

other modern

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Anastasia Vaynberg



fig. a photographed by the author, 2015

He lowered his head, lighting a cigarette. When he looked up, he saw a boy, the foreman's assistant, briskly walking up to him. «There is a problem», the boy delivered a message.

It was, of course, very inappropriate. He has got a lot to do here. Now when the construction was taking place, he as the chief architect had to spend whole days on the site and solve a multitude of minor—and not so minor—problems arising during its course. He was building a university, a whole campus. He developed a masterplan and designed one of the buildings. It was an important project, very important. And not only for him. He had no desire to leave, but it looked as if he had to.

Referring to the fact that there was some business he had to finish first, he waited until the silhouette of the messenger passed out of sight and only then slowly moved from one construction site in the direction of another.

The cemetery lay very close and within five minutes he saw the high red wall of its enclosure in front of him. In his mind's eye he estimated and came to the conclusion that it must be no lower than the average height of a three-storey building. In the upper part of the wall was a row of arched openings through which differently shaped stone slabs could already be perceived.

When, still as a child, he had first seen what he saw now, he could not understand for a long while, what this place was, what there was behind the wall, and what these stones were intended for. Only years later, when he had had no choice but to go inside, he saw that they were the tombstones of one of the oldest parts of the cemetery. He had realized, that although from the outside their position at the very top of the wall seemed to be strange, from the inside it made perfect sense.

The thing is that the wall also concealed a dramatic difference of height, and being inside one could unexpectedly discover that from this point the wall was merely human height.

And now because of this height difference his path led him through the street which was tucked in between the wall on one side and the highway on the other. Following another turn, he suddenly saw two children playing on this dirty and usually abandoned street. They were poorly dressed.

He observed them with great interest for a while, wondering to whom they belonged, and walking on, reached the cemetery car park which was normally hardly even more alive than the aforementioned street. There, he instantly understood, an unregulated refugee camp was set up.

However, here there were even more half-naked children and a lot of poorly dressed adults. The gaze of their black eyes was burning him as he passed. There were pieces of furniture and rags everywhere. The place was buzzing with

an unfamiliar language and it cost him a lot of effort and a cigarette to get rid of a girl who persistently tried to persuade him to invite her for a drink.

These people who instantly made him feel like a stranger in his native city also evoked in him a rush of some tender emotion by the naked state of their existence. «After all», he thought, «they have found a surprisingly precise hiding place for their *vulnerability*». Here they were inconspicuous to anyone and completely invisible, cut off from the respectable inhabitants of Rome by a highway on one side and by the city of the dead, on the other.

He managed to finish one more cigarette before reaching his destination. He was one of those who under the new regime had suddenly found themselves at the top. And he was happy to be one of them.

Now, when, in the name of the Idea an entire city was in a process of being remoulded, plunged into the mountains of red excavated earth, and when he was one of those who was directing these mountains, also here, in this parallel world to the living, a large construction of a new tombs quarter had begun. Whenever he came here, he thought that this symmetry was quite funny and touching. Here, in this yet unborn part of the necropolis, where cypresses hadn't only not managed to grow, but were still to be planted, was his site.

A foreman greeted him with a nod and exhaled mournfully: «We started to dig a pit. In fact according to plan, we should've finished with the foundation today. Anyway, what I wanted to tell you: there was already something, or should I say, there is.» He gestured towards the dirty stone block, which showed up by half from the ground.

«You know, I do not know what to do. We either have to uproot it completely, but then we need more guys, and I cannot tell you at all how much time it will take: it looks big. Or we have to call somebody, maybe this thing is important. In this city you never know: every stone might be a monument. But then, I think you understand it yourself, the whole construction may go up in smoke. But it's your decision, you're in charge.»

At this point another worker, a very young guy who he had never seen before, approached to introduce himself. Making an effort to be polite he held out his hand to the lad and named himself. The guy shuddered and wondered: «It's just like the name that will be on the tomb!»

«Yes, I'm building it for my father», he admitted. The worker looked at him sympathetically with calf eyes and spat on the ground. The whole situation was becoming more and more painful with every moment. He decided to take a walk to think.

He had probably chosen to be an architect because of his father. To kind of continue the family business. And there he was right now, building a tomb for him, who would have thought.

He even got his first job in his father's office. He had learned a lot from him. His father was one of those architects who were now referred to as traditionalists. He too had more or less the same views, the language he used belonged to history too. But, unlike his father, he had always felt that it had to be used more radically, that it's possible to do everything even better. That *he* could do it better. Earlier on in his career, he had become interested in urban planning. Maybe it was an attempt to somehow detach himself from his father. Maybe. But the difference in scale also attracted him: he felt that the scale of the city was much more consistent with the scope of the time and the changes which were needed.

Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he felt extremely uncomfortable now. For him architecture was a way to tell a story. And working with the city he was doing it quite straightforwardly, working more with void than with mass. The city was a kind of space of scenography for him. He used to mark the most important points in the spatial development by special buildings—in his mind he called them monuments.

And here he was. The task of building a monument in the purest sense of the word had to be perfect for him. But this monument surrounded by hundreds of thousands of other monuments is already something else. It was some kind of absolute inner contradiction.

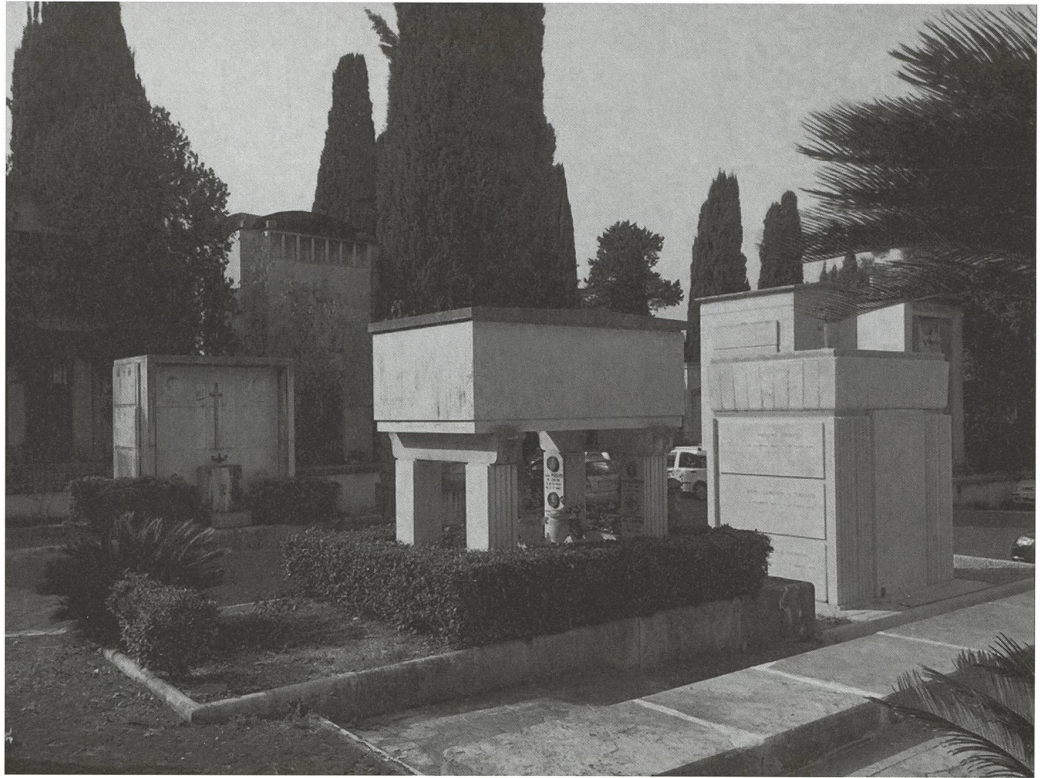


fig. b photographed by the author, 2015

This, he thought, was also a funny rhyme: all this architecture focused on tradition, which he was doing as long as he could remember, it seems to be always implying a single goal—to affirm its time in history. As well as all these crypts surrounding him had the same aim but in the terms of one person or one family. He knew: the word «tomb» comes from the Greek root word, meaning a swelling, reminding us that bodies rarely entirely disappear from the earth's surface, their presence remains marked, naturally or culturally, by an irruption of some kind in the landscape.

He also knew, that all Romans who had died in the city since the 19th century had been buried here from the moment when some Pope had forbidden to bury the dead inside the city walls. Since then, the cemetery had been developing as a living organism, growing with every new part.

There were areas for Catholics and for Jews. There were some parts so old that there was nobody alive anymore to come and visit the dead. These parts were full of countless interpretations of the Pantheon. He had just made his way around one of these, took the stairs and found himself in front of the memorial to the fallen in a large war. This space was full of pathos, marble and names of soldiers. «All these Roman Empires», resonated in his head.

He knew that further on his way were the newest areas of the cemetery—the best examples of modern architecture. White galleries of endless columbariums hiding between cypress trees. Tombs, which looked like full-bodied marble blocks, where architects finally had been able to build freed from any expression of these silly human needs, as for example windows or any other architectural excesses. A pure architecture.

His father used to say : «architecture begun with tombs». He also used to say that the connection between two things, this point, when two different stories come together, is a very special moment.

He lit a cigarette.

Now, among tall old cypresses, which resemble an ancient colonnade, the eye may rest on this tomb. At first glance it may seem as if the stone at the base is darker and rougher. But it doesn't matter, and there is no reason to reduce ones pace. Because this story is merely speculative fiction, and some parts of it are probably a gross distortion of the history. Although some details are partly true.

There is a cemetery in Rome, not far from La Sapienza University, «Cimitero Monumentale del Verano». A great red wall goes around it. There, together with Roberto Rossellini and Alberto Moravia, together with hundreds of thousands of Romans of all manner and profession, of all class and riches, rest the architects Piacentini, father and son.

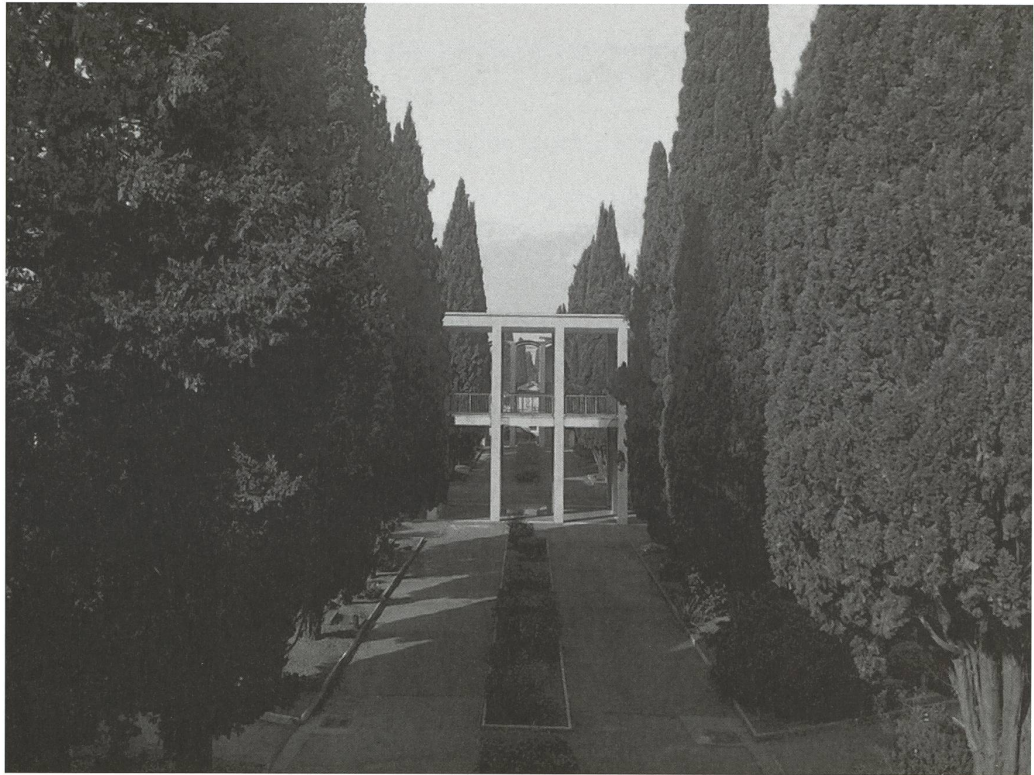


fig. c photographed by the author, 2015

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