

Cemeterial Heritage: between materiality and spirit of place

Reflection on the valorization and management of death as artistic heritage, sense of belonging and collective memory¹

Andréa Michelle Diogo

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

This paper intends to question the Cemeterial Heritage as an artistic materialization and crystallization of a place of memory. To that end it focuses on issues related to its safeguard: on the one hand, it pursues to detail the Cemeterial Heritage in regard to the practices and the legislation as a heritage asset; on the other hand, it evaluates to which length the adequacy of its management may or may not enhance its values, both material and immaterial, taking into account the fruition of the space and the conservation of its spirit of place.

Keywords: Cemeteries; Cultural Heritage; Heritage Management; Place and Memory.

Between materiality and spirit of place

Reflecting on cemeterial space, we immediately conclude on its importance as an essential element for understanding the identity, the sense of belonging and the memory of a place. In fact, the cemetery is the constituent part of the sacrosanct hub of a community, whose daily life relates to the remembrance of their dead (Almeida, 1981: 206-207). In this sense when considering the phenomenon of Death we denote its reflections on our way of "being", arising from the manifestations of "ostentation and social devotion" from the 19th century (Sousa, 2009: 97), crystallized until today in a "human impulse to create lasting monuments"² able to overcome "the

flow and the evanescence of all living forms" (Mumford, 1970: 433).

Simultaneously constituting part of our tangible Heritage (from artistic production to the urban development) and of our intangible Heritage (manifested in the remaining habits and practices related to death), cemeteries are a "sacred place" and are "witnesses of the local history and identity of their community" (European Cemeteries Route, s. d.: to. 1). The cemeteries, without a doubt, not only provide "unique settings where to find part of our historical memories", but also recall values that can be preserved and transmitted to future generations (Id.ibidem: for. 3).

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² The translation of titles of publications and citations are responsibility of the author.



Picture 1 – Prazeres' Cemetery: detail of a *Saudade*. Digital colour proof by the author. Lisbon, June 30th, 2016.

CEMETERIAL HERITAGE

The valorization of the artistic heritage, sense of belonging and collective memory

Gonçalo de Vasconcelos e Sousa, on his *Reflexões sobre a Inventariação, Estudo e Valorização do Património Portuense*, considers that the safeguard mechanism of a cemetery implies that this "Museum of Death" should return "to what it was truly predestined" (Sousa, 2009: 103): an «object to visit, [and] place for meditation» (Martin-Fugier, 1990: 226), the "city-museum, a hub of touristic attraction" (Sousa, 2009: 103). To this effect, he adds that it should follow a set of initiatives that not only support the inventory and qualified restoration of "cemetery specimens with added-value to heritage ", but also foster research, communication and, above all, the recast of regulation³, in order to "stipulate with more precision and heritage sense the works and the building of new graves, seeking to create protected areas within the cemeteries." (Id. *ibidem*: 103).

Next, we address three predominant features: inventory, communication and regulation.

In regards to the inventory process, we emphasize the action of Francisco Queiroz, embodied in his extensive work produced around cemeteries and funerary art from the 19th century in Portugal, and the *Consolidação da vivência romântica na perpetuação da memória* (Queiroz, 2002), having a broad impact on literary production and heritage practices. In fact, his reflections on these "museums of death" that enliven the portuguese territory, from North to South, offer a contribution to the quantitative consolidation of an artistic legacy that "reflects a past of families' memories, of mentalities, of vanities, of architectural aesthetics and symbols" (Queiroz, 2000: 8).

Another initiative advocated by several researchers, in what they perceive as essential in the process of enhancement of collective cultural references, is actually media coverage and communication of this asset, through mechanisms such as the Heritage Education.

³To this date, the author points to the *Regulamento dos cemitérios municipais* [of Porto], 1970, although updated, it retains the same parameters. Cf. *Câmara Municipal do Porto* (2016, 17th November). *Código Regulamentar do Município do Porto*, under Chapter XI, Section I, Article No. 66.

On that point, Marcelina de Almeida reflects on its impact as an "auxiliary [of] the community in the process of interaction with memory, with places of memory, with the history of the place", due to its prominent role for "the awareness [of] populations to the perception and appreciation of places, of knowledge, of celebrations, by means of visual apprehension of the community's assets" (Almeida, 2016: 224). According to the author Renata Alves, even the neglect of the cemeteries and the memory of the dead displays "an expression of a society's cultural heritage" to the extent that they reflect "a mentality, a [collective] imaginary and representation of this society", whose study is important to the understanding and transmission of the legacy of our ancestors (Alves, 2014: 207).

In the context of enhancement of Cemeterial Heritage, moreover, Belmira Coutinho highlights Tourism for its mediatisation and conservation role, portraying it as "beneficial" not only to the cemeteries, but also to the localities. The author also recognizes that, albeit Portugal is endowed with a great potential for tourism of undeniable historic and artistic value, we have witnessed the "unfortunate state of abandonment of many of the most relevant cemeterial monuments", "both by the municipal authorities and by the owners" (Coutinho, 2011: 18).

Despite the disinvestment in adequate regulations and specific legislation by the city council to the "preservation of relevant cemetery specimens" (Sousa, 2009: 236), there have been international initiatives that, though targeting its touristic potential, provide support at the level of media coverage and protection of the Cemeterial Heritage.

Seen in these terms, Elisiana Castro (2010) indicates the importance of actions "aimed at the protection for cemeteries", underpinned by the *2005 Morelia International Charter* which is based on "the preservation of cemeteries and funerary art and proposes the knowledge, dissemination and social appropriation of funeral sites and its rites" (Castro, 2010:4). In the same way, she identifies the *Declaration of Commitment and Draft bill for the recovery, protection and dissemination of funeral*

heritage (Buenos Aires, 2006), the Official Agency for the Argentinean Network of Valuation and Asset Management of Cemeteries, as well as the *Guidelines to Cemetery Conservation* (National Treasure of Australia, 2009), created with the purpose of "providing specialized technical assistance" in accordance with the imposed policy recommendations (Id.ibidem: 4-5). In addition, the author highlights the emergence of associations and organizations of "cemetery friends", such as the National Federation of Cemetery Friends, in the United Kingdom, or the *Amigos do Cemitério da Recoleta*, in Buenos Aires (Id.ibidem: 4-5).

In this context arose the Association of Significant Cemeteries of Europe (A. S. C. E.), which purposes are: "to promote European cemeteries as a fundamental part of the heritage of humanity" and "to raise European citizens' awareness of the importance of significant cemeteries", through sharing – between the constituent members of the European Cemeteries Route⁴ – experiences and practices in the protection, restoration and permanent maintenance of the cemeteries (ASCE – Association of Significant Cemeteries of Europe, 2008).

In Portugal, the valorization of the cemeteries as tourist products has still few manifestations (Coutinho, 2011: 5) despite detaining a significant Cemeterial Heritage "at the level of the most important in the world"⁵. Regardless of the touristic potential for the various Portuguese cemeteries, rooted in the 18th century, it is only verified a use of the Prazeres' Cemetery in Lisbon, and of the Cemeteries of *Lapa*, *Agramonte* and *Prado do Repouso*, in Porto (Id.ibidem: 6) – through the *Núcleo Museológico dos Cemitérios Municipais de Lisboa* (Museological Nucleus of Municipal Cemeteries of Lisbon) and the *Ciclo Cultural nos Cemitérios* (Cemeteries Cultural Cycle) promoted by Porto City Hall.

⁴ The European Cemeteries Route conveys the cemetery as "a place of life", scenarios, urban spaces that are directly linked to the history and culture of the community to which they belong" and is based on a cultural diversity obtained by the interaction between the various constituent members. Cf. European Cemeteries Route (s. d.).

⁵ Authors, such as Belmira Coutinho (2011) and Renata Alves (2014), determine as cases of good practices of cemeterial tourism: *Cimetiere du Pere-Lachaise*, in Paris, *Cimitero Monumentale di Milano*, Highgate Cemetery, in London, and *Cemitério da Consolação*, in São Paulo, among others.



Pictures 2 and 3 – Prazeres' Cemetery (above) and the British Cemetery of Porto (below)
Digital colour proof by the author. Lisbon, June 30th, 2016; Porto, November 11th, 2016 (respectively).

"Monumental cemeteries were made to be visited" (Queiroz, 2009: 7) and, according to Belmira Coutinho, "the Cemeterial Tourism carries advantages", among which she highlights the fact that it "alerts and awares the authorities that oversee the cemeteries for their conservation and restoration" (Coutinho, 2011: 4). In this sense, the action of the *Divisão de Gestão Cemeterial de Lisboa* (Cemeterial Management Division of Lisbon) – represented not only in the "open air museum" but also at the Museological Nucleus situated in the Prazeres' mortuary chapel – it proposes the objective of sensitizing the visitor "to interpret the evolution of time of the different cultural, social and psychological attitudes of the human being in the face of Death", with a purpose to "preserve, study and bring to the public this historical heritage" (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, s. d.). The City Hall of Porto already offers a distinct cultural activity – versed in guided tours, exhibitions, lectures and concerts, promoted in the framework of Porto Cemeteries Cultural Cycle, which goal is "the extension of the initiative to non-municipal cemeteries of the city" (Câmara Municipal do Porto, 2016a).

Management and enhancement of the material and immaterial values of Cemeterial Heritage in Portugal

In spite of the various steps taken towards the protection and enhancement of the Cemeterial Heritage in Portugal, a consolidated model of good practices does not exist, unlike other international examples. Municipalities, such as the cities of Porto and Lisbon, contribute with cultural initiatives focused on their cemeteries, however, to our understanding it is required the implementation of mechanisms for sustainable management of cemeterial spaces, as assets of Cultural Heritage. In this respect, we understand that part of the ideal solution would be the combination of practical measures – like Porto Cemeteries Cultural Cycle and the Cemeteries Museum Center of Lisbon – alongside with academic studies at the level of the inventory, valuation and leveraged heritage proposals.

From this set of initiatives, Gonçalo de Vasconcelos e Sousa formulates a proposal for the enhancement of the cemeteries as a "vast Museum of Death" (Sousa, 2009: 235). He suggests that ensuring such action it

will be necessary the elaboration of an itinerary "that establishes a route for the visitor, (...) introducing him to its history, from foundation to our days", as well as the establishment of a museum center – in permanent liaison with the "open air Museum" – which would function as a place for the collection and display of data, but also as a "research pole for the phenomenon of Death in Portugal, avoiding the destruction of too many objects and buildings, which succumbed to the voracity of time" (Sousa, 2009: 235-236).

Processing the concept of Cemetery-Museum, we understand that its operation and implantation depend on the inclusion of the community, whose impact will result "in the strengthening of the local identity and the production of knowledge and culture" (Nogueira, 2013: 117). In this sense, Renata Nogueira concludes that:

"an active and organized community may become the pillar of all cultural action promoted in the museum, where tourism, as an economic activity, is effective. There will not be a perennial and economically interesting Tourism flow without a welcoming and well organized community. Tourism, both for the cemetery and for the surrounding community, may reveal itself as an alternative to [economic] growth, through improvements made possible by the continued accumulation of income and employment". (Nogueira, 2013: 117).

Final remarks

The purpose of this paper was to reflect on the Cemeterial Heritage in respect of the enhancement of artistic heritage, sense of belonging and collective memory inherent to the cemeteries space, on the one hand, and to the management and enhancement of the Cemeterial Heritage in Portugal, on the other. Completed the process of balancing the importance of inventory and conservation as mechanisms of valorizing the Cemeterial Heritage, it was possible to perceive a sense of urgency for awareness initiatives and legislation.

Despite our witnessing of a gradual development of activities that enhance the recreation and

maintenance of Cemeterial spaces, there are nonetheless prevailing gaps. We understand that it would be useful to explore better mechanisms for the communication of values of the Cemeterial Heritage, with a special focus in the field of Heritage Education. In this way, not only this would propel an increased

interest in the community to enjoy, preserve and pass on a collective legacy; but also, it would stimulate a proper reformulation of regulations and legislation in order to enact and establish concerns about its conservation and maintenance with the local authorities.



Picture 4 – British Cemetery: embossed detail of Perpetua (*Gomphrena globosa*) Digital colour proof by the author. Lisbon, June 30th, 2016.

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