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Displacing the Dead, Disregarding the Living

Public Space and Cemetery Planning in Bogotá, Colombia

Christien Klaufus

IN THE HEART OF BOGOTÁ, two public spaces symbolically mark the government's attempts to create a post-conflict capital city. At the intersection of Calle 26 and Carrera 22, at the entrance of an area ambitiously baptized Renaissance Park, stands an iconic statue by Fernando Botero. On the other side of the street, Reconciliation Park extends around the contemporary building of the Memory, Peace and Reconciliation Center. The initiative for those projects – which are part of a so-called Memorial Axis – was taken by mayors Enrique Peñalosa and Antanas Mockus during their successive administrations from 1998 to 2003. Although they received more international fame for implementing bike lanes, installing a Rapid Bus Transit system and reducing crime rates, the two Calle 26 projects epitomize the aspiration for a city no longer linked in the public mind by notions of death. The mayors took this task quite literally: in order to construct the parks, an existing cemetery had to be removed. In light of their ambition to design for peace, the displacement of graves was considered a practical necessity. Nevertheless, the impact was substantial. The removal of old graves heralded a period of cemetery governance, in which the international sustainability agenda became the new norm.

This is exemplified in the newly founded cemetery Parque Serafin on the southern outskirts of the city, close to the self-built settlements of Ciudad Bolívar. Ciudad Bolívar is Bogotá's third largest municipality,

with over 700,000 inhabitants. The barrios are built against steep hills and in many ways its residents are as vulnerable as their sloping houses. Its population once fled the violence of Colombia's guerilla war or migrated from impoverished rural areas. The cemetery on their side of the city was designed for three purposes: to store the human remains displaced from Calle 26; to service the poor on that side of the metropolis; and to avoid spatial scarcity at cemeteries in the case of future calamities. When urban death rates soared a decade earlier, victims had literally been piled up too often at the other three public cemeteries. In the late 1990s the government decided that such desecration should never happen again. The new cemetery was meant to mark a period of better organized and more dignified burial, but the ambition went further. In its design and layout, Parque Serafin resembles the private parkland cemeteries of the rich, while in its use it caters primarily to the poor. Things, however, did not go as planned. Until recently poor families did not bury their dead in the expected numbers, and in 2015 the metropolitan government decided to speed up a new round of modernization policies to increase the demand.

Bogotá's inner-city regeneration plans are intertwined with burial capacity building on the city's outskirts. Together, the projects are illustrative of a paradoxical situation, in which ambitious spatial plans for the common good result in dysfunctional places. In their attempt to improve cemetery facilities for the poor, technocratic planners turned a blind eye to the existing cultural values and the daily uses of Colombian cemetery space, embedded as those are in local history. To understand the social sensitivities associated with cemeteries in Bogotá, we have to go back to the turn of the century when the two parks and cemetery Serafin were planned.



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Cleaning Up the Area

Bogotá's oldest cemetery, Cementerio Central, is situated along the Calle 26 next to the new parks. It is a monumental cemetery of national historical value amidst a socially vulnerable, low-income neighborhood. Several presidents and other illustrious figures are buried in richly-decorated graves or tombs on this cemetery. Today's cemetery users are a curious amalgam of next of kin, pilgrims worshiping the graves of "potent souls," informal death-service providers such as priests and step ladder renters, illicit traders, sex workers, and ultimately, tourists. The cemetery offers a lively scenery in a space also prone to crime.

Before 1998, when the areas now transformed into the city's Memorial Axis were still a part of the cemetery, Cementerio Central was twice its current size. Those areas were the sectors of burial space for the poor and – according to testimonies – also sheltered a mass grave of thousands of anonymous victims killed during the *Bogotazo* riots of 1948 (which disrupted the city after presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was murdered). These sections, separated by a road, slowly but gradually deteriorated. When architect Enrique Peñalosa took office, he decided to redevelop the area starting with the Renaissance Park. The human remains were removed without an attempt to identify them. Only a small plaque commemorates the *Bogotazo* victims. However, the "re-birth" of that place as a marker of a post-conflict era was never established; the lack of consideration for the victims and the political unwillingness to properly store the remains resulted in public outrage. Ever since its opening, the park has barely been used and has been described as a urban failure in terms of both spatial design and historical commemoration.

Peñalosa's successor, Mockus, was more sensitive to public concerns when he developed the equally ambitious Reconciliation Park. The site was initially designated for a small peace monument. In demolishing two existing *columbaria*, however, the government laid bare the old cemetery, which was previously only acknowledged in oral testimonies. The public outrage about the removed mass graves was still fresh, so the government decided to alter its plans, and the excavated remains were transferred to a new cemetery, Serafín.

At last, the dead reached their final destination. Artist Beatriz González converted the four remaining *columbaria* in the Reconciliation Park into a commemoration of the victims of violence named *Auras Anónimas*. Instead of a small peace monument, the Reconciliation Park now hosts the Anonymous Souls artwork and the national Memory Peace and Reconciliation Center, inaugurated in 2012. Notwithstanding the impressive image of González' work and the memorial building, the park lacks visitors and appears empty, especially when compared to the bustling city around it.

Further plans for the Memorial Axis include the modernization of Cementerio Central based on a 2006 master plan. According to that plan, the road between the cemetery and the Reconciliation Park will be transformed into a green alameda. The independent marble cutters who work on the side of that road will be relocated to a commercial center and ambulant flower sellers at the cemetery entrance will be removed. The cemetery will add funerary and embalming services and a new cremation center, supposedly to serve the urban poor. Ironically, the people most harmed by the plan belong to the same social strata as those targeted by the cemetery plan. After dislocating the bodies of the poor from the cemetery, this plan would now clear the living poor from the area too.

Logistical Efficiency at the Cemetery

The aesthetic and social contrast between Cementerio Central and Parque Serafín could not be starker. Whereas Cementerio Central is a bustling monumental inner-city graveyard designed for the rich but used by the poor, Serafín is a spacious modern burial ground that looks like an elite cemetery but was actually designed for the poor. Set in a lush green area of nearly 25 acres in Ciudad Bolívar, it offers 9,000 niches of various sizes in two large, modern mausoleum buildings. All funerary and disposal services are clustered on the campus. Services are available at approximately a fifth of the prices charged at private cemeteries. During the day, however, the cemetery looks empty and one cannot help noticing the stench from the nearby metropolitan landfill Doña Juana. For a long time, it was hard to reach by public transport. That problem has

been solved but still, people from Ciudad Bolívar continue to bury their dead elsewhere. Why?

The two mausoleums shelter thousands of niches, all closed off with dark stone plaques. In its uniformity the cemetery emphasizes social equality and cleanliness. In contrast to the nameless victims once piled up in the city, each stone plaque mentions the name of the deceased, the date of inhumation and the projected date of exhumation four years later. No birth dates are mentioned and no personal adornments may be attached. Parque Serafín does not allow the use of fresh flowers either, for sanitary reasons. The uniform, stony design of the graves and the strict logistics of daily administration deprive the bereaved of their personal forms of grief and memorialization. In fact, the burial plaques reduce the deceased to a four-year storage contract. Although from an architectural point of view the area is carefully designed, the association of Serafín with a modern-looking waste processor – an extension of the Doña Juana landfill – is not farfetched.

Nevertheless, the displaced dead from the pauper section underneath the Reconciliation Park have been given proper storage and markers. The sanitization of death has been rigorously pursued to help Bogotá deal with its violent history. In an “archive of ashes,” thousands of plastic bags are piled up one above the other, each labeled and coded, every human being neatly reduced into one kilo of ashes. Thus, from a technical point of view, Serafín functions efficiently. From a social and cultural point of view, however, the place lacks a more humane consideration for processes of grief and place-making.

Planning in the Necropolis

With a population still traumatized by large-scale and persistent conflict, poverty and violent death, Ciudad Bolívar indeed needs a modern and full-service cemetery. Since Parque Serafín does not permit personal adornment of graves out of aesthetic and sanitary considerations, most residents from Ciudad Bolívar prefer to bury their dead in another public cemetery, Cementerio del Sur, where personal place-making rites are still allowed. At Cementerio del Sur, the bereaved can establish emotional contact

with their dead through the personalization of stone plaques. They adorn the plaques with personal objects, symbols and flowers and when visiting the grave they touch the stones to talk or pray to their loved ones.

In addition to user-friendly protocols, funerals of young victims of violence need to be assisted professionally. At the moment of farewell, emotional reactions explode, in what are known as *servicios calientes* (hot services), especially when young victims of violence are buried at Cementerio del Sur and to a lesser extent at Cementerio Central. The next of kin obstruct cemetery personnel charged with placing the coffin in a vault. Sometimes hot services spark violent confrontations and create new victims. Cemetery governance cannot counter existing inequalities and urban violence at large, but it can provide more than technical facilities for the burial of victims of violence. For consolation and to avoid further conflict, the presence of professional grief specialists is crucial. Currently, there is only one social worker, who is unable to perform this task on his own. Yet none of the government plans for cemetery modernization or post-conflict city planning mention the need for sufficient capacity of social services that help people cope with grief and parting. In a pragmatic way, the government responds to the pressure on Cementerio del Sur by attempting to improve the image of Serafín as a cheap death-service center in the heart of Ciudad Bolívar. Meanwhile, formal histories of violence and reconciliation continue to develop in Calle 26.

This is where the stories of cemetery planning in the central and southern parts of the city meet. The removal of human remains and cemetery users from Calle 26 in order to install a top-down version of post-conflict space has resulted in two empty parks, two socially turbulent cemeteries and one underused peripheral one. As long as the existing public cemeteries are not responsive to the social and cultural needs of the urban poor and their death and grieving practices, the contrast between barely-used parks and “hot” cemeteries will endure. Unclaimed dead bodies are displaced; ambulant cemetery workers are removed; and the urban poor continue to cry out for more personal recognition of their needs and ways to honor their dead. Until then, trying to design a post-conflict city seems a delusion. **P²**