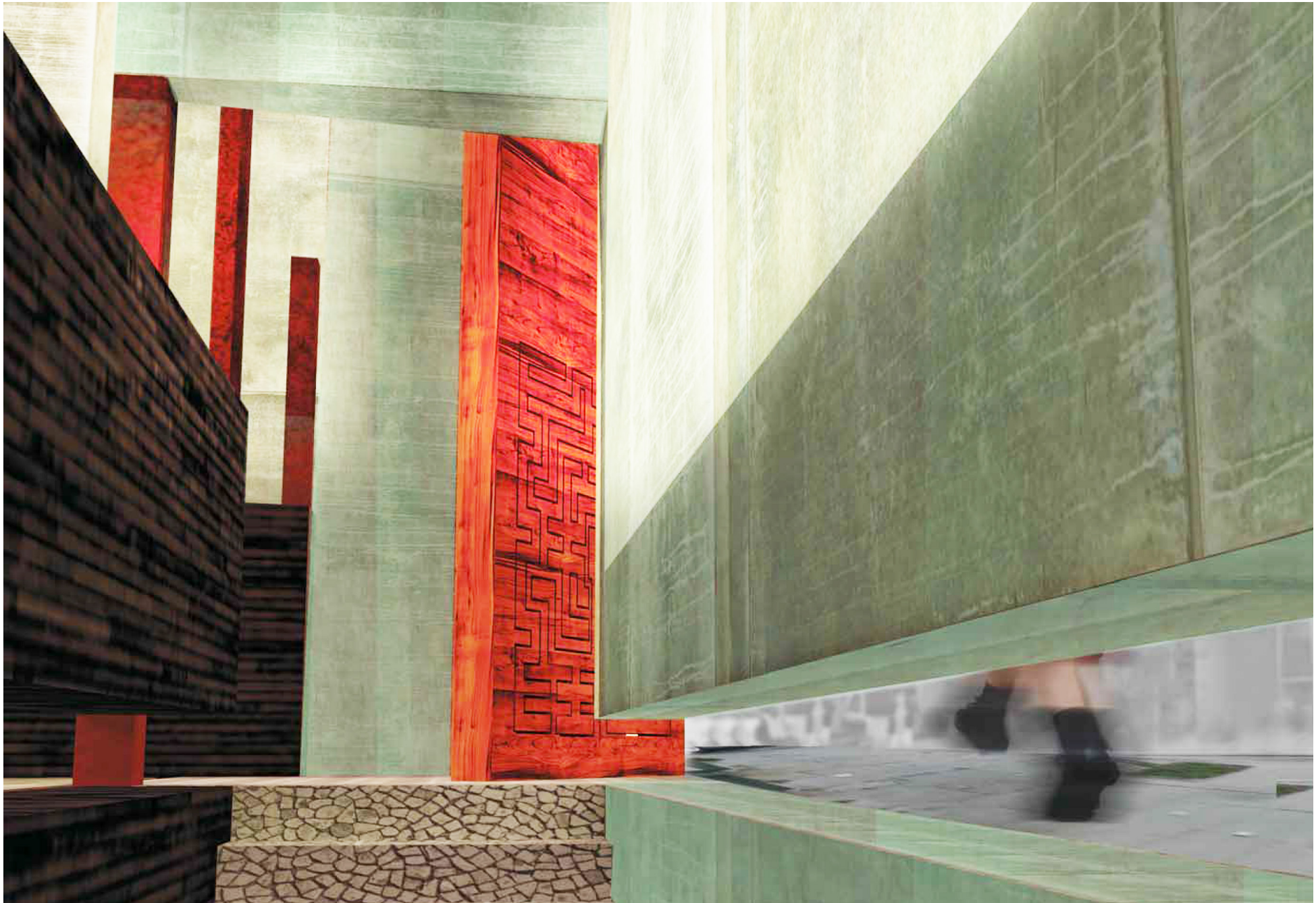
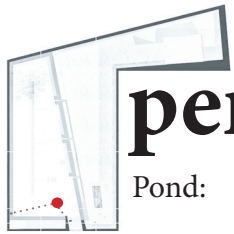


fig. 96. Perspective



# perspective

Pond:

Most foot traffic is along G.E. Patterson and most people will approach the cemetery from this entrance. After entering through another 20 foot tall mahogany door, one has the option to cross over the reflecting pool (a metaphor for the womb, the source of life), another threshold, and into the garden where the scattering garden is located, or one can descend into the darkness of the crypt.

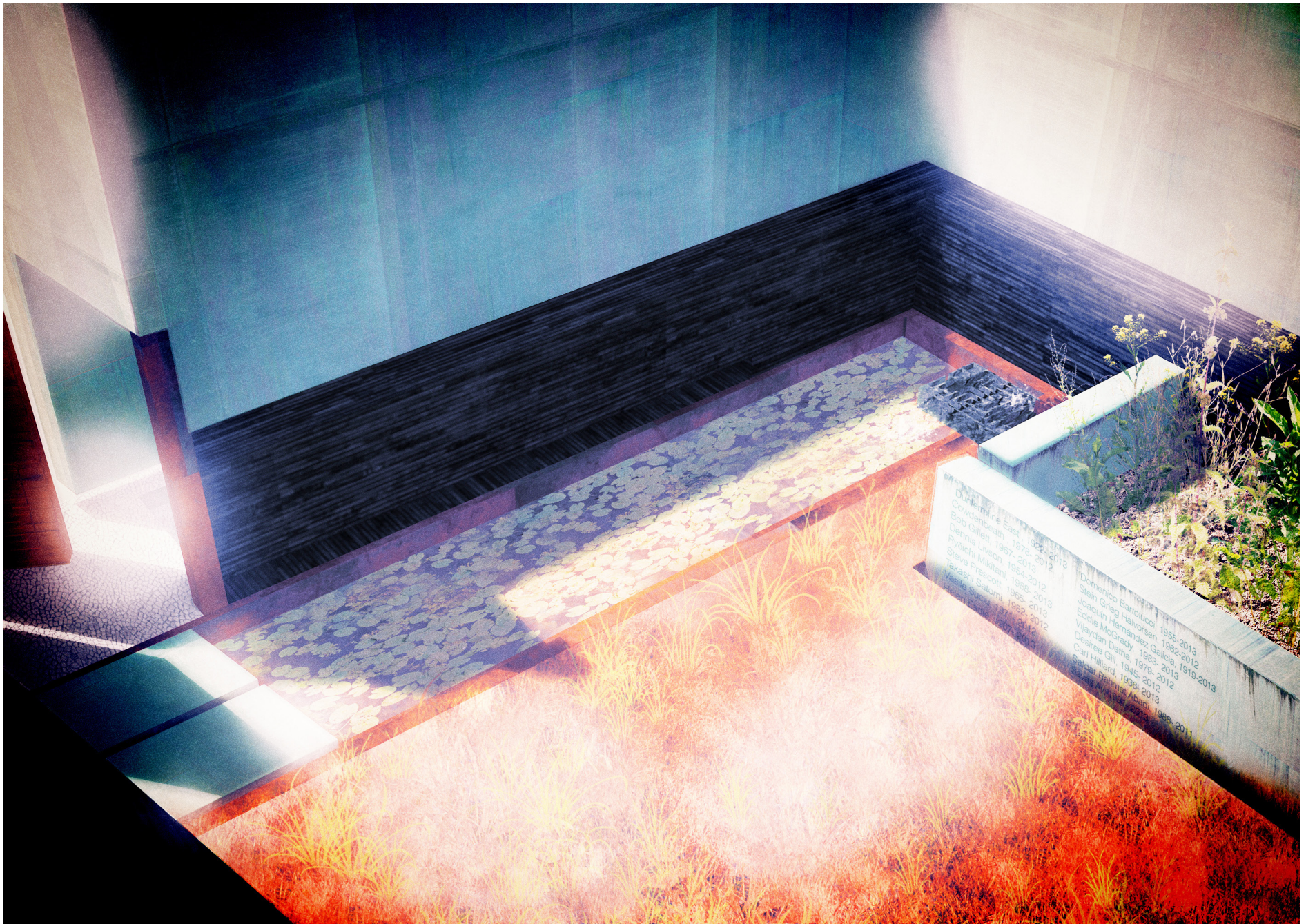


fig. 97. Perspective

# details

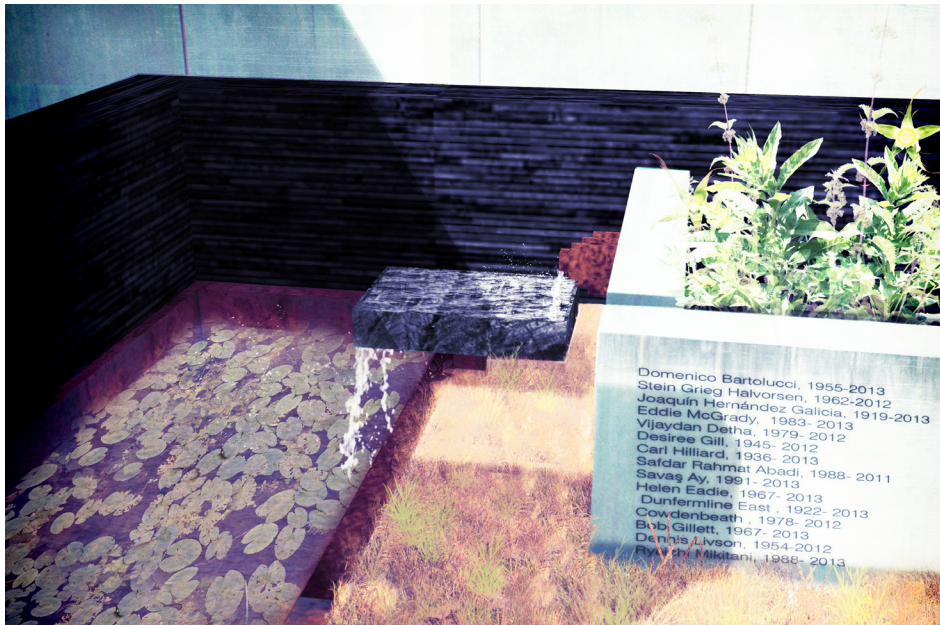


fig. 98. Scattering garden and pond detail.

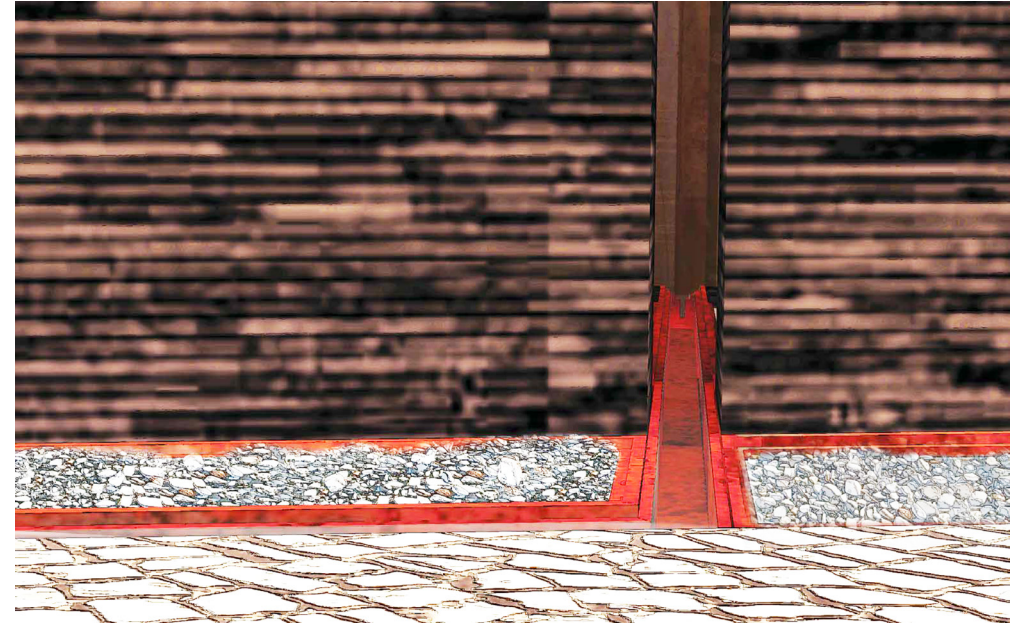


fig. 99. Water, gravel and limestone detail.



fig. 100. Bronze design of roots inset in concrete at entrance of crypt to symbolize Terra Mater.

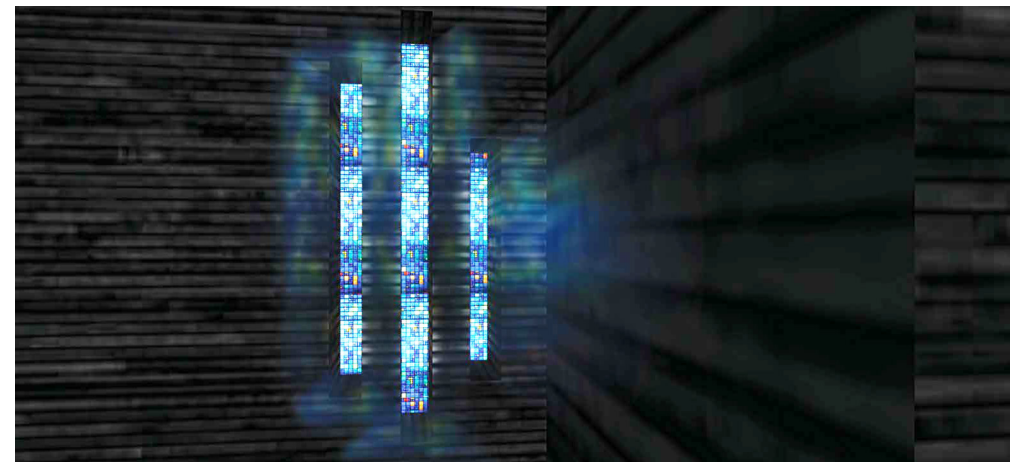


fig. 101. Stained glass window detail in crypt.

# conclusion

“In the question ‘Why anything?’ there is the unanswered.  
Death unanswers everything.”<sup>1</sup>

— Louis I.Kahn

There were some issues that were left unresolved in this thesis. For instance, the size of the cemetery (45 internment spaces for bodies and a modest scattering garden) is not a pragmatic response to the question of how to house the body of everyone who dies in the city of Memphis. This was not the point of this thought exercise. The focus was on the experience of the individual user, and the place of the cemetery in the city. The point was to create a space for conversations about death and dying so that we can be more present, prepared, and thoughtful about our lives and our deaths.

In the early stages of the thesis I set out to answer three questions. First; ‘can burial grounds be integrated into everyday life?’ Through the selection of the site, and the careful design that took the context of the city into consideration, the new Morris Cemetery was sensitively integrated into the city and everyday life. Connections were made between the living and the dead, and an honorable attempt was made to unhide death in a meaningful way.

Second; ‘is there a place for the sacred in the city?’ There are still sacred places in the city of Memphis, but they are very rare. An excellent example of one, the site of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, was serendipitously located within less than half a mile from the site of the new Morris Cemetery. The National Civil Rights Museum is a sacred place because it is a symbol of freedom, the incredible spirit of M.L.K, and many values that we collectively cherish. The new Morris Cemetery has an entrance on the same street (Mulberry Street) as the Lorraine Motel, and the north wall of the cemetery is inflected at an angle in acknowledgement of this sacred site.

Finally; ‘what is an appropriate response to the current view of death in our society?’ Humans are meaning seeking creatures. Meaning and symbols are what allow us to cope with the difficulty and strangeness of being alive. It can be argued that we are in denial of death and that we fear it. And our contemporary cemeteries reflect our view of death with banal, placeless lawns strewn with artificial flowers. My intent was to respond to our contemporary view of death in a more thoughtful and poetic manner by creating a place that considers the meaning of death.

Death will find us all, and there is an end to everything we create, even something as seemingly permanent as a building. Acknowledging death allows us to follow our most grandiose impulses, as well as to be humbled and grounded by the everyday world that we share.

1. Richard Saul Wurman. *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Access Press and Rizzoli, 1986), 33.

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fig. 102. Watercolor concept. Weaving an architectural thread between the sacred and the city.



