LIFE, DEATH, AND DESIGN:
REVISITING ALDO ROSSI’S CEMETERY AT SAN CATALDO

A Thesis in
Architecture
by
Lindsay Mae Connelly

© 2017 Lindsay Mae Connelly

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2017
The thesis of Lindsay M. Connelly was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Ute Poerschke  
Associate Professor of Architecture  
Director of Graduate Studies in Architecture

Denise R. Costanzo  
Assistant Professor of Theory and Criticism  
Thesis Advisor

James G. Cooper  
Associate Professor of Architecture

Darla V. Lindberg  
Professor of Architecture

Craig Zabel  
Associate Professor of Art History  
Head of the Department of Art History

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

Referred to as “The Evil Twin,” “Temple of Death,” and “the City of the Dead,” Aldo Rossi’s San Cataldo cemetery has generated both controversy and admiration since its conception in 1971. Arguably his masterwork, the cemetery has inspired ongoing scholarly discussion, analysis, and interpretation. Although it remains unfinished, San Cataldo is one of the most frequently featured examples of Rossi’s work in studies of postmodern architecture. However, despite San Cataldo’s significance, the cemetery is too often presented as an illustration of theoretical issues rather than a work deserving of study in its own right. In 2015, architectural historian Diane Ghirardo highlighted this situation and issued a challenge by asking, “To what degree have the criticisms of [San Cataldo] depended upon the constellation of interests and concerns of a specific historical moment? Is it possible to identify that which pertains specifically to the project and not only to the contingencies of time and space?” This thesis takes up Ghirardo’s challenge by studying subjects relating to the built work’s physical characteristics and fundamental purpose as funerary architecture. It does so through a critical analysis of four decades of discourse surrounding San Cataldo to identify gaps within the existing conversation about the cemetery. From there, it considers three central issues that have not received sufficient attention. The first is the materiality of the actual built work versus the more famous drawings of the project that are often treated as the “real” project itself. The second looks at death and commemoration as a cultural phenomenon, and how that affects the architecture of the cemetery. The third chapter compares San Cataldo to its more celebrated counterpart, Carlo Scarpa’s Brion-Vega Cemetery. This will extend the discussion on San Cataldo to provide a new, more comprehensive strategy for interpreting and understanding a famous but insufficiently understood project. More widely, this thesis contributes to a larger discussion about the place of funerary and monumental architecture in modernity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. v
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... vi

**INTRODUCTION: San Cataldo’s Critical Legacy** .......................................................... 1
   The Evil Twin .................................................................................................................. 3
   Typology, Meaning, and Modernism ............................................................................. 4

Chapter 1. THE DRAWINGS AND THE BUILT WORK ...................................................... 17
   The Disembodied Image .............................................................................................. 18
   Materiality and Methods ............................................................................................. 25
   The Competition ......................................................................................................... 27

Chapter 2. THE CEMETERY AND DEATH .................................................................. 31
   The House and City of the Dead ................................................................................ 32
   Ancient Connections .................................................................................................. 34
   Typology ...................................................................................................................... 41
   Rites and Rituals .......................................................................................................... 44

Chapter 3. SAN CATALDO AND BRION ..................................................................... 48
   Scale, Site, and Symbolism ......................................................................................... 50
   Modena and Brion’s Lasting Impact .......................................................................... 57

CONCLUSIONS: San Cataldo’s Link to Life................................................................. 62

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 69
# LIST OF FIGURES

## Introduction


1.4 Aldo Rossi, “Cimitero di San Cataldo, Modena, Italy: Site Plan,” 1971-1978 [Source: Canadian Architecture Center]

## Chapter 1

1.1 Aldo Rossi, “Development sketch,” 1971-1972 [Source: Aldo Rossi Foundation]

1.2 Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1971 [Source: The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection]

1.3 Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1972 [Source: The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection]

1.4 Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1972 [Source: The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection]


1.6 Aldo Rossi, “Boardgame,” 1972 [Source: Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979]


1.8 Aldo Rossi, “Elevations and Sections” [Source: Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979]

1.9 Aldo Rossi, “Elevations” [Source: Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979]

1.10 Aldo Rossi, “The Elements of the Plan, analytic table” [Source: Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979]


1.12 Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri. “Cimitero di San Cataldo, Modena, Italy: Bird's-eye perspective.” 1970s. [Source: Canadian Centre for Architecture]


1.14 Aldo Rossi, Aldo Rossi Foundation [Source: Dezeen, Postmodern architecture: San Cataldo Cemetery by Aldo Rossi]


Chapter 2

1.1 Diego Terna, “Concrete Trusses,” Accessed February 9, 2017 [Source: Postmodern Architecture: San Cataldo Cemetery by Aldo Rossi, Dezeen]

1.2 “Tomb of the Volumnii, Perugia,” Mansell-Alinari Collection [Source: Curl, Death and Architecture]

1.3 Dianne Suzette Harris, “Cemetery of San Cataldo,” 1978-1984 [Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology]

1.4 “Gallo-Roman funeral stela, father holding his son in his arms” [Source: Ragon, The Space of Death]

1.5 “Plan of a columbarium of the first century near the Portia di San Sebastiano for the servants of the Cesears,” J.H. Parker Collection, 1298 [Source: Curl, Death and Architecture]

1.6 “Section through a columbarium of the first century near the Portia di San Sebastiano for the servants of the Cesears,” J.H. Parker Collection, 1297 [Source: Curl, Death and Architecture]

1.7 “Tomb of 60 BC with a columbarium of opus reticulatum in the Thermae of the Gordiani,” J.H. Parker Collection [Source: Curl, Death and Architecture]

1.8 “Cemetery of San Cataldo 1971 project of Aldo Rossi architect,” Accessed March 6, 2017 [Source: Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe]


**1.14** Shyla Nicodemi, March 17, 2013, Milan, Italy, Accessed March 6, 2017 [Source: https://shylanicodemi.com/2013/03/17/milano-monumentale/]

**1.15** “Campo santo di Pisa: view of garden from interior,” Italian and other European Art (Scala Archives), Pisa, Italy [Source: Image and original data provided by SCALA, Florence/ART RESOURCE, N.Y]

**1.16** Laurian Ghinitoiu, AD Classics: San Cataldo Cemetery / Aldo Rossi [Source: Archdaily]


**1.18** Laurian Ghinitoiu, AD Classics: San Cataldo Cemetery / Aldo Rossi [Source: Archdaily]

**Chapter 3**


**1.2** “Brion Cemetery Water Pavilion,” In Carlo Scarpa’s cemetery for Brionvega boss, Accessed March 6, 2017 [Source: Phaidon]

**1.3** “San Cataldo Cemetery” [Source: Bing Maps]

**1.4** “Brion Cemetery” [Source: Bing Maps]

**1.5** Nuno Cera, “Carlo Scarpa’s Tomba Brion,” [Source: http://www.nunocera.com/index.php/photography/carlos-scarpas-tomba-brion-2012/]

**1.6** Santo Stefano Cemetery in Italy / Aldo Amoretti Marco Calvi Giancarlo Ranalli [Source: Archdaily]

**1.7** “Untitled (San Cataldo – Aldo Rossi),” 2009 [Source: www.nunocera.com]

**1.8** Santo Stefano Cemetery in Italy / Aldo Amoretti Marco Calvi Giancarlo Ranalli [Source: Archdaily]

**1.9** Laurian Ghinitoiu, AD Classics: San Cataldo Cemetery / Aldo Rossi [Source: Archdaily]

**1.10** Beppe Giardino, San Mauro Torinese Cemetery Extension / Raimondo Guidacci, [Source: Archdaily]

**1.11** Laurian Ghinitoiu, AD Classics: San Cataldo Cemetery / Aldo Rossi [Source: Archdaily]

**1.12** Beppe Giardino, San Mauro Torinese Cemetery Extension / Raimondo Guidacci, [Source: Archdaily]

**1.13** Laurian Ghinitoiu, AD Classics: San Cataldo Cemetery / Aldo Rossi [Source: Archdaily]

**1.14** Eduardo Fanteria, Accessed February 23, 2017. [Source: Flickr Hive Mind]

**Conclusions**


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all who contributed to the work described in this thesis in some way. First, I thank my advisor, assistant Professor Denise Costanzo, for her continued support of my thesis research. I could not have accomplished this thesis without her guidance, patience, and knowledge. I also thank my committee members, Professor Darla Lindberg, associate Professor James Cooper, and associate Professor Craig Zabel for offering new perspectives. Their insightful comments and questions helped shape and strengthen my research. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support of me and my architectural education. Their advice, love, and guidance made this thesis possible.
LIFE, DEATH, AND DESIGN:
Revisiting Aldo Rossi’s Cemetery at San Cataldo
“Architecture was one of the ways that humanity had sought to survive; it was a way of expressing the fundamental search for happiness.”

- Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography

INTRODUCTION  I  SAN CATALDO’S CRITICAL LEGACY
Described as “a poet who happened to be an architect,” Italian designer Aldo Rossi has achieved international recognition and acclaim as an author, theorist, artist, teacher, and architect.\(^1\) In 1990, he was the first Italian architect to win the prestigious Pritzker prize for architecture. One of the the works that paved the way to his Pritzker win was the San Cataldo Cemetery, in Modena, Italy, which began in 1971.\(^2\) Arguably his masterwork, the cemetery has inspired both controversy and ongoing scholarly debate.

The Northern Italian city of Modena has enjoyed prosperity and growth since World War II. By the 1960s however, this expansion caused the city to outgrow its 19-century cemetery designed by Cesare Costa\(^3\) (fig 1.1-3). A study conducted by Modena’s municipality found the capacity of the existing Costa cemetery would need to increase by 55,000 over the next 60 years to meet rising demand. On May 6\(^{th}\), 1971, the municipality announced a competition for the expansion of the Metropolitan Cemetery of San Cataldo open to Italian architects and engineers. The municipality selected a 60,000 square meter plot west of the existing cemetery suitable for the new project.\(^4\) On June 13\(^{th}\) of the following year, Milanese architect Aldo Rossi, in collaboration with his former pupil Gianni Braghieri, were selected as the winners.\(^5\)

The original plan for the cemetery was a rectangular site, 590 feet wide by 918 feet across (180 meters by 280 meters), consisting of a central cubic sanctuary space, on axis with four triangular stepped burial vaults, and a truncated cone. These three elements were

---

5 Johnson, “What Remains of Man,” 38-54. The decision was not unanimous however, with some jurors feeling that the monumental forms of the cemetery would be in conflict with the skyline of the city and that its collective ethos sacrificed the feelings of the individual. The jurors in favor of Rossi’s proposal thought it was a unified and coherent project, clearly related to the existing cemetery.
surrounded by two L-shaped ossuaries, and three enclosing walls of columbaria. The central cube was meant to be a sanctuary space and collective monument for funeral, civil and religious ceremonies but was later changed into an ossuary. The truncated cone was intended as a gathering space for funerary services, with a communal grave underneath. In 1976 construction began and was completed in phases, with the last structures concluding in 1997. The cemetery was never finished, and stands incomplete today.

THE EVIL TWIN:

The original Costa cemetery was built between 1850 and 1876 and is located northwest of Modena’s city center. Rossi’s cemetery addition is roughly equal in size, shape, and scale to the neoclassical cemetery that sits directly adjacent (fig 1.4). Some authors claim Rossi and Braghieri created their competition submission by duplicating the basic outline of the original cemetery and tracing out an “evil twin” next to it. Both cemeteries feature perimeter walls that enclose large grass burial grounds, separated by gridded pathways. A smaller Jewish cemetery and a service building separate the two larger enclosed cemeteries.

Evident in the description of San Cataldo as the “evil twin,” Rossi’s cemetery has braved its fair share of acrimonious criticism. The cemetery’s stark and unfinished appearance makes

---

8 Lopes, Melancholy and Architecture, 2016.
11 Lopes. “Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri’s San Cataldo Cemetery ..." Uncube. November 10, 2015. Accessed October 20, 2016. Lopes wrote, “San Cataldo offers no comfort or solace in its stark appearance: a kind of postwar social housing unit for the deceased. In this sense, the project gazes at the abyss of annihilation and the abyss gazes back at us... The banality of the entire setting wavers between the horror of anonymity and the magic of the prosaic.”
it a target for critiques and misunderstandings. However, its notoriety, combined with Rossi’s teachings and theories, also generated copious and diverse scholarly discussion. Overall, the discourse on San Cataldo focuses on Rossi’s use of typological forms and analogous relationships as a way to create meaning, or as a resistance against architectural autonomy and modernism. Most authors use these theories to further their own more specific analysis and interpretations of his work.

TYPOLOGY, MEANING, AND MODERNISM:

In *A Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi describes the serious automobile accident he experienced in April of 1971. The accident was a turning point in his life; it marked the end of his youth and a confrontation with his own mortality. The design for the Modena cemetery was born in the hospital bed where he recovered. Rossi also credits his near-death experience with forming the basis of his thoughts on typology and analogy. In the hospital he began to think of cities as “great encampments for the living” and cemeteries as cities of the dead. San Cataldo as a city of the dead is a theme explored in depth by both Rossi and many authors studying his work. Rossi’s statements in his essay “The Blue of the Sky” and in *A Scientific Autobiography*, assert that the cemetery is a house of the dead and is constructed according to the rhythm of urban mortality. Deborah Thom backs up and clarifies this claim. She explains that Rossi’s cemetery is a place for the dead, which is only understood in relationship to the city of the living. It is a “repository for bodies which is analogous to and which provides an understanding of the

---

city.” According to Thom, this analogous relationship between the cemetery and the city informs most of Rossi’s design decisions and choices for the project.14

The analogy of San Cataldo as a city for the dead speaks to a larger topic in Rossi’s work: his inquiry into and practice of typology. A guiding voice in the discussion of typology is Italian art historian (and politician) Giulio Carlo Argan. His essay, “On the Typology of Architecture,” introduced typology to Rossi and other neorationalists in the 1960s. His essay defines typology as an analytical tool for architecture and urban forms, as well as a rational basis for design. Type is formed by regressing or reducing “a complex of formal variants” to a common root form that has analogous formal and functional properties.15 Argan’s position is echoed in Rossi’s book, The Architecture of the City. Here, Rossi described typology as a “study of types of elements that cannot be further reduced, both “elements of a city as well as architecture,” and argues that type is the principle closest to the essence and idea of architecture itself.16 The discussion of San Cataldo’s specific relationship to typology closely follows the definitions of typology Rossi and Argan’s definition of the term. More specifically, most authors claim Rossi’s uses type both at San Cataldo and in his larger body of work, as a tool that allows him to study and link the collective memories of the city to urban form.

Building on Rossi’s discussions of type in The Architecture of the City, Diane Ghirado emphasizes the significance of typology, not only as a first step in understanding a city and its individual buildings, but also in the development of an appropriate architectural design.17 She

---

17 Diane Ghirardo, “The Blue of Aldo Rossi’s Sky.” AA Files 70 (0, 2015): 159-72.
writes that Rossi used typology as an analytical approach through which he identified buildings and urban types. Ghirardo reaffirms the position that types are elements that can not be further reduced and claims that no type can be identified with just one form. For Rossi, type was at once locus and event, form and meaning.

Thom, along with author Seungkoo Jo, delve further into Rossi’s theory of type and its relationship with time, memory, and the city.\(^\text{18}\) Thom insists that Rossi thinks of the city as a house of memory, and as a record of the events and processes that produced its architecture. She writes, “he taps into the city analogously and typologically” to produce forms which demand multiple interpretations. The dominant forms of the cemetery - the cube, stepped triangular grouping of multi-storied tombs, U-shaped tomb, and truncated cone - are distilled transformations of urban forms and their types.\(^\text{19}\) Similarly, Jo describes how typology transcends form and allows memory to be connected to the events of the city. She states that for Rossi, type is the principle that remains unaltered in spite of changes to the form. Echoing Ghirardo, Jo argues architectural type has no precise form or content, but it is rather an abstraction of memory.

While Thom and Jo expand on the typologies in use at San Cataldo, Mary Louise Lobsinger has explicitly discussed Argan’s influence on Rossi’s practice of typology.\(^\text{20}\) She argues type became the cornerstone of Rossi’s architectural theory in part because it countered “an idea of architecture reduced to function and standards cloaked in a uniform style.”\(^\text{21}\) Further Lobsinger claims that type was useful to architects because it had the ability to bring together

---

\(^\text{19}\) Thom, “The City of the Dead as the City of the Living,” 14.
\(^\text{21}\) Lobsinger, “That Obscure Object of Desire,” 45.
the “sociohistorical moment and the absolute past” to create an architectural expression of totality. Here, she reiterates how Rossi used type as both as an explanatory tool and an interpretive device that enabled the objective documentation of material changes within the city over time. Typology as a means to connect and document the past and present is also acknowledged by author Kate Nesbitt. Her introduction to Argan’s essay frames the interest in typology as part of a “larger postmodern search for meaning because it establishes a continuity with history which gives architecture legibility within a culture or urban environment.” She also claims this “legible urbanism” was attractive to postmodernists because it remedied the “object-in-a-field” modernist city.22

More specifically, Lobsinger’s article explores typology in relation to Rossi’s “compulsion to repeat” the forms and motifs in different projects. She insists that for Argan and Rossi, type contained infinite formal possibilities, and would always produce different results or architectures when put into practice. To demonstrate Argan’s influence on Rossi and the San Cataldo cemetery, Lobsinger points to a quote in A Scientific Autobiography. Rossi writes, “Nothing can yield more unforeseen results than a repetitive mechanism. And no mechanisms seem more repetitive in their typological aspects than the house, public buildings, and the theatre.”23 Here again, Lobsinger shows how Rossi uses type as a tool to engender distilled forms that synthesize the historical past and future. Ghirardo, Thom, Joo, and Lobsinger’s statements illustrate how they see Rossi following Argan’s definition of type as a tool to create forms that simultaneously convey and are connected to the collective memory of the city and history.

In addition to typology as an analytical tool, contemporary literature on San Cataldo also investigates the role of typology in creating multiple meanings and interpretations. Besides the analogous relationships of the forms to the city, some authors find layers of meaning in the cemetery’s connections to historical precedents and Rossi’s other works. Moreover, others see the plainness and clarity of form as another means of producing numerous readings of and meanings in the project.

The first and most widely discussed circle of meaning found at San Cataldo is the forms’ analogous relationships to elements of the city. Rossi’s drawings of the cemetery consist of a rectangular site defined by three-story buildings. The interior of the rectangular space consists of four distinct forms: a hollow cube, U-shaped building, a stepped-triangle, and a truncated cone. Rossi himself describes the cemetery’s forms as a city, writing, “together all of the buildings read as a city in which the private relationship with death happens to be the civil relationship with the institution. Thus, the cemetery is a public building…” Rossi attempts to solve technical issues for the cemetery the same way he solves problems when designing a house, school or a hotel. However, he writes:

> as opposed to a house, school, or hotel, where life itself modifies the work and its growth over time, the cemetery foresees all modifications…Faced with this relationship, architecture can only use its own given elements, refusing any suggestion not born out of its own making. Thus the references to the cemetery are also found in the architecture of the cemetery, the house and the city. Here, the monument becomes analogous to the relationship between life and the city.

While Rossi describes the forms of the cemetery in terms of the abandoned house (central cube) and smokestack (truncated cone), Thom and Eugene Johnson further investigate Rossi’s

---


25 Rossi, “The Blue of the Sky,” 34.
descriptions for meaning and relationships to the city. They argue that the enclosing wall structures, the hollow cube, and the stepped triangular tombs are distilled depictions of the typology of dwelling. The perimeter buildings featuring pitched roofs and punched windows, and the stepped, triangular tombs represent the urban housing block. These authors believe the triangular tombs were specifically meant to be analogous to the relationship between housing blocks and city streets, while the cube is meant to represent an abandoned house, with no floors, roof, and empty windows.

From Rossi’s description in “The Blue of the Sky,” we know the truncated cone was meant to serve two functions. The upper level was meant to be an amphitheater with seats for gatherings and services. Below was supposed to be a common grave for indigent people. Rossi describes the cone as the chimney of an abandoned factory that held the remains of the abandoned dead, the “desperate or forgotten lives.” Thom notes how the cone creates a dichotomy between its industrial and institutional form and its function as a final resting place for the forgotten; The bodies of the indigent are buried under the feet of those attending the services in the amphitheater above. Building on Rossi’s description, Thom alleges that the cone acts as a reminder and critique of urban institutions. Defending this claim she writes, “the living share the space with the unwanted dead whose presence prompts association with the institutions which typically house them, (hospitals, asylums, prisons, orphanages) and also with those systems which victimize them.” The form and dual functions of the cone reveal a new layer of meaning for Thom.

---

29 Thom, "The City of the Dead as the City of the Living," 16.
Johnson interprets San Cataldo through the lens of the cemetery’s architectural and historical influences. He argues that Rossi’s use of type depends on his “far-reaching knowledge of the history of architecture”, and that acknowledging “from what architecture Rossi’s cemetery is born” contributes to an understanding of the project’s meaning. He asserts that the idea for the overall cemetery plan came from the writing, theories, and drawings of Boullée, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, and Adolf Loos. He points to Etruscan funerary urns, Roman Bakers tombs, and BBPR’s Monument ai Morti nei Campi di Germania as the major influences of the cube. He also attributes the form of the cone to Boullée and Piranesi’s influence. He sees it as is similar to Boullée’s conical cenotaph and the Basilica in Piranesi’s Campo Marzio.

While Johnson looks most closely at Rossi’s architectural influences, many others also mention the similarities between Rossi’s forms and those of the Etruscan funerary urns, the Monument ai Morti nei Campi di Germania, and Boullée’s cenotaph. Rossi points critics in this direction since he mentions the Etruscan urns and Baker’s tomb in his description of the project, was mentored by a member of BBPR, and wrote the introduction for Boullée’s Architecture, Essai sur l’Art. These four precedents are most often cited to quickly describe or explain the cemetery’s historical connections. However, Rossi’s statements about San Cataldo, together with some of his design choices and certain elements present at the site, allude to other historical references in the project that critics have not explored as thoroughly.

Other authors, including Stanley Abercrombie and Thom, point to the extreme plainness of the forms as another source of multiple meanings. Thom specifically argues that the sparse

---

architecture of the cemetery is not visually barren out of a disregard for ornament. Rather, Rossi’s belief in clarity of type allows for meanings to accumulate over time. She believes a building that attempts to create “multiple and variable” interpretations is preferable to one which tries to pick and choose its messages.\(^{34}\) Like Thom, Abercrombie feels the character of the project is only achieved through “careful and deliberate” design editing. For him, the project’s most impressive quality is its “severe plainness”, and states that while the buildings are bare, they are far from mute.\(^{35}\) Although unconvinced of the interpretations put forward by other authors, he notes that it is not necessarily a failing that different authors have their own readings of the project’s forms. Instead, he presents it as sign of a deeply serious, ambitious project with a “desirable flexibility of meaning.” Thom, Abercrombie, and others recognize San Cataldo’s clarity of type and form as the most effective means of creating and proliferating meaning in the project.\(^{36}\)

In addition to developing meaning, a number of authors claim Rossi’s adherence to typology demonstrates his belief in architecture as an autonomous discipline, and positions his work against the modernist ideals of the time. Lobsinger and Ghirardo both argue the theory of type Rossi subscribed to was opposed to the ideology of modernism. Ghirardo states that Rossi’s study of type reintroduced long-forgotten ideas about architecture, and suggested a strategy for combating modern banalities. She sees Rossi resisting modern architecture in three key ways. First, he departed from the language of the existing Costa cemetery, and reduced his cemetery to the most elemental forms. Second, he rejected modernist planning theories, and third, used color at a time when his peers “to paraphrase Henry Ford, embraced any color as long as it was white.”\(^{37}\) Lobsinger further enforced this point with her claim that choosing type as

\(^{34}\) Thom, “The City of the Dead as the City of the Living,” 16-17.
\(^{35}\) Abercrombie, "Cemetery Famous before Building Began," 166.
a fundamental criterion for a theory of architecture was to “position oneself against the bourgeois fetishization of the individual creative life and to uphold the architecture as an autonomous discipline composed of objective, historical givens.”

Building on this analysis, Lobsinger examines how Rossi’s compulsion to repeat forms could be further evidence of his resistance to the modernist movement. She theorizes that Rossi’s choice to repeat a previously used or known form “posits an idea of creative self freed from the burden of inventing anew” and that “the search for new architectural forms that reflect our experience of the world can be understood as a constituent element of modernist ideology.” Lobsinger argues Rossi’s choice to repeat may also be considered an attempt to resist the production and consumption of the new. While other authors notice the repetition of forms in relation to typology, a discussion of the repetition as a means to resist modernism is limited to Lobsinger’s interpretations.

Rafael Moneo’s article, “Aldo Rossi: the Idea of Architecture and the Modena Cemetery” offers a different position on autonomy. He asserts that Modena “consolidated and reinforced” the “La Tendenza” movement. Moneo insists that because the Tendenza movement had become a widely spread architectural idea, Modena must be examined in that context. He focuses on the idea that there was a particular aspect of architecture that was considered an autonomous discipline, and how that idea slowly developed into a fundamental principle in Rossi’s work. Moneo explains that while the modern movement insisted on the “figurative aspects of architecture”, in an attempt to establish a continuity between architecture and other fine arts, Rossi defended the legitimacy and independence of the principles which govern the practice of architecture itself.

38 Lobsinger, “That Obscure Object of Desire,” 47.
Belgin Turan-Özkaya built on Moneo’s position that autonomy was a fundamental principle in Rossi’s work, but views it as part of the development of “aesthetic intentionality” in architecture.\textsuperscript{41} She insists that for Rossi, the ‘craft’ or ‘art’ of architecture was something beyond providing shelter and fulfilling function. Similar to Lobsinger and Moneo, Turan-Özkaya claims Rossi’s discourse on aesthetic intentionality and autonomy was “a call for a return to a conventional understanding of architecture as a field of expertise and as aesthetic production.”\textsuperscript{42} She adds however, that his discourse was also an attempt to reaestheticize the discipline. Like Moneo and Turan-Özkaya, most authors point out that while modernism tried to establish a connection between architecture and other fine arts, and promoted individual creative exploration, Rossi believed in architecture as an independent discipline linked to its historical past.

CONCLUSIONS:

The provocative nature of San Cataldo produced a variety of debates and discussions. The most prevalent method of examining the project is through the lens of typology. While the individual interpretations vary, Rossi’s use of typology is most often credited for creating meaning in the work, positioning him against modernist ideals, and reinforcing his belief in architecture as an autonomous discipline. The theoretical aspects of Rossi’s work are well-documented and well-studied, however, few authors have offered critiques or reexaminations of the existing analysis on Rossi’s cemetery. Abercrombie and Ghirardo are part of a small group of authors who question the current discussions on San Cataldo.

\textsuperscript{42} Turan-Özkaya, “Reaestheticizing the discipline,” 74.
Abercrombie relies on his first-hand experiences of the cemetery as a basis for his questioning. He approaches the discourse and design of the cemetery with hesitation. Aside from a degree of abstraction lost between the drawings and completed forms, he sees the biggest disconnect occurring between Rossi’s mysterious drawings and the milder built work. He notes that unfortunately for Rossi, the built reality is more humane than the concept. The discrepancies between Rossi’s drawings of San Cataldo and the built work reveal that some of the most established analysis of the project may not parallel what actually exists in Modena. This disconnect establishes the need for further inquiry into the differences between the relationships of the drawings and built work.

Ghirardo critically examines the discourse and takes issue with how other authors analyze and interpret San Cataldo’s forms and its architectural or historical influences. She argues that much of the discourse surrounding the Modena cemetery either misses the point of the project, or ignores Rossi’s ideas about the cemetery altogether. She states that architectural historians’ “beloved formal genealogies” only tell us what Rossi had observed or studied. They do not help to explain why he chose specific forms or help to lift the “enigmatic veils with which he shrouded them.”

The limited approach to analysis Ghirardo describes speaks to her larger concern – too often Rossi’s project is seen as by-product of discourses rather than a work to be studied in its own right. Moreover, she laments how much of the writing about the cemetery and Rossi’s ideas in general seem to talk about almost anything but the actual design; instead she finds the discussions are characterized by opaque prose and theories unrelated to architecture. Later, Ghirardo poses a challenge to architects and historians when she asks: “to what degree have the criticisms of this project depended upon the constellations of interests and concerns of a

43 Abercrombie, “Cemetery Famous before Building Began,” 165.
specific historical moment?... Is it possible to identify that which pertains specifically to the project and not only to the contingencies of time and space?“45 Ghirardo’s quote indicates her frustration over the existing discourse’s inability to adequately address issues relating to the cemetery itself. Abercrombie and Ghirardo’s critiques of the San Cataldo cemetery and the scholarly debate surrounding it opens the door to a new direction of analysis that is more focused on the built work.

The voice of the project’s architect is missing from the majority of writing about the San Cataldo cemetery. Despite being a prolific author in addition to an architect, Rossi’s own words about his project are largely absent in discussions of his work by other authors, or else taken out of context to further their own ideas. Returning to Rossi’s writing brings to light new insights into the thoughts, ideas, and emotions that generated San Cataldo’s design. Reflecting on his time in the hospital, Rossi wrote,

I lay in a small, ground floor room near a window through which I looked at the sky and a little garden. Lying nearly immobile, I thought of the past, but sometimes I did not think: I merely gazed at the trees and the sky. This presence of things and of my separation from things—bound up also with the painful awareness of my own bones—brought me back to my childhood. During the following summer, in my study for the project, perhaps only this image and the pain in my bones remained with me...46

The San Cataldo cemetery’s design is grounded in Rossi’s own experiences with life, death, and fear that arose from directly confronting the thin line that separates the two. Rossi’s anxieties and reflections on his own mortality are instilled in the project and their presence should not be muted by abstract ideologies. The dominant focus on the theoretical aspects of San Cataldo implies the project is primarily a manifestation of architectural and urban principles. However, a more critical examination of the built work along with Rossi’s own writing reveals

46 Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, 11.
that San Cataldo is more than a summation of theories; Rather, Rossi used his personal experiences to create a meaningful and experiential cemetery for the citizens of Modena. San Cataldo is sensitive to issues of death and bereavement and situates itself within a larger language of relevant Italian cultural practices.
Fig. 1.1: San Cataldo Cemetery (Monumental Cesare Costa and Aldo Rossi) November 6th, 2010 (Flickr)
Fig. 1.2: San Cataldo, March 28th 2008 (Panoramio)

Fig. 1.3: Olga Schlyter, San Cataldo Cemetery (Old Part), June 2006 (Flickr)
Fig. 1.4: Aldo Rossi, Cimitero di San Cataldo, Modena, Italy: Site plan, 1971-1978 (Canadian Architecture Center)
“What surprises me most in architecture, as in other techniques, is that a project has one life in its built state, but another in its written or drawn state.”
- Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography
THE DISEMBODIED IMAGE:

Rossi and Bragheri produced many drawings and renderings as part of their competition submission. Some accurately and analytically document the architects’ design intentions, and others artfully collage plans, sections, and elevations to present the project in its entirety on one sheet of paper. Many of these drawings, from process sketches to design development documents, are accessible through a variety of institutional collections internationally, including: The Bonnefantenmuseum Masstricht, the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Deutsches Architektur Museum (DAM), the MAXXI in Rome, the University Institute of Architecture in Venice, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Politecnico di Milano, and the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles.\(^1\)

As Rossi received feedback from Modena’s municipality, and as the project progressed from design to construction, he continually reflected on and revised the drawings. This produced many drawings and images of the project, most of which fall into two categories: presentation plans and sections, and experiential perspectives. Rossi also completed many process sketches and iterations of previous drawings, but these are not referenced as often in scholarly work or as accessible to a public audience. (figs 1.1-4). Technical or construction drawings for this project are not widely published.

The number and variety of images present some problems in regards to detail and chronology. While many of the drawings available are captivating and enigmatic, overall, the detail level is low; materials are not clearly shown, there are not many construction details, and most drawings appear abstract and scaleless. There are currently no known drawings documenting the existing state of the incomplete built work. Moreover, the chronology of the drawings and sketches is not well-established. We know Rossi completed many drawings over

the span of the project, but it is not as clear at which time he did what drawing or sketch. The ambiguous chronology makes it less obvious that the orthographics came before most of the more experiential and experimental drawings.

One of the most common types of drawings of San Cataldo are orthographic plans, sections, and elevations. These drawings were used first as part of Rossi’s competition entry, then primarily to present to the municipality during design development. They help document the layout of the cemetery, its relation to the existing Costa cemetery, and the relative size and scale of the architectural elements. A few of these drawings collage plans, sections, and elevations together to offer a totalizing view of the project, and others focus on one of the three in more detail (figs 1.5-7). Some of the earlier orthographics illustrate how the cemetery’s layout changed as Rossi revised the design and received feedback from the municipality (figs 1.8-10). Overall, these types of drawings were design tools of Rossi’s to advance the project from concept to realized work.

Another popular drawing type referenced in discussions and analysis of the project are the bird’s eye perspectives. Typically taken from the cemetery’s south-west side looking north-east, these drawings convey a more experiential, painterly view of the project. Often in these drawings, the buildings are distorted and cast dark shadows that stretch across the page, revealing the works’ sublime and surreal qualities. It is important to note that while these images are usually shown in black and white or with emphasis on the dark shadows, Rossi originally made many of these drawings full color. The color drawings and the black and white drawings take on very different tones. The latter engenders comparisons to the “unsettling magical realism” or “melancholy and mystery” of a de Chirico painting (fig 1.11). However, it is hard to

---

saw the same about the drawings saturated with shades of reds, greens, blues, and yellows (fig 1.12). These drawings help convey the project’s overall mood and give a better sense of what the cemetery would look like when built.

The drawings are integral to understanding San Cataldo as they contribute to the multifaceted and sophisticated nature of the project. Because the cemetery is unfinished, the drawings are valuable recordings of Rossi’s original design intentions and ideas. They also document the series of changes and modifications he made moving from the competition to construction. Without them, the understanding of San Cataldo’s architecture would be incomplete.

The drawings are also necessary to understand the theories guiding Rossi’s decisions about the forms and plans of the project. Authors typically refer to the drawings more often than the built work in their explanations and interpretations of the cemetery. Eugene Johnson relies heavily on Rossi’s drawings to extrapolate influences and inspirations behind the project. More specifically, he uses the drawings as evidence of Boullée, Piranesi, Fischer von Erlach, and Loos’s influence on Rossi. He argues much of the plan for San Cataldo was generated from Piranesi’s reconstructed Campo Marzio drawings. He includes Piranesi’s drawings alongside Rossi’s so the reader can more clearly see the similarities he describes. Johnson also asserts all of the structures in Rossi’s cemetery conform to drawings and passages by Boullée about funerary architecture. Johnson claims Rossi’s truncated cone is directly influenced by Boullée’s drawing for a conical cenotaph. He introduces a drawing of each to exhibit the similarities

3 Johnson, “What Remains of Man,” 40. Johnson claims Rossi’s drawing “The Analogous City” has “lifted Piranesi’s vision of an imperial ancient city of the dead placed within the context of Rome, and put it in the middle of a 19th-century cemetery plan.”

4 Johnson, “What Remains of Man,” 44. Boullée writes, “It does not seem possible to me to conceive anything sadder than than a monument composed of a smooth, naked and unadorned surface, of a light absorbent material, absolutely bare of details, and of which the decoration is formed by a composition of shadows, drawn by shadows still darker.”
between the two. Moreover, Johnson mentions one of Rossi’s drawings, titled “The Labyrinth,” to illustrate Fischer von Erlach’s influence on San Cataldo. Again, he compares Rossi’s drawing and von Erlach’s to and enforce his claim.⁵

Often, authors conflate the drawings and the built work in their interpretations and analysis of the project. They do not clearly distinguish between Rossi’s drawings and the structure as built; they choose instead to see the drawings as the totalizing product of Rossi’s design intentions. This approach makes sense because of the incomplete and unfinished nature of the San Cataldo cemetery. The built work does not include many of the forms seen in the drawings, most notably the conical tower and triangular ossuaries. Therefore, the built work alone does not support a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical ideas and meanings Rossi incorporated into the project.

Lobsinger relies on Rossi’s drawings for her inquiry into how typology and formal repetition manifest in the San Cataldo cemetery.⁶ Her awareness of Rossi’s “compulsion to repeat” starts with his drawings in A Scientific Autobiography, where she sees him redrawing old and new projects together, each one using his signature drawing style. She argues Rossi’s drawing style - thick black lines, scaleless, and without reference to a physical site - engenders an image that no longer reads as a proposal for built form, but as an “ahistorical representation of an authored idea.”⁷ Lobsinger claims a disregard for the “formal and dimensional aspects of drawing” inspired Rossi’s investigation into architectural typology.⁸ Rossi’s drawings further enforce Lobsinger’s position on repetition and type when she considers the distinct forms of the cemetery. Lobsinger argues that for Rossi, type contains infinite formal possibilities that always

---

⁵ Johnson, “What Remains of Man,” 44.
⁸ Ibid, 45.
produce different results when put into practice, and she notes there are few mechanisms more repetitive in their typological aspects than the house, public buildings, and the theatre. These forms are seen in Rossi’s drawings, but not in the incomplete built work.

Similar to Lobsinger’s approach, Thom privileges the drawings over the built work to analyze the theories and meanings in the forms of the San Cataldo cemetery.\(^9\) She sees the dominant forms of the cemetery as distilled transformations of urban forms that have specific analogous and historical relationships to the city, and the drawings help to reveal the meanings behind each form. She claims the enclosing wall structures, hollow cube, and stepped triangular tombs are depictions of the typology of dwelling while the truncated cone represents urban institutions. Thom conflates the drawings and the built work because the analogous relationships of the cemetery’s forms and Rossi’s theories on the city and typology are more clearly seen in the drawings than the built work.

As Lobsinger alluded to, Rossi’s style of drawing generates images that are somewhat cartoonish in appearance. The tactility and texture of the materials and surrounding landscape are mostly absent in the drawings of San Cataldo. Because the built work currently stands unfinished, there is a perception that the drawings are a more valuable and thorough point of reference for the project. Compounded by the abstract, presentation-style quality of the drawings, it is easy to think of the San Cataldo cemetery as a collection of drawings and images. However, sustained concentration on the drawings perpetuates the project as a disembodied image, not as a functioning cemetery for the citizens of Modena. This maintains the notion that San Cataldo’s worth lies not in its physicality, but in its ability to illustrate theoretical issues. The preference for and reliance on a two-dimensional, visual reading of San Cataldo does not afford a comprehensive study of the project as funerary architecture.

Moreover, it makes one feel as though studying the drawings of the project is a legitimate substitute for visiting and analyzing the built work.

Ghirardo is one of the first to notice the disparity between Rossi’s drawings and the built work. She claims that while there has been a series of readings of Rossi’s more informational images, there has been less study of his imaginative and evocative drawings. The irony of Rossi’s work, she points out, is that as the project developed and moved toward its physical reality, the drawings of the scheme became increasingly more lyrical, and allowed the poetic side of Rossi’s character to come to the foreground. She insists this second type is drawing is “not as interested in transmitting information as conveying expressive meaning, precisely for their elusive and enigmatic qualities. These drawings are products of imagination, not reason or science”¹⁰ (fig 1.13-4). She sees the drawings not as stand-alone objects, but pieces joined to Rossi’s published and unpublished writings which create reflections not just on architecture but on a “human condition that both shapes and is shaped by architecture.”¹¹

Abercrombie also discusses the differences he sees between the drawings and the built work. He visited the site during construction, and saw most of the linear wing and part of the three-story enclosure completed, and the hollow cube underway.¹² He argues while the drawings create a powerful and sublime reaction, approaching the site on foot has a less compelling effect. Abercrombie admits one of the most obvious things missing is the project’s completion. Rossi’s drawings present a strongly unified composition, but the fragmentary appearance of the project as built detracts from the impact created by the drawings. Apart from conveying a more unified composition than the built work, Abercrombie recognizes Rossi’s drawings achieve a sense of “sinister mystery” that is missing in the built work. The ink-black

---

¹⁰ Diane Ghirardo, “The Blue of Aldo Rossi’s Sky.” *AA Files* 70 (0, 2015): 166.
shadows stretch “terrifyingly long” across the page in Rossi’s drawings, but in reality, “nature is content to cast paler, less dramatic shadows.”13 This contributes to what Abercrombie describes as a disconnect between the degree of abstraction seen in the drawings and the reality of the built work. He contends that functional elements like window sills, eaves, and hardware make the project slightly more human, and slightly less severe, than the concept.14

Ghirardo and Abercrombie are two of the first to investigate the discrepancies and differences between the images of the cemetery and the constructed work. Ghirardo exposes divergences between San Cataldo’s drawings and its construction; while the drawings started out as informational and analytical, they became more inventive and evocative as the construction progressed. These later drawings expressed a new side to Rossi’s cemetery, one that is less scientific and rational and more imaginative. Ghirardo begins to unveil that for Rossi, San Cataldo was more than a set of drawings illustrating architectural theories, it was an emotional and contemplative endeavor for both Rossi the man, and Rossi the architect.

Moreover, Abercrombie noticed how the parts of San Cataldo he saw under construction were different that the surreal and abstract images. The built work is less severe than the drawings, but at the same time, more human. He picks up on the subtle influences of the materiality and physicality of the built work that are not visible in the drawings.

Rossi was well aware of the different lives lived by drawings and built works respectively.15 In fact, he enjoyed the incongruities, writing,

Whenever I followed the progress of my few realized projects, I liked the errors made on the construction site, the little deformations, the changes which became remedial in some unexpected way. Indeed, they amazed me because they began to seem the life

13 Abercrombie, "The Cemetery Famous before Building Began," 163-64.
of the structure. As a matter of fact, I believe that any original order is open to practical changes, and that it allows for all the failures of human weakness.16

Rossi’s words illuminate a new approach to understanding and interpreting San Cataldo. He acknowledges that modifications happen when a project moves from design to construction but feels those differences should be enjoyed and celebrated. For Rossi, the functional revisions, material limitations, and practical changes made during construction gave the project a new form of vitality. Rossi, together with Ghirardo and Abercrombie, lay the groundwork for an inquiry grounded in the physicality and materiality of the built work. They established that there are complexities embedded in the construction, materiality, and function of the cemetery which are not adequately explored in the existing discourse.

MATERIALITY AND METHODS:

There is more to learn about San Cataldo than can be found from looking solely at the drawings. A study of Rossi’s writing about and design intentions for San Cataldo reveals that Rossi was equally concerned with the characteristics of the materials and the technology behind their construction as he was with the meanings of the forms. About the structure of the buildings he writes, “All of the structure is reinforced concrete with filled borings…The conical tower of the communal grave has a cement finish, utilizing the technique of building towers for the industrial plants. The cubic sanctuary is built in reinforced concrete or in load bearing prefabricated concrete blocks.”17 Rossi’s detailed descriptions of the various materials in “The Blue of the Sky”, exposes a narrative about the sensory and tactile architectural experiences present at Modena. His descriptions of the finishes and colors of the materials helps portray San Cataldo not just as a drawing, but as an architecture with haptic qualities. He writes,

---

The repositories and all of the vertical surfaces of the cemetery are covered with roughly-finished cement or with a dark grey plastic material, with the exception of the ossuaries and conical tower. The ossuaries have a light grey stone finish and the remaining horizontal surfaces, perimeter porticos, underground passages and elevated walks are also grey stone, cut into large rectangular slabs. The roofing of the perimeter porticos are made of a cement-based hollow triangular element with a white finish and the conical tower is made from reinforced concrete coated with a transparent substance that leaves the natural grey color of the cement unaltered. The stone surfaces are always hammered or hatched.  

Here, Rossi specifically chooses materials with rough, unfinished textures, which provide a tactual experience when visitors comes in contact with the materials. He picks materials that are prone to showing signs of age and weathering, and leaves them in their natural state or close to it, celebrating how each material ages organically over time (figs 1.15-6).

Another interesting design element at San Cataldo is Rossi’s choice to use “carefully leveled” white gravel for the paths. Unlike other common paving methods like stone pavers or poured concrete, crushed stone paths create a distinct sound when walked on. The unmistakable sound of people traversing gravel contributes to the soundtrack of a site that otherwise stands in near silence. The paths document the presence of life among the deceased and highlights the physicality and materiality of the site.

Whereas many of Rossi’s black and white drawings may feel “desolate” or “surreal,” the feelings created at the San Cataldo cemetery are quite different. At the site, there is a softening that comes with the realities and limitations of materials. In reality, what is so often portrayed as a monochrome, sinister landscape is actually abundant in saturated color, haptic

---

19 Ibid, 32.
textures, and natural scenery. Inside the cemetery, the facades of the perimeter buildings are stuccoed pale pink with green metal frames in the windows and doors. The pitched roofs are sky blue and the central cube, preceded by a white building, is a natural clay red (figs 1.17-8). Inside the hollow cube, metal staircases connect the galleries and large square openings between the niches frame views of the landscape beyond. Reflecting on San Cataldo Rossi writes,

The slogan of the competition for which it was designed was “the blue of the sky,” and now when I look at those huge, blue, sheet metal roofs, so sensitive to day and evening light as well as to the seasons, they sometimes seem deep blue, sometimes the clearest azure. The pink stucco of the walls covers the Emilian brick of the old cemetery, and it too displays the effects of the light, appearing almost white or else dark pink.21

From this quote, it is apparent the interplay of color, texture, and material were central to Rossi’s design for San Cataldo. However, the dominant popularity of the black and white images currently obscures the colorful, expressive nature of both the realized work and the drawings.

THE COMPETITION:

The nature of a design competition necessitates an ongoing conversation between the winning designer and the competition committee. After Rossi and Braghieri completed the first round of changes, they were asked to produce a final version of construction drawings for the complex. Again, many modifications were made to the design, including the introduction of an elevated building next to the Jewish cemetery that connected the site to the parking areas north and south of the perimeter. This addition changed the perimeter of the cemetery from two concentric enclosures to a three-story U-shaped building facing Via San Cataldo. The cube was

---

converted from a sanctuary space to an ossuary with niches set into the interior walls. An elevator and two metal grate staircases connected each floor. The layout of the stepped triangular buildings was changed to host tombs but the centralized circulation remained. The forms of the cube, stepped triangular buildings, and the conical tower did not change despite a change in their functions. At the request of the municipality, Rossi added a park surrounding the site. These various changes caused the cemetery’s capacity to decrease but Rossi’s design allowed for additional tombs or niches to be added to the perimeter buildings over time. These modifications are most clearly seen in a comparison of the drawings to the existing built work, because in addition to his own process drawings, Rossi revised the drawings to reflect the municipality’s requests.

Later in 1980, the municipality informed Rossi of complaints from visitors, who claimed they could not stay in the corridors of the porticos and perimeter for long because of the freezing wind blowing in during the winter months. These complaints resulted in one of the most significant revisions to the cemetery’s windows and doors. Although Rossi’s design intended for hollow openings, he was asked to enclose them for better insulation during the winter. Rossi’s proposed solution to seal the windows and doors that preserved the original elevations of the project was deemed too costly. Eventually, painted aluminum frames with cross-shaped mullions were applied to the facades. The addition of the mullions and frames contributed to the complex’s “uncanny” appearance, and made San Cataldo look even more cartoonish.

Between 1982 and 1984, Rossi and Braghieri also designed a wing of family mausoleums for Modena. The mausoleums were added to the east side of the perimeter, next to the portico. Clad in stone, each had a pediment with an “oculus forming a zigzag of pitched

---

23 Ibid.
roofs” and resembled the small tombs of antiquity.\textsuperscript{24} By 1984, part of the south side of the perimeter and the gateway were completed, along with the central ossuary cube. As the cube’s niches were filled, construction on the rest of the complex waned. The south side of the perimeter and a short stretch to the west concluded around 1997, but only about half of what Rossi intended design actually exists today; about 60% of the perimeter wall, half of the U-shaped ossuaries, and the central cube are complete. The landscaping and parking areas are absent, and the gateway is blocked and surrounded by overgrown foliage and suburban housing.\textsuperscript{25}

CONCLUSIONS:

The project’s drawings evolved from primarily informational at the start to more emotional and expressive by the end, but will ultimately remain in the realm of the theoretical. Once construction began, the built work finally had to face what the drawings did not: the realities and instabilities of the human and natural environment. The modifications San Cataldo underwent during construction show how the cemetery adapted to real-world issues like budget, weather, and functionality. These kinds of design modifications are the ones Rossi enjoyed seeing in his work and felt conveyed the life of the project. However, some of the changes requested by the municipality went against Rossi’s original design intentions documented the proposals for the cemetery. There are many discrepancies between the experiential sketches, the orthographic drawings, and the structure as built because of Rossi’s ongoing revisions of the drawings and the municipality’s requests. Therefore, looking solely at the drawings for analysis of San Cataldo is not a completely accurate representation of the project. Rather, a more
explicit distinction between the intentions of the architect and the built work will help clarify misconceptions about the work and the ideas behind it.

San Cataldo’s drawings live two distinct lives. The first consists of the ascribed meanings and ideologies placed on them by an audience engaging in a larger architectural discussion. Rossi’s drawings are tools they use to further their own agendas and ideas that may be less compatible with the reality of the built work. Outside architectural theories, combined with the unfinished built work and abstract nature of Rossi’s drawings, support the perpetuation of the project as a disembodied image rather than a functioning Italian cemetery.26

The drawings’ second life consists of the intentions poured into them by Rossi himself. Equally concerned with the construction and materiality of the architecture as the theories behind it, Rossi used the drawings as tool to develop a thoroughly considered, experiential, and functional cemetery for Modena’s citizens. He did not feel it necessary to privilege either the drawings or the physical work over one another. Instead, he chose to continually update the drawings to reflect the work and the work to reflect the drawings.27 For Rossi, the drawings were a means to an end. They propelled the project towards construction where they built work could take on a life of its own beyond the capacity of the drawings.

26 The distinct life Rossi’s drawings take on echoes the two lives of of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans. Ledoux drew the plans for this salt factory with the same care and concern for architectural quality as a palace or important religious building. Later, when he was in jail, he revisited the drawings and expanded on their design and meaning. The saltworks’ drawings became a Ideal City which encircled the factory. The unfinished Utopian architecture of the drawings is separate from its historic purpose. "From the Great Saltworks of Salins-les-Bains to the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans, the Production of Open-pan Salt." World Heritage List. Accessed March 02, 2017. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/203.
Fig. 1.1: Aldo Rossi, Development sketch, 1971-1972 (Aldo Rossi Foundation)

Fig. 1.2: Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1971 (The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection)
Fig. 1.3: Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1972 (The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection)

Fig. 1.4: Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study, 1972 (The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection)
Fig. 1.5: Aldo Rossi, Analogous Architecture, 1975 (Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979)

Fig. 1.6: Aldo Rossi, Boardgame, 1972 (Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979)
Fig. 1.7: Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, 1971-1978 (Avery/GSAPP Architectural Plans and Sections)
Fig. 1.8: Aldo Rossi, Elevations and Sections (Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979)
Fig. 1.9: Aldo Rossi, Elevations (*Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979*)

Fig. 1.10: Aldo Rossi, The Elements of the Plan, analytic table (*Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979*)
Fig. 1.11: Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, Presentation drawing, 1971-78 (Avery/GSAPP Architectural Plans and Sections)

Fig. 1.12: Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, Cimitero di San Cataldo, Modena Italy: Bird’s-eye perspective, Design development drawing, 1970s (Canadian Centre for Architecture)
Fig. 1.13: Aldo Rossi, Architectural Sketch on the Ground, 1975 *Aldo Rossi Projects and drawings 1962-1979*

Fig. 1.14: Aldo Rossi, Development sketch, 1971-1972 (Aldo Rossi Foundation)
Fig. 1.15: Edoardo Fanteria, San Cataldo Cemetery (Flickr)

Fig. 1.16: Elisabetta Griffero, Concrete - A.Rossi - Cimitero San Cataldo (Flickr)
Fig. 1.17: Addison Godel, San Cataldo Cemetery, April 27th, 2010 (Flickr)

Fig. 1.18: Bruno Marchetti, San Cataldo Cemetery (City of Modena)
“There are different customs and forms for the places of death as those for life, but often we hardly grasp the boundary between the two conditions.”
- Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*

CHAPTER TWO  I  THE CEMETERY AND DEATH
The San Cataldo cemetery has often been the subject of architectural inquiry, analysis, and acclaim for its application of typology and resistance to late modernist ideologies. These themes have been extensively studied in both San Cataldo and Rossi’s body of work. However, the discussion on San Cataldo as a functioning cemetery has been more limited. Rossi’s words in “The Blue of the Sky” reveal that he thought of Modena as more than a concretizing of theoretical ideals. Rather, he endeavored to create a cemetery that addressed the evolving social and cultural attitudes towards death while embracing historic funerary traditions and symbols. An inquiry into Rossi’s own statements about the San Cataldo cemetery demonstrates his comprehensive understanding of funerary architecture’s longstanding role in human culture.

THE HOUSE AND CITY OF THE DEAD:

The typological and analogous relationships in Rossi’s work have generated a variety of scholarly discussions. Understanding that Rossi meant for the cemetery’s forms to be analogous to the domestic house, the industrial factory, and the city is crucial to a full appreciation and comprehension of the project. Many authors have noticed Rossi’s use of distilled typologies allowed him to coalesce the collective memory of the city, the past, and the present into one form. However, the typological relationships he creates also have connections to some of the most ancient ideas about death and funerary architecture.

The primary connection Rossi makes to these ancient ideals is that of the tomb as the house of the dead. He starts his essay claiming, “The cemetery, when considered in terms of a building, is the house of the dead.” He also says initially, there was no distinction between the typology of the house and the typology of the tomb.¹ He insists the typology of the tomb, with its “rectilinear corridors, central space, and earth and stone materials”, overlaps with the typology

of the house, and references to cemetery are applicable to the cemetery itself as well as to the
house and the city. For Rossi, ancient forms like Etruscan urns shaped like houses and the
Roman Baker’s tomb were the only forms able to transcend the blurred boundaries between life
and death.

Rossi’s brief acknowledgement of his project’s relation to ancient symbols is often
overlooked in favor of an analysis of the typological relationships of the forms. However, two
authors more thoroughly investigate the meanings and connections between Rossi’s references
to the Etruscan urns and Baker’s tombs, the domestic house, and the city. Eugene Johnson
notices how Rossi’s forms at Modena are capped by a triangular roof reminiscent of the pitched
roofs of Etruscan funerary urns, and views the empty holes in Rossi’s cube, even though they
are square, as analogous to the empty round holes in the ancient Roman Tomb of Eurysaces
the Baker.\(^2\) These are the same forms that Rossi thought “expressed the everlasting
relationship between the deserted house and the abandoned work.”\(^3\) However, Johnson ties in
Rossi’s other work to expand on the meanings of the forms. He first compares the enclosing
wall at Modena to Rossi’s Gallaratese apartments in Milan and his later housing designs at
Setubal and Berlin. He also sees Rossi using a pitched roof as a “kind of sarcophagus lid” in his
Monument to the Partisans at Segrate, which he claims makes the forms of the houses at
Modena “residential units of the dead.”\(^4\) Johnson points out how Rossi’s designs for residential
units for the living and residential units for the dead are very similar in appearance. He echos
Rossi’s claim that the line that divides architecture for the living and for the dead is very subtle.

Ghirardo sees the Roman Baker’s Tomb as a depiction of the relation between the
empty urban dwelling and the abandoned worksite, and the Etruscan funerary urn as a formal

\(^2\) Eugene J. Johnson, “What Remains of Man-Aldo Rossi’s Modena Cemetery.” *Journal of the

\(^3\) Rossi, “The Blue of the Sky,” 31-34.

\(^4\) Johnson, “What Remains of Man,” 44.
model for a house that contributes to a more collective attitude towards death. Like Johnson, Ghirardo also notices the ties between the historic and domestic features of the cemetery and Rossi’s other works. She points to drawings for housing units Rossi designed in Chieti that are overlaid onto the plan for Modena, or drawings where the cemetery is paired with the Gallaratese to support her claim that these domestic features seek to forge a comparable interconnection between the private home and public sphere of the city.\(^5\)

Modena is a multi-faced project with layers of meanings, traditions, and symbols embedded into its design. In response, authors Johnson and Ghirardo study and elaborate on Rossi’s words about the Baker’s Tomb and Etruscan urns and connect it to his other works. This helps to uncover more meaning behind the cemetery’s forms, but their research did not expand past Rossi’s own projects. Their initial inquiry demonstrates there are aspects of the functional and cultural roles of the cemetery yet to be fully explored.

ANCIENT CONNECTIONS:

San Cataldo’s analogous relationships between the domestic house, Etruscan funerary urns, and the Roman Baker’s tomb have been thoroughly discussed in the published discourse. However, San Cataldo also draws on other longstanding traditions and symbols of funerary architecture. A critical analysis of Rossi’s writing about the cemetery and the cemetery’s forms reveals his endeavor to synthesize and express a variety of ancient funerary themes, including the conflation of the house and the tomb, Roman stelae and columbaria, cypress trees, menhirs, and labyrinths. These symbols contribute emotional, physical, biological, and metaphysical connections to transcendent themes of life and death.

\(^5\) Diane Ghirardo, “The Blue of Aldo Rossi’s Sky.” *AA Files* 70 (0, 2015): 166.
While Rossi only specifically mentions the Etruscan Urns and Baker’s tomb, his writing hints at his awareness of even more ancient ideas about the domestic house and its counterpart, the tomb. Like San Cataldo, many ancient cultures made little distinction between the house of the living and the house of the dead. Michel Ragon’s book claims that for the thousands of years man was nomadic, the house of the dead was the only house that did not move, the only one that “expressed an arresting of time”. In Assyro-Babylonian literature, the grave is called “house or “residence,” or “the house from which he who enters does not leave.” Similarly, the pagan Gallo-Romans believed death was a continuation of life and a movement from one residence to another. Their tombs mirrored the apartments they lived in during life, equipped with food, dishes, silverware, and furniture. The sarcophagi themselves often had triangular or domed roofs that imitated the roofs of the houses of the living. For the ancient Romans and Rossi, the domestic house was both a mediator between life and death and a dwelling for the afterlife (figs 1.1-2).

This equation of the house and the tomb is apparent in the small family mausoleums Rossi designed for San Cataldo (fig 1.3). These structures look like little cartoon houses, but contain the remains of individual families. The idea of simplifying the forms of the domestic house for a tomb is not a new one. The gabled roofs and human-scale of Rossi’s mausoleums recall ancient Gallo-Roman funeral stela (fig 1.4). Like the mausoleums, the stelae took the form of huts or houses, consisting of clearly defined walls, triangular roofs, and columns. The similarities to Gallo-Roman funeral stelae illustrates Rossi’s knowledge of and sensitivity to the

---

6 Rossi, “The Blue of the Sky,” 31. Rossi writes, “The cemetery, when considered in terms of a building, is the house of the dead. Initially, no distinction was made between the typology of the house and that of the tomb.”
9 Ibid.
symbolic implications of uniting the forms of the house and the tomb. The mausoleums blur the line between house and tomb, so in life and in death, these families exist under one roof. Moreover, the conflation of the house and the tomb at San Cataldo is an emotional expression of the passage from one life to another. It relates not only to the typological relationships discussed in most of the literature, but also to some of the most deeply human emotions about life and death.

In addition to the house and the tomb, physical connections to death come to light in a study of ancient Roman columbaria. Cremation was common in Republican Rome, and they built large numbers of columbaria, although few remain today. A notable example of one of these ancient structures is a large columbarium of the first century AD, built near the Porta di San Sebastiano for the servants of the Caesars. It featured a massive rectangular pier in the center containing many niches and, like San Cataldo, the exterior walls were stuccoed and then painted.¹⁰ (figs 1.5-6). While this columbarium was hollowed out of the ground, tombs in other parts of the Empire were constructed above ground. These columbaria, like the ones present at Ostia, featured rectangular tomb-enclosures and high walls of opus reticulatum with brick and stone dressings (fig 1.7). Some of these enclosures were roofed, and others were left open to the sky.¹¹ The forms and significances of these early columbaria are echoed in the forms of Modena’s ossuaries and central cube, which also features four walls of stacked niches open to the sky. These connections demonstrate San Cataldo’s worth not as just as a product of architectural theories, but as a physical concretization of Rossi’s profound understanding and respect for ancient funerary traditions.

San Cataldo’s connection to the traditions of Western funerary architecture go further still. The cemetery features a number of cypress trees, an ancient symbol of death recognized across cultures. Ragon described how the Greeks and Romans used cypress tree branches on funeral pyres which soon become a biological symbol of death and eternity.12 He writes, “the Chaldeans, Syrians, and Assyrians also regarded the pyramidal cypress as sacred. The Muslim world and China adopted the cypress tree as a tree of and for death.”13 Cypress trees are common fixtures across the Italian landscape, but in the context of an Italian cemetery, they absorb these complex narratives. The trees are present in a majority of traditional and contemporary Italian cemeteries. They are also visible in the popular images of experimental funerary architecture by Boulée and Ledoux. The ubiquity and powerful symbolism of the cypress tree was apparent to Rossi, who could have specified other types of trees but chose to plant cypress trees at San Cataldo (fig 1.8). The trees soften the strong simplicity of the cemetery’s architecture and provide solace to visitors, reminding them that life persists after death.

The cemetery underwent many modifications from the competition process to construction. As discussed earlier, Rossi’s drawings sometimes depict design features that somewhere along the way, did not make it to the built work. In a few distinct cases, elements of San Cataldo’s drawings reveal Rossi’s contemplation of the metaphysical nature of life and death, and the ancient symbols used the express these themes. In “The Blue of the Sky,” Rossi describes the burial grounds inside the cemetery. He writes, “Each burial ground, marked by the crossing of the paths, has in the center a stone stele, like a menhir, which bears the number of the particular area, thus giving it an identity.”14 A number of Rossi’s earlier drawings show these

---

stelae marking the distinct burial grounds within the cemetery (fig 1.9). However, the stelae do not appear in the built work. Rossi’s intention of menhir-like stella marking each burial ground is a symbolic choice. A menhir, defined as “a single standing-stone, sometimes arranged in regular rows,” falls under the definition of a megalith, which is a “large block of undressed or partially dressed stone used singly or with other megaliths”¹⁵ (fig 1.10). The menhir-like markers at San Cataldo function similarly to obelisks in that they stand in the center of each burial ground, marking the specific space they inhabit. Common meanings associated with the obelisk are aspiration, regeneration, and eternal life. They were thought to be a stabilizing force and a support of the sky.¹⁶ Not only that, but they are one of the most pervasive and enduring symbols of funerary art worldwide. The menhirs did not make it into the realized work, but their presence in the drawings demonstrates Rossi’s engagement with extremely primitive motifs of funerary art. The inclusion of such a sacred symbol is further proof that the project has significance as something other than a summation of architectural theories.

While sometimes elements seen in the drawings allude to deeper meanings within the cemetery, other times the name of a drawing creates meaning. One of Rossi’s drawings, titled, “The Labyrinth,” shows a bird’s eye view of the cemetery, with distorted, exaggerated perspectives of the enclosing walls (fig 1.11).¹⁷ The drawing’s title hints that this drawing is not trying to describe the formal or planar arrangement of the cemetery; rather, it illustrates Rossi’s deep reflection on and awareness of both cultural symbols of death and his own mortality.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the defining elements of the cemetery (central cube, cone, and triangular ossuaries) are almost out of view, and in fact, in the wrong place compared to Rossi’s other drawings. The drawing looks more like a reflection of a drawing than a drawing itself.
The labyrinth is one of the most ancient symbols of humanity. Pliny the Elder described the four famous labyrinths of antiquity as the Egyptian, the Cretan, the Lemnian, and the Italian or Etruscan labyrinth. The most common myth attached to the labyrinth is that of Greek architect Daedalus (fig 1.12). He is the only named architect of mythology and has since become a “symbol par excellence of the humanist architect.” King Minos of Crete commissioned Daedalus to construct a labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur. As tribute to Crete, Athens had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete to sacrifice to the Minotaur every ninth year. One year, Theseus, the son of the King of Athens went to Crete to try to stop the sacrifices to the Minotaur. Emboldened by love for one of King Mino’s daughters, Theseus slaughtered the Minotaur and navigated out of the labyrinth following a string of thread.

While not much knowledge exists about the Italian or Etruscan labyrinths, what is known reveals an interesting similarity to San Cataldo. The Italian labyrinth Pliny describes was thought to be a tomb for Etruscan general Lars Porsena that featured an unescapable subterranean labyrinth. Early on in the design process for San Cataldo, Rossi planned to build a series of ossuary tunnels underneath the cemetery. They were later phased out of the design; nevertheless, the parallels between the plan for the underground tombs and his early process drawing “The Labyrinth,” and Pliny’s description of the Italian labyrinth is not coincidental. Rossi

---

did not include an actual labyrinth as part of the design, but it is evident he was thinking about their mythologies and meanings during the design process.

In the introduction of his English translation of Rossi’s *The Architecture of the City*, Peter Eisenman writes,

...the labyrinth, Daedalus’s creation can be considered emblematic of a humanist condition in architecture. But this is not the spiral’s only meaning. As an unfolding path or route, the spiral has also been interpreted as a psychological figure, the symbol of a process of transformation. Thus we are obliged to interpret Rossi’s use of the image...in two ways: the first in terms of the spiral as a mausoleum, as representing a symbolic place of death...and at the same time...as representing a place of transformation.²²

Eisenman’s quote begins to speak about the incredibly complex symbolism of the labyrinth. Traveling to the center of a labyrinth and returning to its circumference represents the involution and evolution of the universe, the passage of time, and the earthly cycles of birth, life, and death. Meandering a labyrinth is a meditative journey into the center of one’s being.²³ Like Eisenman described, a labyrinth is both a place of healing and contemplation, and a transition from one phase or state to another. Aware of these enigmatic and sacred meanings, Rossi’s titling of his drawing was a conscious choice that entrusts San Cataldo with the same narratives and symbolism.

Life sometimes brings periods of pain, death, or fear of the unknown. Since ancient times, humans have tried to give shape to these fears. The labyrinth is a result of that endeavor; it allows us to contain our terror and desperation in a defined space, and to overcome fear it by

---

physically and metaphysically moving through it.\textsuperscript{24} In Rossi’s eyes, San Cataldo is its own labyrinth; It invites visitors to meander, guides them, and prepares them for the next transition.

**TYPOLOGY:**

Since the seventh or eighth century in Europe, Christians buried their dead inside parish churches or within adjacent or neighboring parish cemeteries or churchyards.\textsuperscript{25} Later, during the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries, European cemeteries were public, urban spaces that accommodated a range of activities; everything from buying and selling, strolling, and prostitution occurred at the cemetery.\textsuperscript{26} However, the European Enlightenment introduced a new approach to burials that reflected the changing attitudes towards death and society. For reasons of hygiene and propriety, reformers prohibited burials inside churches and closed down the adjacent or nearby cemeteries. In place of these practices, they revived the ancient Greco-Roman tradition of burying the dead outside the cities.\textsuperscript{27}

Richard Etlin’s article argues the cemetery designs of this period form the “basis of the subsequent major Western burial grounds” and can be classified into five categories: the campo santo, the elevated field of honor, the Elysian field, the monumental cemetery, and the space of geometric absolutes.\textsuperscript{28} Two of these categories, the elevated field of honor and the Elysian field, do not closely apply to Italian cemeteries. Etlin recognized San Cataldo’s connection to his fifth category of geometric absolutes, but Modena’s mixture of cemetery typologies places it in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Etlin, "The Geometry of Death," 134.
\end{itemize}
dialogue with two other of Etlin’s categories as well: the monumental urban cemetery and the *campo santo*.²⁹

Etlin derives his category of geometric absolutes primarily from Etienne-Louis Boullée’s work. Simple geometric forms are arranged in relationship to each other to create an “ambiance of otherworldliness.”³⁰ According to Etlin, Rossi’s San Cataldo, as well as two cemeteries by GRAU in Altilia and Parabita, use Boullée’s type of “projective geometry” to create “exalted, emotional, and metaphorical rationalism.” In these and Boullée’s funerary architecture, the negative spaces, partially buried forms, and somber lighting form a metaphorical counterpoint to the city of the living. At the same time, these elements evoke strong feelings about the “incommensurable” nature of death.³¹ Etlin affirms San Cataldo’s place in the geometric absolute category because of its similarities to the geometrical and metaphysical nature of Boullée’s work. This makes sense as the connection between San Cataldo and Boullée is well documented in architectural discourse.

The next category is the *campo santo*, the most famous of which is the Camposanto Monumentale in Pisa, Italy (fig 1.13). The Camposanto Monumentale consists of a long rectangular gallery closed to the outside with blind arcades and open to the interior through round arches. Under the marble floor are more than 600 sepulchral vaults for the wealthy. Outside, the unmarked central field was for a burial ground for the public. The *campo santo* design typically features rectangular or circular enclosed arcades around the periphery of an open burial field. During the early 1800s, Italian architects turned to the *campo santo* as a model

---

²⁹ While other studies have focused on the typological and analogous relationships of the forms to external theories, this study of typology refers specifically to San Cataldo as built, and how its design relates to other types of archetypal Italian cemeteries. This study attempts to talk about how San Cataldo’s architecture and design places it in dialogue with other built works, not theories.


for new cemeteries built outside the city because of its “austere presentation of human mortality” and architectural dignity.\(^{32}\)

The last category is the monumental urban cemetery. This type of cemetery exhibits ordered, gridded streets and manicured grasses, flowers, bushes, and trees with the intention of “banishing all reminders of the hideousness of death.”\(^{33}\) The progressive replacement of modest tombstones with large mausoleums often made the monumental cemeteries resemble the living cities nearby. Etlin posits that the monumental cemetery signaled the sentimental view of death yielding before the “bulky evidence of a denial of death through building.” One of the most notable examples of the monumental cemetery type is the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan\(^ {34}\) (fig 1.14).

Like the monumental cemeteries Etlin describes, Rossi’s cemetery also features an ordered, symmetrical plan meant to be representative of city streets. Where some authors see San Cataldo displaying no “visual references to death,” Rossi may be embracing the monumental cemetery’s position of downplaying the traditional melancholic sculptures and references to death, in favor of a more stoic city of the dead.\(^ {35}\) This approach makes sense given the neighboring monumental cemeteries directly adjacent to San Cataldo. Instead of trying to imitate the classical motifs and sculptures of the Costa cemetery, Rossi synthesizes the symmetry, scale, and essence of the existing cemetery and uses that to inform his design for the extension. San Cataldo reads as a distilled and modern transformation of the classical cemetery next door, and Rossi’s design response places Modena in dialogue with the historic monumental cemeteries of Europe.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 134.
\(^{33}\) Ibid, 136.
\(^{34}\) Ibid, 136.
Rossi’s description of Modena’s landscape details a green area composed of a plane of high grass that produces a compact garden bordered by a row of cypress trees. The overall layout follows a line “parallel to the enclosing wall of the cemetery grounds.” San Cataldo was intended to have large swatches of open grass areas enclosed by a rectangular structure that is similar to the cloisters of the campo santo cemeteries. While not completely bounded as intended, the connection between the historical campo santo style cemetery and San Cataldo further solidifies its significant ties to enduring motifs of funerary architecture.

Part of the project’s strength as funerary architecture is its ability to situate itself within many different classifications of cemeteries. Rossi writes, “References to the cemetery are applicable to the cemetery itself as well as to the house and to the city. This project for a cemetery complies with the image of a cemetery that everyone has.” Rossi combines the collective memories and the traditional iconography, forms, and traditions associated with cemeteries in his design for San Cataldo. The result is a deeply synthetic project that draws on copious references and symbols to ascribe meaning. This connection, along with the similarities to the campo-santo and monumental cemeteries, enforces Rossi’s words about San Cataldo complying with the popular imagery of cemeteries (figs 1.15-6). Because the project was a public cemetery for the citizens of Modena, Rossi knew to incorporate a variety of recognizable typologies, symbols, and references to cemeteries that would have been familiar to visitors.

**RITES AND RITUALS:**

In addition to San Cataldo’s ancient and typological connections to funerary traditions, another strength of the project lies in its consideration of Italian mortuary customs. San Cataldo

---

was commissioned as a public cemetery for the people of Modena. With that comes a specific set of requirements and provisions to meet the needs of the people it serves, yet much of the discourse on San Cataldo fails to analyze how it functions as public cemetery. Further inquiry brings to light evidence that Rossi worked to design a cemetery accommodating of the many rites, rituals, and customs associated with funerals.

Overall, the way Italians engage with cemeteries is very different than Anglo-Americans. The expansive tracts of bare cemeteries found in the United States contrasts strongly with Italy’s colorful and compact cemeteries. In Italy, it is common for families to make recurrent visits to the cemetery, something not as characteristic of the Anglo-American world. This may be because of greater internal mobility in America, which makes it harder or more burdensome for families to travel to the grave. Italians, however, often travel considerable distances to visit family graves. Authors Jack Goody and Cesare Poppi attribute this to less distinctions made between children and nephews and more distant relatives for Italians. Less distinction makes more people available to pay regular visits, as an unattended grave in Italy stands out as a “shameful reproach on the family.” Unlike the sprawling spaces for burials in the United States, Italian graves are often stacked in mausoleums and columbaria above ground due to lack of space. These above-ground structures create a park-like setting and are designed with frequent visits, picnics, and family strolls in mind.

One of the most substantial differences between the Anglo-American and Italian cemeteries is the decoration and adornment of the graves. Where American cemeteries are austere and limited in individual expressions, Italian cemeteries are accustomed to personal

mementos and decorations. Rossi’s awareness of this practice manifests in the “urban-style covered street” that connects San Cataldo to the nearby Costa and Jewish cemeteries. The intention of the covered street was to house the shops of the florists and stone-cutters, along with other vendors and materials connected with the “veneration of the dead.” For Italians, the most ubiquitous form of grave decoration is fresh cut flowers. Rossi’s inclusion of a place for flower vendors at the cemetery ties into this longstanding tradition. It is customary in Italy to adorn graves with fresh flowers, not only on special occasions but all throughout the year. The continuous supply of fresh flowers is indicative of frequent visits to the cemetery by relatives or friends, and is taken as an outward sign of one’s continuing devotion to the dead. Allotted space for the sale of flowers at San Cataldo allows this tradition to continue with added convenience for the visitors.

Not only does Rossi provide space for visitors to procure flowers with ease, he also takes the flowers’ presence into design consideration. San Cataldo has a reputation of being a stark, austere compilation of elemental forms. However, if one takes into account the abundant amount of flowers and personal mementos decorating the graves and niches, it seems like Rossi purposely kept the forms simple as not to detract from individual adornments. As an Italian native, Rossi must have been aware of the tendency and frequency of floral tributes to appear at cemeteries. Therefore, he knew creating space for individual and personal forms of

---

41 To illustrate this dichotomy, authors Goody and Poppi recount a story of their American friend whose children were playing in a cemetery near Florence. The children found an undecorated grave and took flowers from other graves in order to cover its nakedness. The authors claim that in America, such a generous action would be uncalled for.
43 “Cemetery in Modena, Project,” 65.
44 Jack Goody and Cesare Poppi. “Flowers and Bones,” 146-75. They write, “In the case of Italian cemeteries, flowers act as the ongoing witness of the active relationship between the living and the dead. The very fact that their freshness betrays the frequency of visits compels the cult to be kept up once it has started.”
commemoration would be preferable to a fixed architectural language decided by the architect. The unfilled niches at San Cataldo are stark and simple, but the niches filled with flowers, candles, and personal photos saturate the halls with color and individuality (figs 1.17-8). The architecture of San Cataldo is the backdrop that allows these customs to flourish. It was a conscious choice by the architect not to impose a system that detracts from grave decoration, but to celebrate and highlight this time-honored, cherished Italian tradition.

CONCLUSIONS:

Reflecting on the project, Rossi wrote, “In fact, as I now see it rising today, I find this great house of the dead a living sense of pietà... Thus this house of the dead, constructed according to the rhythm of urban mortality itself, has a tempo linked to life, as all structures ultimately do.”45 His sensitivity to architecture’s role in life and in death is apparent in this quote and in the design of San Cataldo. Rossi’s cemetery coalesces a range of enduring symbols and references that connect to emotional, physical, biological, and metaphysical aspects of life, death, and bereavement. He combines these symbols with traditional cemetery types and funerary customs to create a project relatable and comforting to a wide variety of people. The cemetery accommodates the functional requirements for funerals and leaves space for personal connections, reflections, and decorations. When analyzing this project, it is important to remember, as Rossi did, that San Cataldo is a cemetery designed for the citizens of Modena, Italy. Its capacity to demonstrate theoretical ideologies is anecdotal to its ability to meet the spiritual, cultural, and social needs of its patrons. Ultimately, Rossi created a cemetery that honors and commemorates death by engaging with and celebrating life.

Fig. 1.1: Diego Terna, Concrete Trusses (Postmodern Architecture: San Cataldo Cemetery by Aldo Rossi)

Fig. 1.2: Tomb of the Volumnii, Perugia, Mansell-Alinari Collection (Death and Architecture)
Fig. 1.3: Dianne Suzette Harris, Cemetery of San Cataldo, 1978-1984 (SAHARA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Fig. 1.4: Gallo-Roman funeral stela, father holding his son in his arms (The Space of Death)
Fig. 1.5: Plan of a columbarium of the first century near the Porta di San Sebastiano for the servants of the Caesars, J.H. Parker Collection (*Death and Architecture*)

Fig. 1.6: Section through a columbarium of the first century near the Porta di San Sebastiano for the servants of the Caesars, J.H. Parker Collection (*Death and Architecture*)
Fig. 1.7: Tomb of 60 BC with a columbarium of opus reticulatum in the Thermae of the Gordiani, J.H. Parker Collection (*Death and Architecture*)

Fig. 1.8: Cemetery of San Cataldo 1971 project of Aldo Rossi architect (Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe)
Fig. 1.9: Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri. Cemetery of San Cataldo Modena, Italy Plan study. 1971 (The Museum of Modern Art, Architecture and Design Collection)

Fig. 1.10: David May, Stones of Brogdar, Orkney, Scotland. November 19th, 2013 (Flickr)
Fig. 1.11: Aldo Rossi, The Labyrinth, 1972 (What Remains of Man – Aldo Rossi’s Modena Cemetery)

Fig. 1.12: Cretan Labyrinth (School of Finiguerra)
Fig. 1.13: Camposanto, Pisa Italy (Opa Pisa)

Fig. 1.14: Shyla Nicodemi, March 17th, 2013
Fig. 1.15: Campo santo di Pisa: view of garden from interior (SCALA, Florence/ART RESOURCE, N.Y)

Fig. 1.16: Laurian Ghinitoiu, Modena, Italy (Archdaily)
Fig. 1.17: Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo, January 18th, 2009 (Panoramio)

Fig. 1.18: Laurian Ghinitoiu, Modena, Italy (Archdaily)
“Today if I were to talk about architecture, I would say that it is a ritual rather than a creative process. I say this fully understanding the bitterness and the comfort of the ritual.”
- Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography

CHAPTER THREE  I  SAN CATALDO AND BRION
If asked to name a famous Italian cemetery designed by a 20th century architect, it is possible Rossi’s San Cataldo cemetery might come to mind, but it is more probable one would think of Carlo Scarpa’s Brion-Vega cemetery. Located in San Vito d’Altivole near Treviso, Italy, Brion is widely recognized as Scarpa’s greatest architectural achievement and as a modern masterpiece (figs 1.1-2). The cemetery has amassed a large following of people inspired by the forms and spirit of the site, and inspires pilgrimage-like visits by architects, architectural students, and historians each year. Because of locational and functional similarities, some of the analysis of San Cataldo happens within the context of a comparison to the Brion-Vega cemetery. On the surface, it is easy to see why the projects are often compared – both were built in the early 1970s by notable Italian architects on sites adjacent to older cemeteries. While comparing the two cemeteries has enriched our understanding of each project, most authors do not use the same criteria to analyze Brion as San Cataldo. Much of the discourse presents Brion and Modena as counterparts, but the standards applied to a study of Brion are not applied equally to San Cataldo. Rather, the discussions of Brion focus on its experiential, tactile, and enigmatic qualities while Rossi’s project is viewed through the lens of outside theories and influences. This further perpetuates the misunderstanding of San Cataldo because it is presented on equal terms to Brion, when in reality, the projects have very different characteristics and functions. In fact, explicitly clarifying the differences between the projects instead of using ambiguous evaluative criteria highlights each cemetery’s distinct and valuable qualities.

Not only are San Cataldo and Brion compared on unequal terms, but Brion is often given preferential treatment over Modena. This preference is especially apparent in the language used to describe and analyze the projects. Some authors go so far as to point out that when Scarpa accepted the commission for Brion, he had already turned down the Modena cemetery
project.\(^1\) This sentiment seems to imply the Modena cemetery was not worth Scarpa’s time, but in reality, it was design delays that kept Scarpa from the project.\(^2\) In addition, the descriptive language used for San Cataldo is very different. Modena is described as a “desolate and surreal landscape” or a “compilation of stark abandoned forms” that mimics the “unsettling realism of a De Chirco painting.” In those same comparisons, Brion is an “intimate garden” for quiet reflection.\(^3\) The bias towards Brion pervades both the descriptive language and the analysis of the projects, denigrating San Cataldo architecture, meaning, and purpose in favor of Brion’s. This perpetuates the misunderstanding and contentious nature of the Modena Cemetery, while solidifying Brion’s place on a critical pedestal.

SCALE, SITE, AND SYMBOLISM:

In some ways, the two projects are so fundamentally different that it is hard to justify a comparison of the two on anything other than their geography, chronology, and function as cemeteries. Yet, Brion and Modena continue to be compared without much acknowledgement of their distinct functions as private and public cemeteries respectively, and how those functions influence the architecture. One discrepancy that often gets overlooked in comparisons are the relationships between function and scale for each cemetery. Discussions about Brion point out how the cemetery feels intimate and personal, and contains specific references to its occupants.\(^4\) The Brion-Vega cemetery was designed for two people, Giuseppe and Onorina Brion. After establishing a successful business in household appliance manufacturing, the Brions commissioned a private cemetery for themselves near their hometown. They purchased

---

a small, 68 square meter plot of land bordering an existing cemetery. Later when Giuseppe Brion passed away, the 68 square meter plot of land was extended around the corner, generating the “L” shaped plan. The Brion family wanted an architectural design that would “touch a responsive cord in people’s hearts” and inspire poetry.\(^5\) This sentiment, combined with a generous budget and limited functional and programmatic requirements for the cemetery, absolved Scarpa from many pragmatic architectural concerns and allowed an intense concentration on the materiality, detailing, and haptic qualities of the site. In addition to the Brion’s trust of Scarpa’s design choices and a limited program, the fixed size of the “L” shaped lot made the intimate, small scape places Brion is praised for possible.\(^6\)

San Cataldo was built because the existing Costa cemetery was reaching capacity and the city needed more space to accommodate the deceased. The city of Modena wanted a cemetery addition with plenty of space for burials into the future. Therefore, the scale of the cemetery was much larger than was required for Brion. The vast difference in scale is indicative of the function of the cemeteries. Brion is a private cemetery designed for two people and their family, while San Cataldo is a public municipal cemetery for an entire city, yet the existing conversations all but ignore this distinction (figs 1.3-4). Acknowledging each cemetery was built for a particular purpose and understanding how these purposes influence the plans and scales is essential to equitably and productively compare the two projects.

Another major difference between the two cemeteries is the organization and layout of the architecture on the site. San Cataldo was intended to be a symmetrical and rational plan in response to the neoclassical cemetery next door. In a sense, San Cataldo is a reflection of the Costa cemetery’s spatial order, offering a distilled and transformed vision of its classical

---

\(^6\) George Ranalli and Ross Miller, “Critique,” *Progressive Architecture* (1981): 130. The program for Brion was tombs for Brion and eventually his widow and members of the family, a chapel for funeral services, and a burial plot for the architect.
neighbor. The jury members favoring Rossi's design appreciated its unified and ordered plan and felt it proposed an “alternative to the brutal and disordered growth of the city.”\textsuperscript{7} Scarpa’s plan for Brion is the antithesis of Rossi’s ordered design. The cemetery is not symmetrical like Rossi’s design, instead it is described as a “plurality of places…interwoven among various poles which refer to each other,”\textsuperscript{8} Scarpa’s cemetery consists of four “destinations” scattered over the site: tombs for the Brion’s, a family burial ground, a chapel, and a meditation platform.\textsuperscript{9} Their placement suggests a circulation, but ultimately the path the visitor takes is up to them.

Tasked with building a cemetery, both Scarpa and Rossi found themselves confronting a similar design problem: how to create a contemporary cemetery in the context of a more traditional cemetery, located on the outskirts of town. After closer examination, it is clear Rossi made a thoughtful and considerate attempt to address the existing Costa cemetery. Rossi explains how it was difficult to “find references to the existing surroundings” other than the Costa Cemetery and Jewish Cemetery.\textsuperscript{10} Despite this, he still made efforts to connect to the existing cemetery both by respecting its symmetry and extending the Costa wall into the new design. He aimed for his design to read as one part of the whole Modena complex, not as a separate entity.\textsuperscript{11}

In contrast, it is harder to discern a relationship between Brion and the existing municipal cemetery it borders. Scarpa’s project appears to wrap along two edges of the existing cemetery but has little interaction with it. Brion’s main entrance clearly delineates where the existing cemetery ends and Scarpa’s addition begins. Scarpa’s sculpting of the contours of the site further separate his design from its surroundings. By raising some ground above the existing

\textsuperscript{8} Portoghesi, “Carlo Scarpa,” 1-48.
\textsuperscript{9} Ranalli and Miller, “Critique,” 130.
\textsuperscript{11} Rossi, “The Blue of the Sky,” 33.
groundline and lowering other parts, the municipal cemetery almost vanishes from view in certain spots. The perimeter wall also helps to separate Brion from its surroundings, and offers only brief glimpses of what is beyond.

One of the major points of departure in comparisons of San Cataldo and Brion is the discussion of material and form. Despite Rossi devoting part of his competition essay to a detailed descriptions of the characteristics of the materials and the technology behind their construction, the haptic qualities of the project are largely absent from the discourse. Instead, to describe the cemetery, authors rely heavily on its visual appearance and the theories behind the analogous forms. Author Linda Cook writes of San Cataldo, “the architecture is devoid of detail: the windows have no glass, no mullions; there is no floor, only a small metal walkway around the perimeter [of the cube] …the landscape plan is limited to a palette of grass, concrete pathways and cypress trees.” These descriptions perpetuate a view of San Cataldo as a barren landscape when in reality it is saturated in color, details, and a variety of materials.

More often than not, the language used to discuss Modena is blunt, disparaging, and dismissive. On the contrary, authors use reverential language to recount their experiences at Brion and vividly illustrate its features. Modena tends to receive pithy descriptions, whereas Brion is given lengthy and poetic accounts of its various materials, and how they feel, sound, and smell. In a description of the Brion tombs, Ranalli and Miller write, “their handles are

---

12 Rossi, “Blue Sky,” 31-34.
13 Cook, “Italian Way of Death,” 68.
14 See Chapter 1.
15 Diego Seixas Lopes, "Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri’s San Cataldo Cemetery ..." Uncube. November 10, 2015. Accessed October 20, 2016. Lopes writes, “San Cataldo offers no comfort or solace in its stark appearance: a kind of postwar social housing unit for the deceased, In this sense, the project gazes at the abyss of annihilation and the abyss gazes back at us.”
16 William J. R. Curtis, Modern Architecture since 1900. Third ed. London: Phaidon Press, 2013: 610. Curtis writes, “Scarpa created one of his most haunting and enigmatic works...The Brion Tomb was a mythical landscape exploring the erosion of age and the soul-stirring effects of water.”
rosewood, a material that gives a sweet smell as it would be touched in grief.”17 The tombs are made of ebony, and “tilt lovingly” towards each other. “The underside of the arch is laid with rich mosaic tiles that reflect the ambient light and the color of the adjacent lawns, casting a brilliant glow reminiscent of the light reflected on the underside of the Venetian canal bridges.”18 The disparate approach to the description of both projects’ materials presents San Cataldo as a stark, barren place and Brion as an intimate and tactile experience. What these authors neglect to mention is that San Cataldo is rich in color, clay reds, sky blues, and natural tans, where Scarpa’s built work is overwhelmingly shades of grey.

Both architects use form to create meaning in their projects. However, when the two projects are compared, the meanings of the forms at San Cataldo are often seen as fixed and prescribed, while Brion’s forms allow for more open interpretations. Yet this is inconsistent with most of the scholarly discourse on the cemetery’s meanings.19 The introduction highlighted the variety of interpretations and meanings found in San Cataldo’s architecture through form, typology, or relationships to other works. Despite this contradiction to the majority view of San Cataldo, in the context of a comparison to Brion, the complexities of Rossi’s cemetery are deemphasized.

Scarpa’s use of form is further differentiated from Rossi’s in its subversion of perceived and actual form within the cemetery. Authors reverentially describe many of the ways Scarpa manipulates form including: islands that appear to float are actually anchored to piers; sarcophagi that seem to rock precariously; a bridge that links nothing to nothing; and a taut steel

17 Ranalli and Miller, “Critique,” 131.
18 Cook, “Italian Way of Death,” 68.
19 Ranalli and Miller, “Critique,” 130. Ranalli and Miller write, “Rossi’s use of the cone, the abandoned house, and the ossuaries tries to replicate a relationship that exists in life between cemetery, house, and city. In Scarpa’s mysterious garden, we participate in our own private thoughts, suggested and stimulated, but not determined by the implied allegorical meanings.”
cable that acts as a fence but is easily stepped over.20 A majority of the discourse sees layers of meanings in Brion’s forms and symbols that provoke visitors to question their ideas about life and death, while still maintaining a sense of mystery.21 Brion is praised for its ability to create a landscape layered with meaning and iconography that at the same time, is not fixed and left open for individual interpretation. It is credited with a design which will “evolve different emotions and associations” and invites “interpretation and speculation in a way that few modern buildings are able.”22 This position presents the plurality of meaning as unique to Brion, when in reality, San Cataldo has multiple readings and interpretations attributed to it as well.23 It benefits the understanding of both projects to acknowledge and explore how each architect successfully created meaning though form in different ways instead of maintaining that one project proliferates meaning while the other does not.

The comparisons further benefit Brion and disparage Modena when authors discuss how each project displays traditional funerary iconographies and references to death. One author claims, “there are no immediate visual references to death, none of the traditional artifacts (tombstones, sculptural figures, flowers) that would identify [San Cataldo] as a cemetery.”24 Later she concedes one is faced with endless rows of small cubicles marked with candles, flowers, and photographs once they enter the structures. This ignores the wealth of traditional and ancient references at San Cataldo, as well as Rossi’s awareness and accommodation of Italian funerary customs as discussed in Chapter two. He included ample space for flowers and personal mementos, the symbolic cypress tree, and connections to ancient funerary constructions motifs. Here, a narrow view of “visual references to death” causes authors and

---

20 Ranalli and Miller, “Critique,” 131.
21 Saitō, Carlo Scarpa, 17.
23 See Introduction.
24 Cook, “Italian Way of Death,” 68.
visitors to miss many of Modena’s subtler funerary connections. Rossi incorporated some of the most transcendent and enduring symbols of funerary architecture and death, but in the shadow of Brion, their presence is somehow overlooked.

While Rossi’s project is inaccurately charged with inadequate displays of discernable cemetery iconography, Scarpa’s project is not held to the same standard of displaying references to death. Besides the two sarcophagi, none of the traditional artifacts Cook describes are present at Brion. There are no tombstones, sculptural figures, or flowers anywhere in the project. Several authors speculate on the meanings of some of the other significant symbols in the project, but none are that closely related to symbols most commonly associated with death. For example, the interlocking blue and red circles at the entrance of the cemetery have been speculated to symbolize eyes, wedding rings, to alpha and Omega, and to signify birth and death \(^{25}\) (fig 1.5). Other authors have seen the interlocking circles as alluding to the cycle of life, the sacred symbol of the mandala, and to perfection and immortality. \(^{26}\) Brion includes many symbolic forms, but their immediate connection to funerary architecture and cemeteries are not as clearly defined; yet, this is not considered a failing of the project as it is at San Cataldo.

There are other inconsistencies in how authors view each project’s symbols and references to death. Brion is praised for using iconographic forms that create a plurality of suggested interpretations, while San Cataldo’s meaning are seen as fixed and predetermined. This contradiction is partly because the way Rossi uses symbolism and iconography is different than Scarpa. Rossi reflected on a variety of funerary references, symbols, and traditions, but chose to synthesize and transform these elements in his own way. As a result, the references to death at San Cataldo are less overt and obvious, because they are not always expressed as direct or literal forms. Scarpa took a different approach. Instead of distilling and transforming

iconographic forms, he chose to use them more explicitly. The two circles representing wedding rings or the circles of life are legible forms people can immediately see and interpret. He took the same approach with the bridge spanning the Brion’s tombs, allowing the funerary motifs to be read and understood by a wide array of people. San Cataldo and Brion’s forms bring to light a larger semiotic issue pertaining to abstraction and symbolism. Each project is attempting a balance between both legible and abstract forms, but their referents are different because of their distinct functions, scales, and purposes. The dominance of the discussions about San Cataldo’s typological relationships, together with the apparent preference for Brion, obscures the equivalencies and similarities between the two projects and how they employ symbolic architectural forms.

MODENA AND BRION’S LASTING IMPACT:

The Brion-Vega Cemetery and the San Cataldo Cemetery represent important points in the timeline of Italian architecture but the legacy of each project is distinct. Brion stands as the epitome of Scarpa’s individual creative and aesthetic pursuits, while Modena becomes a point of reference for architects looking to reconcile traditional Italian customs with contemporary ideals. Scarpa’s sole authorship of Brion is celebrated but Rossi’s design intentions are not as widely discussed, revealing a bias for the individual creative mission over designs for cultural collectives.

The influence of Modena’s simple and elemental forms, as well as its more traditional plan, maintain a continuity between the monumental and classical eighteenth and nineteenth century Italian cemeteries and the cemeteries of the present. There are a number of recent cemetery and funerary projects, built as extensions to older, established cemeteries in Italy, that embrace the design ideas set forth by Rossi’s San Cataldo cemetery. Two strategies Rossi implemented that architects have since employed in their funerary projects are a distillation and
clarification of the forms and functions of the traditional cemetery, and a respect for the natural and unique characteristics of materials.

One example is the Santo Stefano Cemetery. Similar to Rossi’s approach, the architects distill down the forms and essence of the existing cemetery on site to create a new design that recalls the traditional but accommodates contemporary needs. They achieved this by respecting the human scale of the existing cemetery, and designing tombstone blocks that keep with the established scale. The architects also incorporate the pattern of repetition seen in the older mausoleums and tombs into their design.

In another example, the San Mauro Torinese Cemetery extension recalls the ‘unfinished’ quality of Rossi’s cemetery. The project features monolithic walls that fold 90 degrees to become roofs, but in other places leave the section of the building exposed. In those places, a simple metal stair and the floor plates of the building are revealed. This moment specifically conjures images of the unfinished interior of Rossi’s central cube that strongly contrasts with the monolithic exterior walls. The architect’s material choices also demonstrate an ongoing dialogue with San Cataldo. Rossi’s choice of simple, unadorned materials that do not hide their flaws or the effects of aging, is echoed in San Mauro Torinese’s use of cor-ten steel, concrete, and cloudy marble panels. Both projects use materials that visibly respond to the effects of time and weathering. They also let the physical and aesthetic characteristics of the materials speak for themselves and do not attempt to ornament or alter them.

The essence and teachings of San Cataldo are especially apparent in side by side comparisons of Modena and the two later cemeteries (figs 1.6-13). The photographs capture architectural moments, material characteristics, and formal conditions that bring San Cataldo to mind. San Cataldo’s becomes a point of reference for the simple and rational approach to Italian cemeteries we see in the Santo Stefano Cemetery and the San Mauro Torinese cemetery.
Overall, Modena’s cultural and social response, together with its architectural expressions, diffuses into a larger chronology of Italian funerary architecture.

Brion’s legacy and notoriety is intimately linked to Scarpa’s individual creative pursuits. Scarpa and his Brion masterpiece embody the mythology of “The Architect” as a solo artist with unique vision. Made popular with novels like Ayn Rand’s “The Fountainhead,” the “Architect” is perceived as an aloof and obsessive masterbuilder unwilling to compromise on their creative principles. The Brion cemetery manifests Scarpa’s desire to maximize the format and creative expression of every aspect of the design process, from where the water will run off the buildings, to the hardware of the doors and light fixtures, and even the sound the concrete steps make when they’re stepped on. This is all made possible because Onorina Brion believed Scarpa was a “poet-architect” and the only architect capable of designing her family’s cemetery.

Rossi, working with vastly different programmatic budgetary requirements, takes a more pragmatic approach. For the scale and scope of the Modena cemetery, the detailing of every architectural and site element like Brion would be impossible. Rather than trying to control every drop of water and door hinge, Rossi’s design embraces the natural and unavoidable results and processes of weathering, and leaves the decorative and personal design touches up to the visitors who use the cemetery (fig 1.14).

These approaches speak to two very distinct mindsets of the architects. Scarpa is seen by critics and clients alike as the romantic image of “The Architect”, obsessing over every

---

28 Saitō, Carlo Scarpa, 16-18. This author’s text enforces the view of Scarpa as “The Architect,” writing, “I can picture Scarpa in the Brion Cemetery humming to himself as he moved back and forth along the connecting corridor of the entrance wing or around the chapel; Scarpa strolling about, savoring the sensation of motion, listening to the sound of his own footsteps, stopping to gaze at or run his hand along a detail or a wall, observing any changes in perspective or visual range.”
aspect of the design and construction, an act that ultimately results in a very personal creative endeavor. Because of this, his motives are less relevant than what others read into his work. Unlike Scarpa, Rossi celebrated the changes that come from the realities of construction, and made every effort to meet needs of the city and citizens of Modena. Rossi’s more systematic and pragmatic approach does not adhere to the same mythology of “The Architect” as Scarpa. Instead, Rossi used his own experiences as well as interpretative and poetic drawings to design a cemetery that privileged the needs and customs of its patrons over his own individual creative pursuits.

CONCLUSIONS:

Brion and Modena are two of the most acclaimed and influential modern cemetery projects in Italy and worldwide. They share many similarities but also have many differences. Brion’s popularity with architects and art historians has inspired a variety of conversations, debates, and analysis. Some of these discussions involve a comparison to San Cataldo. However, the comparisons of the projects often benefit Brion and disparage Modena, while overlooking the variations in scale, site, function, materiality, and form. Acknowledging the distinct circumstances under which each cemetery was built would ground a more balanced approach to comparing the two projects. Moreover, explicit evaluative criteria for analyzing the cemeteries would help clarify the differences between them and contribute to a better overall understanding of both projects.

The comparisons of Brion and San Cataldo solidify Brion’s place on its late-modernist pedestal; It is seen as a masterful display of transcendent forms combined with an obsessive attention to craft and detail that results in a highly contemplative and metaphysical architectural experience. The same architects and historians present San Cataldo as a stark and surreal manifestation of architectural ideologies. Despite the array of colors, textures, active use, and
rich personal displays of commemoration, San Cataldo continues to be described as a “desolate” and “banal.”29 Although Rossi coalesces a plurality of meaningful and enduring symbols, forms, and traditions into Modena’s architecture, it is still predominately viewed as a by-product of architectural theories.

The legacy each project leaves behind is a conclusive point of departure for understanding both projects. Scarpa’s Brion is sacred ground to architects and historians because it must be viewed as a unique and un reproducible design, like a revered piece of art. Brion is a result of one artist’s individual creative and aesthetic pursuits, and it is impossible to recreate. San Cataldo however, channels creative and theoretical visions into a socially-embedded formal solution that architects and designers creating contemporary work in a deeply-rooted traditional context can reference. The San Cataldo cemetery is a social and cultural response to a pragmatic but complex design challenge. Combined with its architectural and symbolic meanings, San Cataldo’s goal was to contribute to and advance a larger and ongoing narrative about Italian funerary architecture.

Fig. 1.1: Brion Cemetery Water Pavilion (Phaidon)

Fig. 1.2: Technical Drawing (Henry Pyne)
Fig. 1.3: San Cataldo Cemetery (Bing Maps)

Fig. 1.4: Brion Cemetery (Bing Maps)
Context and scale comparison of the San Cataldo cemetery and the Brion Cemetery (maps are the same scale)
Fig. 1.5: Nuno Cera, November 19th, 2015 (Uncube)
Fig. 1.6: Santo Stefano Cemetery in Italy (Archdaily)

Fig. 1.7: Untitled, Modena, Italy (Nuno Cera)

Fig. 1.8: Santa Stefano Cemetery in Italy (Archdaily)

Fig. 1.9: Laurian Ghinitoiu, Modena, Italy (Archdaily)

Comparisons of the Santo Stefano Cemetery (left) and the San Cataldo Cemetery (right)
Comparisons of the San Mauro Torinese Cemetery (left) and the San Cataldo Cemetery (right)
Fig. 1.14: Edoardo Fanteria, Modena, Italy (Flickr)
“We could speak of every project as if it were an unfinished love affair: it is most beautiful before it ends.”
- Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*

CONCLUSIONS  I  SAN CATALDO’S LINK TO LIFE
I love the beginning and end of things; but perhaps above all I love things which are broken and then reassembled, as in archaeological and surgical operations. Throughout my life I have often been hospitalized for fractures and other injuries to my bones. And this has given me some sense and knowledge of the engineering of the body, which would otherwise have been inconceivable to me. Perhaps the only defect of the end, as well as the beginning, is the fact that it is partly intermediate. This is true because it can in some ways be foreseen. And of course the most foreseeable end is death.¹

Few architectural endeavors have achieved the degree of simultaneous infamy and admiration as the San Cataldo Cemetery. It is most often credited as a concretization of Rossi’s practice of typology and resistance to modernism, and used as evidence of his belief in architecture as an autonomous formal discipline. Rossi blended recognizable and meaningful forms – the house, the institution, and the city – with present-day needs to create a distilled and transformed architectural language with links to the collective memory inherited from the past and the sociohistorical moment.²

While typological theories guide some of Rossi’s design choices, they are not as central to the cemetery as they are made to seem. Rossi deserves respect for how culturally and socially responsive his cemetery was.³ Much to Rossi’s bewilderment, San Cataldo’s worth is continuously reduced to its manifestation of architectural and urban ideologies.

I remember how this project provoked ferocious attacks on me which I did not comprehend; attacks were even directed at my entire architectural activity. Yet what had a greater impact on me was the critics’ reduction of the project to a sort of neo-Enlightenment experiment.⁴

---

¹ Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, 82.
³ With a notable exception being Diane Ghirardo’s essay. Diane Ghirardo, “The Blue of Aldo Rossi’s Sky.” AA Files 70 (0, 2015): 159-72.
Rossi’s quote speaks to his perception of the project as not just a summation of drawings and theories, but as a deeply contemplative, complex, and serious work of funerary architecture.

The discrepancies between the drawings and the built work are the first inclination of Rossi’s thinking about the cemetery beyond typological and architectural theories. The abstract nature of the drawings perpetuates the project as a disembodied image despite evidence that Rossi carefully considered the materiality of the cemetery. His detailed descriptions of the materials and construction methods show a concern for the physicality of the work that the drawings cannot convey. Rossi enjoyed the changes and modifications generated by construction, and used the drawings as part of an iterative design process that engaged with ideas of life, death, bereavement, and tradition.

ROSSI’S SENSITIVITY TO A DESIGN CHALLENGE AS PROFUND AND ENIGMATIC AS A CITY OF THE DEAD COMES TO LIGHT WHEN ONE REMOVES THEORIES AND IDEOLOGIES FROM THE DISCUSSION AND Focuses SOLELY ON SAN CATALDO AS A FUNCTIONING ITALIAN CEMETERY. ROSSI RECOGNIZED HE WAS BUILDING FOR ITALIANS AND KNEW HOW TO SPEAK TO THEIR LONGSTANDING TRADITIONS, CUSTOMS, AND BELIEFS ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH THROUGH ARCHITECTURE. CONNECTIONS TO ANCIENT FUNERARY MOTIFS LIKE THE HOUSE AND THE TOMB, THE CYPRUS TREE, THE MENHIR, AND THE LABYRINTH ALL TIE INTO ROSSI’S GOAL OF CREATING “A CEMETERY THAT COMPLIES WITH THE IMAGE OF A CEMETERY EVERYONE HAS.”5 Including references to more established cemetery typologies also propels Rossi towards this goal. Yet what is most overlooked in analysis of San Cataldo is its adept embrace of its fundamental purpose: a public cemetery for the citizens of Modena, Italy. Familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Italian funeral customs, Rossi made every effort to accommodate the needs of the cemetery’s patrons. It is indicative of Rossi’s character that he willingly adapted his design and aesthetic intentions to

better address the requests of the cemetery’s visitors. He provided spaces for quiet moments with family, places for solitary reflection, and room for individual commemorative objects (fig 1.1). Rossi humbly let his architecture act as the backdrop for the abundance of personal memorabilia, flowers, candles, photographs, and other objects of remembrance (fig 1.2-3). Where others see a stark and barren burial ground, Rossi envisioned a cemetery that offers solace through a stoic but sensitive architectural experience in harmony with its patrons’ time-honored traditions.

The misunderstanding and reduction of the San Cataldo cemetery culminates in the comparisons of Modena to Carlo Scarpa’s revered Brion Cemetery. The comparative discourse shows a clear bias towards Brion, but also reveals a widespread misconstruing of Modena’s appearance, the meanings and symbols embedded in the design, and its overall performance as a cemetery. While Brion is a unicum impossible to replicate, San Cataldo becomes a point of reference for contemporary architects looking to similarly coalesce the history of the past with the ideas of the present.

A more comprehensive reading of San Cataldo will positively affect Rossi’s reputation and the perception of his work. Expanding our view of the project beyond theories and drawings to include a more in depth study of the physicality of the built work and its synthesis of ancient and traditional funerary motifs helps complete San Cataldo’s body of knowledge. This approach is also more in line with Rossi’s own beliefs about architecture. He claims, “I am convinced, however, that architecture as totality, as a comprehensive project, as an overall framework, is certainly more important and, in the final analysis, more beautiful.”\(^6\) In light of these new findings, San Cataldo deserves to be revisited and reevaluated through a more inclusive lens.

\(^6\) Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, 8.
that escapes the varying limitations of past analysis authors and considers Rossi’s own writing and thoughts about his work.

Echoing Rossi’s words, architect Petra Gipp once wrote, “we see a cemetery as a place which is naturally linked to life. To the development of life through time and through the world, something wandering which suddenly one day can end. A demystified relationship with death makes life easier to live.” Rossi did not balk at the uneasiness often associated with cemeteries and death. Instead, he used his own anxieties, reflections, and experiences with mortality to create a responsive and compassionate cemetery meaningful to those who use it. Rossi’s San Cataldo cemetery commemorates death through an architecture that engages with and embraces the lives of its patrons.

This is a timely topic as the traditions, customs, and architecture made for the transition between life and death continue to develop and progress. The cemetery has always been the place most intimately linked to these traditions and transitions. However, the cemetery’s important cultural and social role is changing in profound ways. Funerary architecture and cemeteries used to set precedents and define values for architecture more widely, but conversations about the development and progression of contemporary funerary architecture are largely absent from architectural discourse and practice. Architects and designers have shied away from these types of projects, despite a growing demand for architecture that better addresses the changing needs and customs of death and dying. This evasion does nothing to prevent death, but only increases our fear of it. A fuller, more open reading of Rossi’s cemetery

---

7 “Cemetary Service Building at Ulriksdal / Petra Gipp Arkitektur and In Praise of Shadows.” ArchDaily. Similar to Gipp’s quote, Rossi writes in A Scientific Autobiography, “I find this great house of the dead a living sense of pietà... Thus this house of the dead, constructed according to the rhythm of urban mortality itself, has a tempo linked to life, as all structures ultimately do.”
shows that funerary architecture does not have to be a morose monument to the past, but can honor all aspects of life, including death.

The San Cataldo cemetery diffuses into an ongoing discussion about how funerary architecture fits into an awareness and way of managing death that is undergoing a large cultural shift. The ubiquity of the internet has made people more connected than ever before but it also presents previously unforeseen challenges relating to life, death, memory, and meaning. What happens to someone’s Facebook when they pass away? What are virtual graves? Will handheld GPS devices replace headstones? For funerary architecture to remain relevant, it cannot simply concretize architectural theory, it must also address society’s changing needs and desires in regards to death and commemoration. Clarifying the contentious San Cataldo cemetery and producing a more comprehensive understanding that highlights the project’s architectural and symbolic response to death provides a catalyst for new conversations about contemporary funerary architecture and the important role it plays in all of our lives.

The San Cataldo Cemetery began and ended with a car crash. Rossi survived a car accident that necessitated a lengthy hospital stay. In that hospital bed, Rossi’s body mended his bones back together, while Rossi united fragments of tradition, form, emotion, and memory into architecture. It was another car crash that tragically ended Rossi’s life in 1997 at age 66. Construction on the cemetery ceased after his death, leaving it unfinished. After Rossi, the incomplete cemetery took on a new life as it was populated with the memories of the deceased and the vitality of its visitors. While this may not have been part of Rossi’s original plan for the cemetery, I believe a cemetery of fragments is exactly what he would have wanted. The

cemetery exists on the line between two extremes. It is both temporal and transcendent. It is at once immortal and ephemeral. More than anything else, the permeant fragments of San Cataldo stand as a reminder that death may be an end, but life persists elsewhere.
Fig. 1.1: Edoardo Fanteria, Modena, Italy (Flickr)
Fig. 1.2: Ico Federico, Modena, Italy (Flickr)

Fig. 1.3: Federico Puggioni, Modena, Italy (Divisare)


