

The Monumental Cemetery of Milan: a Place for the Arts and for Celebrating Civic Identity

The deep cultural bonds that link the cities to their cemeteries are in great evidence in 19th-century Italy; here, as in most European countries, burial matters underwent radical changes after the promulgation of the Saint-Cloud Edict of 1804.¹ By prohibiting burials inside the city walls and by transferring to the administrative domain a problem traditionally solved by the religious authorities, the decree converted an act of pious assistance into an act of civic service, thereby affecting with major transformations also the structure and typologies of cemeteries.

It can be observed that the Saint-Cloud Edict fostered a gradual process of “ennobling” burial grounds with remarkable effects on their morphological schemes. The setting-aside of specific areas managed by the public authorities disclosed new perspectives for architectural and artistic design, as well as for social expectations and civic assessment. In a way, it can be said that the Saint-Cloud Edict created a stronger net of relationships between the cities and their cemeteries, so that although the latter physically went outside their walls and the urban fabric, conceptually they became more deeply rooted within the modern urban culture.

Such phenomenon acquired a special meaning in nineteenth-century Italy, a country that was almost totally dominated by foreign regimes and where the institution of city graveyards was soon to be perceived not only as part of modern hygienic facilities, but also as an opportunity to convey autonomous cultural values. This partly explains the extraordinary flourishing of new cemeteries from the very first decades of the century; among them one can mention the cities of Bologna, Brescia (fig. 1), Verona (fig. 2), Genoa, Torino, Naples, Rome, as well as several smaller towns like Modena, Como or Cremona; all of them truly engaged in building very distinctive structures that, although very costly, were greatly favoured by the citizens and came to be

Fig. 1 Brescia, Cemetery, view of the front entrance, print by Artaria, Milan 1840



Fig. 2 Verona, Cemetery, general view, print, Milan 1849

regarded as some of the most positive outputs of a considerate and progressive administration.²

This short foreword was necessary to introduce the special case study of Milan's Monumental Cemetery (from now on referred to also as the Monumentale): one of the most important and best-known Italian cemeteries, although its actual establishment was delayed compared to the above-mentioned list of cities undertaking new graveyards shortly after the Saint-Cloud Edict.

In the first half of the 19th century, Milan (the capital of the Lombardo-Veneto) was governed by the Austrians who, while not opposing projects of urban renewal, did not really encourage their achievements. As far as the cemetery was concerned, matters were complicated by a very controversial architectural competition opened in 1838, with opposing opinions concerning artistic styles, educational methodologies and political views; it culminated with one winning project (by the neoclassical architect Giulio Aluisetti), with the beginning of construction in 1857, and with its hasty interruption in 1859.³ As a result, in what was perhaps the wealthiest city in Northern Italy burials continued to be carried out in a number of small graveyards, properly scattered outside the city walls, but lacking any artistic or architectural quality.⁴

Soon after the Austrians' departure in 1859, subsequent to the second Italian Independence War, the most important commitment of the new city council concerned a vast programme of urban renewal and modern facilities, which included, for instance, renovation of the Duomo square, construction of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, completion of the Central Railway Station and establishment of a new main cemetery. In addition to their specific functional purposes, all these projects conveyed the meaning of a finally reached independence fostering municipal sovereignty and autonomy. Especially the graveyard, because of its long and unsuccessful history under the foreign regime, called for definite solutions from the newly organized

Italian administration, so that its achievement came to be regarded as a question of civic pride and as a moral duty towards the citizens.

The existing project was soon abandoned as the outcome of past political conditions and conservative artistic viewpoints; in 1860 the municipality launched a new architectural competition and the organising committee advised the contestants to abandon the revival of ancient classical styles. While in general terms such opinions reflected the decline of Neoclassicism as a unique and supranational language, in specific terms they favoured Italian neo-medieval styles. From the religious side they happened to be more congruent with Christianity; from the historical perspective they could be associated with the ages of Italian municipal freedom; from the artistic standpoint they recalled the beautiful and world-wide appraised model of the Pisa graveyard, as well as many remarkable monuments in the Lombardy region. Thereby it can be said that the Monumentale marked the coming end of the “Neoclassical age” of Italian cemeteries, setting a new and rather influential pattern for future realisations.⁵

Resuming its history: in 1863 architect Carlo Maciachini was awarded the first prize in the final phase of the competition (fig. 3); construction work started in 1864 and in 1866 the cemetery, although not complete, was ready to perform burial functions. Among its outstanding design qualities the judging committee, which included prominent citizens, artists and architects representing the main institutes of high education (e. g. The Academy of Fine Arts and the newly founded Polytechnical School of

Fig. 3 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, general plan, 1885, architect Carlo Maciachini

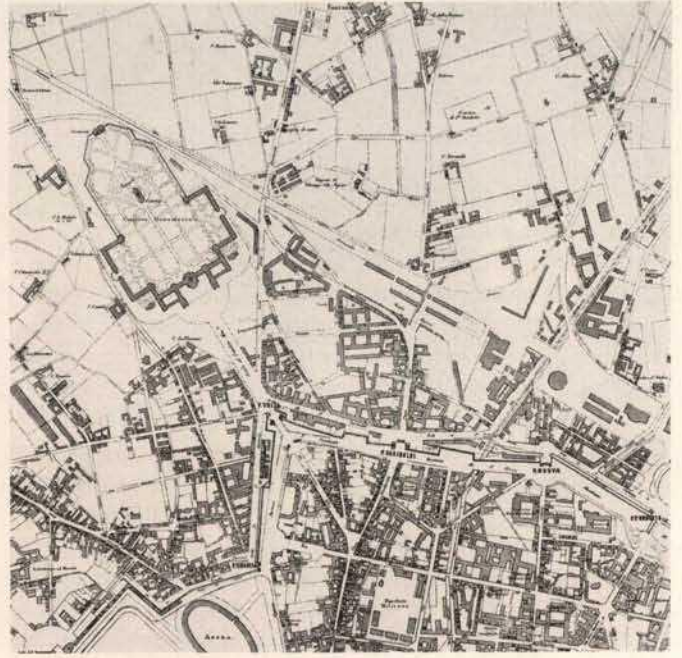
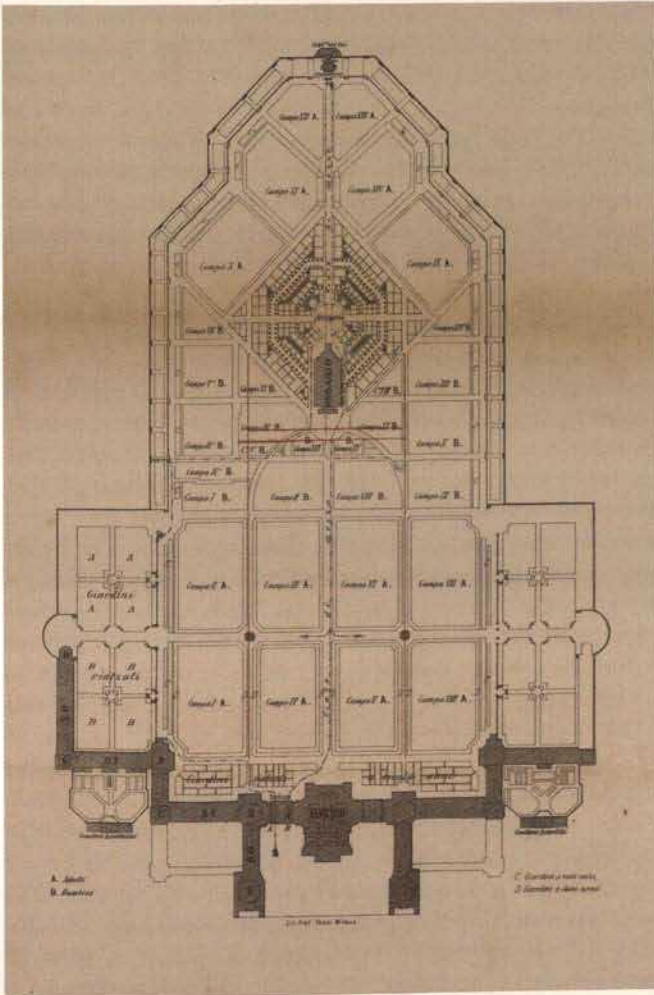


Fig. 4 Milan, city map, 1884, north-western portion with the Monumental Cemetery and the new avenue connecting it to the city centre

Milan), had called attention to the stylistic character which, drawing inspiration from the Middle Ages, had made use of “elements coming from Tuscany, motifs derived from the Byzantine tradition and structures belonging to the Lombardy artistic heritage.”⁶ This meant that the architect had successfully blended a variety of features within a harmonious ensemble, according to the most genuine eclectic approach.

Another merit of Maciachini’s project was the general layout, highly praised for being both pleasant and practical (fig. 3). The architect had decided to group all the main buildings on the front line and had distributed them on both sides of a central edifice, shaping something similar to a “cour d’honneur” looking towards the city. This skilfully articulated façade comprised two series of open archways that led into, but did not conceal, the vast burial ground set behind the main architectural structures. Thus the burial ground is perceived as part of the whole environment.⁷

Actually Maciachini tried to combine the two different main types of cemeteries, the geometrical enclosure and the free landscape, by designing a regular layout and, at the same time, breaking up the continuous frames of porticoes and arcades that were typical of Neoclassical graveyards.⁸ Without rejecting architectural arrangement, he sought to adapt its rules to a vast, flat open space, designed geometrically, devoid of picturesque features, but with invisible boundaries and suitable to host a great variety of open-air monuments, tombs, memorials, family vaults, mausoleums.

In order to organise this extensive area Maciachini used criteria similar to those of town planning design: a main avenue running the length of the cemetery divides it into two symmetrical parts, leading from the entrance to the Ossuary, continuing through the area named “Necropoli” (the city of the dead) and coming to an end at the Crematorium Temple. A large transverse road intersects the main avenue midway, together forming a system of “cardo” and “decumanus” and thus establishing the fundamental coordinates for the grid layout (fig. 3).

The Monumentale had effects on Milan’s urban development (fig. 4): first of all requiring a network of street connections based on a system of primary and secondary roads, with the for-

mer being of special significance not only for transportation purposes. Indeed the architectural composition of the main buildings, organised like a monumental stage overlooking the city, did ask for special consideration, demanding an imposing boulevard. The new avenue leading to the graveyard thus forced the opening of the ancient walls, and stretched itself towards the city centre, somehow dissolving the very idea of separation, calling for dignity and décor, setting the Monumentale as the focus of a straight perspective view framed with trees.⁹ This avenue was actually oversized in respect to traffic needs, a feature which, however, does not represent a planning mistake, but reflects the intentional thought to provide the new cemetery with a very strong symbolic meaning of cultural connection with the city as a whole.

It can also be observed that the growing visual evidence of the Monumentale went together with its increasing municipal importance and with its somewhat decreasing religious significance. The setting up of the Famedio in the central building of the façade openly demonstrates this issue, thus deserving some attention¹⁰ (figs. 5, 6). The term means temple of fame, and indicates a new kind of civic architecture dedicated to the memory of famous citizens. “Famedio” had already been built in the most important cemeteries (for example, Brescia, Verona, Genoa) according to the lines of their original projects; in the case of the Monumentale, however, the municipality had initially discarded this idea, so that the original design by Maciachini did not include any temple of fame, having instead assigned the main edifice of the façade to a Catholic church.

Only in 1870, when construction was in full swing, did the city council not only decide to add a Famedio to the new cemetery, but also determined to place it in the spot previously allotted to the church, considering this choice more suitable to a city like Milan which strongly aspired to gain a position of economic, social and cultural prestige in the young scenario of the newly unified Italian country. So, while inheriting the Romantic ideals of homage to the deceased, while expressing the typical 19th-century faith in educating by means of praiseworthy examples, the Famedio of Milan is also a bold statement of civic pride, clearly showing an attitude which often has been considered peculiar to Italy and its history, as the legacy of an ancient urban organisation and a deeply rooted feeling of “civitas” belonging.¹¹

Eventually Maciachini did not change the church structure and maintained its overall medieval design features as well. The

Fig. 5 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, the Famedio



result is rather peculiar, establishing a very “pagan temple”, as far as its significance is concerned, however devoid of any classical stylistic reference: establishing a place for secular worshiping where the Middle Ages are highlighted by employing many decorative patterns coming from Romanesque and Gothic church architecture, combining Pisa with Ravenna, Milan with Byzantium, carved stones with smooth bands of marbles, twisted columns with sculpted capitals, rose windows with mosaics. Laden with symbolism, the Famedio celebrates memory as the reward of great lives, placing the statue of Glory on top of the main entrance, and depicting the lunettes above the side doors with History writing meritorious names (“*Marcat nomen sicut monumentum*”); with shining Glow (“*Flamma flammae lux lucis*”) and with Fame that never wanes, not even in the silence of Death (“*Mutae mortis magna vox*”).

A special committee was appointed to devise a code of honour to be followed in the interior decoration. This code was published in 1886 after a long enquiry into the history of Milan starting from the 4th century AD (when the city was the Italian capital of the Western Roman Empire) and going to current times.¹² It can be summarised by three main categories of citizens to be worshipped: the “illustrious” for their personal accomplishments in art or science; the “praiseworthy” who have brought benefits to the community; the “distinguished” for patriotic merits. Their names and portraits are arranged according to different historical periods and compose a decorative scheme that covers the Famedio’s walls with frescoes, stuccoes, marble slabs, inscriptions and sculptures. They provide a visual gallery of “*exempla virtutis*” in order to celebrate Milan’s most reputable identity (fig. 6).

I am not going to discuss the single monuments in the Famedio, apart from mentioning that in the centre of the building rises the great sarcophagus where one of Italy’s most admired writers, Alessandro Manzoni, was buried in 1883: he was the first great “Milanese” to be celebrated in this civic temple of fame. The wall facing the doorway was dedicated to the so-called “guests and honorary citizens”, comprising among them many champions of the Risorgimento campaigns; their memorials look towards the Famedio’s entrance and towards the city, thus reinforcing the civic and community worthies with national reference (fig. 6).

The Monumentale was the first municipal cemetery to include, since its earliest design, special sections for “Non-Catholics” (fig. 7) and for Jews, the latter one of special interest (fig. 14). Opened in 1872, it mirrors the full and very quick emancipation of Italian Jews after the country’s unification. This area is by no means unique for the quantity of memorials that, apart from the traditionally Jewish funerary elements, show many features shared with the non-Jewish sections of the cemetery, including iconographical themes, artistic styles, cultural models and the most pursued social values, such as decorum, piety and civic virtues. It is a sign of achieved integration and expresses optimism towards a city that, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, was going through a process of industrial expansion, economic growth and social advancement.

Together with the ideals of religious and political freedom went faith in the latest scientific and technical accomplishments, a standpoint which is represented at the Monumentale by the Crematorium Temple¹³ (fig. 8). Its construction was made possible by Alberto Keller, a rich Protestant silk manufacturer, who granted a large sum of money to the city in order to introduce the hygienic and modern practice of cremation. Although such practice clashed with the Catholic dogma of the “resurrec-



Fig. 6 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, interior of the Famedio

tion of the flesh”, the Crematorium was opened in 1876 and was equipped with advanced technical devices, gaining the reputation of being the first one in Europe operating in a public cemetery on a modern basis.

In this particular building Carlo Maciachini (aided by engineer Celeste Clericetti) disregarded the medieval styles and made use of a Neoclassical idiom that recalls the antique Roman rituals of purification by fire, at the same time reinforcing the idea of the public cemetery as a secular more than religious institution. This is very true and very evident in the area around the Crematorium, named “Giardini cinerari” (“ashes gardens”) and dense with private memorials to prominent intellectuals, scientists, progressive politicians, plus many of the artists who had provided the Monumentale itself with remarkable works of art. This place can somehow be regarded as a culturally and socially consistent milieu, where individual memorials, notwithstanding the variety of artistic results, partially draw their character and their identity from being gathered around the modern and collective facility of the Crematorium. In a way they embody those connections between public and private domains that are perhaps some of the most noteworthy aspects of nineteenth-century Italian cemeteries, with special evidence at Milan’s Monumentale.

As previously remarked, its huge open space not only had to meet the overall burial needs of the city, but also had to promote a wide range of tombs, favouring the use of different typologies, materials and techniques which, by the way, caused practical benefits to the many skilled professional architects, artists and crafts-

men operating in Milan. Moreover this solution encouraged a taste for variety that met with the gradual onset of a sense of the individual or, better said, of an awareness of identity which had provoked a growing request for personal remembrance. In Milan, as elsewhere, people had come to regard funerary monuments as a way to establish, whether openly or not, significant bonds with their life histories: therefore as a means for self-representation and for communicating identities shaped according to personal preference and/or according to specific social rules.

Fig 7 Milan, Monumental Cemetery. “Non-Catholic” section, in the background the memorial to Alberto Keller, promoter of the Crematorium Temple





Fig. 8 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, Crematorium Temple, photograph from the end of the 19th century

The Monumentale widely reflects this phenomenon, portraying all sorts of iconographical themes, of artistic fashions, of cultural categories and, also, displaying the entire range of social classes, at least until 1895 when the opening of a new bigger cemetery (called "Musocco") restricted the Monumentale to the richest and longer lasting tombs.¹⁴ Many of them can be considered greatly representative of the idea of memorials as conveyors of identity values.

In the same years that the squares of Italy were being filled with monuments to the heroes of the Wars of Independence, to

Fig. 9 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Giulio Sarti, 1870, sculptor Giovanni Strazza



Fig. 10 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to the Treves family, 1906, sculptor Ettore Ximenes, detail

politicians, writers and artists who contributed to the national pride and helped "construct" the country's identity, numerous private tombstones were being modelled on the same patterns to "construct" private identities. A good example is the memorial to Giulio Sarti (1870, sculptor Giovanni Strazza), a railway engineer, whose statue was placed at the top of that kind of pyramidal composition typical of the honorary urban monument, flanked by the allegorical figures of Science and Technology and embellished with long epigraphs extolling his virtues¹⁵ (fig. 9).

Fig. 11 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Francesco Lucca, 1879, sculptor Giovanni Strazza





Fig.12 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Milan Mitzko Conforti, sculptor Attilio Prendoni



Fig.13 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Isabella Casati, 1890, sculptor Enrico Butti

An even better example is the memorial to Francesco Lucca, dating from 1879 (by the same sculptor Giovanni Strazza), a music publisher who rose from humble origins to wealth and respectability, thus embodying the very idea of self-help (fig. 11). He had succeeded in founding his own establishment as a music publisher and had acquired a name for supporting the music of Richard Wagner in a city like Milan where Giuseppe Verdi was dominating the opera theatre. Its daring enterprise is recorded by the title *Lohengrin* inscribed on the spine of one of the books stacked under his armchair. Instrumental in assuring Lucca's

posterity was the widow, Giuseppina Strazza, who dedicated to her husband a monument that might easily have stood in a city square.¹⁶

Industrial proficiency and entrepreneurial skills were much praised in Milan; hence there are numerous memorials representing labour, professional emblems, working places. In the Jewish area the Treves memorial by sculptor Ettore Ximenes, dating from 1906, refers to the family's flourishing publishing activity, depicting its members surrounded by writers, painters and intellectuals and also recording in highly accurate details

Fig. 14 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, Jewish section





Fig. 15 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Emilio Rigamonti, 1890, sculptor Ernesto Bazzaro

the modern photomechanical process for picture reproduction, a technique in which the Treves led the field¹⁷ (fig. 10).

In the same Jewish section the tomb for Milan Mitzko Conforti (1919, sculptor Attilio Prendoni), who died aged 21, recalls his desire to become a doctor, to take care of the ill and the weak, and to promote the building of a modern hospital in Milan. It conveys an identity which in this case has been only dreamt of, but even so it appears to be historically very significant¹⁸ (fig. 12). In its artistic results, decorative motifs and

Fig. 16 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, family chapels in Neo-Romanesque style



Fig. 18 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, memorial to Mazzucchelli Krassowsky, 1877, sculptor Pasquale Miglioretti

iconographical patterns this monument, as well as the preceding one, is deeply grounded on social experience and bears witness to the already mentioned successful integration of the Jewish community into the social fabric of the city.

More than others, female identities seem to follow accepted patterns that usually belong to the domestic domain. While male identity is based on professional ability, on political and ideological stands, on membership in the social group, in short on a network of public relations with the external world, female identity belongs almost entirely to the interior. Her positive self is mainly that of being a wife, a mother, often a widow spending the rest of her life in sorrow (fig. 18). But although women generally appear as subdued personages, it must be remembered that they had been endorsed with the very important role of looking after the ethics of private behaviour, thus flanking public morality and complementing masculine performance in psychological and affective terms.¹⁹

Actually while emotion is generally prohibited for men, it is granted to women who, therefore, have performed a significant role in the balancing of sentiments. Artists have drawn a broad range of expressions from female figures, sometimes achieving results of extraordinary quality, showing all levels of grief, sweetness, and beauty in association with death (fig. 13 and 15). These memorials may not be very revealing about the individual personality of the deceased, but they communicate a great deal about women's social standing in the 19th century, about their role in the family and about their task of carrying out the emotional side of mourning.

No less significant are those monuments that eschew representation of an event, a personage, or an emotion, assuming instead the form of a family chapel. Called "aediculae" (from Latin "small house") they are directly tied to the ancient tradition of the burial place as the last "home" where all the family members are gathered (fig. 16). "Aediculae" are particularly numerous at the Monumentale and had been foreseen from the beginning, representing not only an interesting design challenge to architects, but also a consistent income opportunity for the municipality which could lease the necessary building parcels in the cemetery at high prices. The most prominent architects designed "aediculae" and the most affluent families chose to be

Fig. 17 Milan, Monumental Cemetery, general view





buried in these miniature buildings that embody the very idea of status symbol.²⁰ They are particularly suited to accommodate the entire repertoire of funerary art, of architectural styles and structures, of sculptural insertions and surface decorations, following the most varied pattern of intentions: from ostentation to understatement, from the enhancement of religious symbolism to the assertion of secular beliefs. These too can be considered as “declarations of identity”, that, in the specific case, could be made manifest in the broad interplay of stylistic references, thereby providing important testimony of the history of taste.

Altogether they tell us of a city that tried to communicate a positive self-representation through the multiple expressions housed by its new cemetery (fig. 17). One of the most genuine meanings of the Monumentale in the nineteenth century has been its suitability to meet a great number of needs, ideas, and experiences, echoing the diversity of the city itself, combining practical usefulness with an artistic environment and balancing the rules of public concerns with the freedom of private requests.

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