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**DEATH AND MODERNISM: AN INCONVENIENT ISSUE**

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*Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included in the arts? Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfils a function is to be excluded from the domain of art.*

Adolf Loos

'Architektur', *Der Sturm*, 15th December 1910

In modern terms, cemeteries were an inconvenient issue. In its utilitarian crave, the segregation of functions foreseen in the Athens Charter banished remembrance — and therefore, funerary space— from the urban realm. The scientific and formal search for a better living had no equivalent regarding death. But before the quest for modernism became institutionalized under the patronage of CIAM, some cemeteries were planned following the new design principles, while interweaving closely with contemporary urban proposals.

Ernst May's design for the Hauptfriedhof's extension —Frankfurt's main cemetery— is one of the few examples in which the modern creed was consequently applied to funerary purposes. Together with new schools, a sport stadium, a central market and other urban scale facilities, the cemetery extension was part of a broader program to transform Frankfurt into the Neue Sachlichkeit's showcase. Its layout draws on the same schemes as the residential Siedlungen May planed to extend the city, following the garden-city principles he was familiar with after his stay at Raymond Unwin's office in London<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, tombstones and inscriptions were standardised to favour mass production, while the new formal code of modernism could become widespread, also in the traditionally conservative field of commemoration. A closer look at this project designed in 1928 illustrates how early modernism dealt with death and its representation, before the 1929 crash —together with the 2<sup>nd</sup> CIAM conference— called for reduction and simplification, and Le Corbusier's publication of the Athens Charter reduced urban complexity to four elementary functions.

A brief comparison of Frankfurt's cemetery extension with other contemporary cemeteries by Bruno Taut, Jože Plečnik and Willem Marinus Dudok in Magdeburg, Ljubljana and Hilversum shows how different architectural movements of the time shared similar principles, revealing the role the garden-city played in the early 1920's as a model for both funerary settings and urban planning.

Along with the residential architecture for which May is best known, 'das neue Frankfurt' displayed a similar concern about all those urban scale facilities included in the city's extension plan. Ernst May commissioned the erection of the central market (Martin Elsaesser, 1926-1928), the mental hospital (Martin Elsaesser and Max Bromme, 1929-1930), the power station (Adolf Meyer, 1928-1929), the customs administration headquarters (Hebebrand, 1927), as well as churches, schools, parks, gardens and public baths<sup>2</sup>. Cemeteries were also involved in the ambitious task to turn the city into a modern metropolis.

Growing population demanded new places of burial. After Ernst May became Frankfurt's Building Supervisor in 1925, many decisions regarding funerary space were made. It was then that the Jewish community commissioned *Regierungsbaumeister* Fritz Nathan its new graveyard, on an independent plot within the Hauptfriedhof's area. Carried out between 1928 and 1929 –almost simultaneously with Ernst May's Hauptfriedhof's extension- the New Jewish Cemetery housed its own mortuary, funerary hall and administration in two dark clinker brick buildings flanking an open court. A straight path stretched from this modernist structure, dividing the grid of evergreen hedges that outline the white gravel burial plots.

As part of Frankfurt's extension plan, the Master plan for the Nidda Valley reserved a large area for the Westhausen Friedhof, the future metropolitan cemetery of the west, placed between the Praunheim and Westhausen siedlungen. Although there is no evidence that Ernst May designed the premises –since it was inaugurated in the 1950's- he did have the chance to enlarge the Hauptfriedhof in downtown Frankfurt.

The city's main cemetery was actually a cluster of plots which had been developed at different stages since its opening in 1828. Its later extension, dating from 1905, had provided the whole with an axial layout that collided with the intricate contours of the plot, failing to provide the area with a clear-cut structure<sup>3</sup>.

Only a long stretch of land at the north-east corner of the site remained free of tombs when Ernst May designed the last addition to the Hauptfriedhof<sup>4</sup>. Parting from the same principles he set for all building activities under his command, he planned the cemetery extension as a *Siedlung* of the dead, a rational realm where modernism could be applied on all design scales.

Like Römerstadt and other settlements he planned before 1929, the cemetery extension was designed as a *Trabant* or satellite garden-suburb. It was thus a self-contained area only linked to the whole through a round bower. Its autonomy was underscored by a dense tree boundary, the same way Römerstadt and Bornheimerhang outlined their contours through retaining walls or the Rotenbusch and Heimat Siedlungen used higher buildings along its border. Like Raymond Unwin stated in his book *Town Planning in Practice. An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs*<sup>5</sup>, garden-cities should have visible boundaries, like medieval towns had their walls as crucial elements of their visual identity.

A set of platforms stepped down the gentle slope to the north, underscoring topography much in the same way housing rows did in many of the settlements of the Niddatal master plan. In order to underline the independence of the cemetery addition, these terraced platforms rotate 45° from the overall grid, establishing a geometry of their own. This shifted hatch is underlined by double rows of trees planted along the edge of each terrace, flanking the paths that lead to the grave fields<sup>6</sup>. Like Ernst May did with his housing rows, the beginning and end of each alley was highlighted through a group of higher trees that screened off the view, avoiding an endless, tiresome perspective.

Thus, the cellular extension of the cemetery was intended as an independent enclave within the whole, its southern boundary consisting of a radial section in order to match the new geometry with the pathway system of the existing burial plots. Ernst May recalled again Ebenezer Howard's diagram for the garden-city, the same way he did while designing the radial scheme for Bornheimer Hang Siedlung<sup>7</sup>.

Although not strictly necessary, a funeral hall was planned at the center of the radial section. This non-confessional, temple-like construction topped the horizontal profile of the cemetery extension with the same intention May employed the outstanding volume of the church in the new neighbourhoods: as a visual and social accent much in the spirit of the Stadtkrone Bruno Taut had foreseen as crown of every community.

To ensure the modern looks of the Hauptfriedhof's extension, Ernst May delivered a set of new regulations for the tombs in his *Begräbnissordnung*. As he had done with the Frankfurter Grundrisse and the Frankfurter Normen (the Frankfurt plans and standards indicating how every element of a house ought to be designed), the cemetery rules established a strong control over form, size and material of tombs and funerary monuments, so they could be made with industrial methods, lending the cemetery a coherent, contemporary appearance. Further, the city's building administration made an inventory of the stone stock of all tombstone manufacturers in the Frankfurt area, in order to discard all those materials not suitable for the new aesthetics<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the Building Counselling Department –together with the art classes of Joseph Hartwig and Richard Scheibe at the Städtische Kunstschule- developed different tomb and mausoleum prototypes with simple, abstract forms that would meet mass-production requirements, while endowing the funerary premises with the abstract imprint of modernism. Even a new typography was to be used for all memorial inscriptions, so no detail would escape from the new Frankfurt's objective and efficient flair<sup>9</sup>.

But how modern were actually May's cemetery and the new Frankfurt program? A number of graveyards designed in the 1920's show how similar principles were used both for urban planning and cemetery design by architects who did not subscribe to this orthodox version of modernism.

One of the most radical members of the expressionist movement, Bruno Taut, designed in 1922 a cemetery for the city of Magdeburg, where he had been appointed Stadtbaurat (Municipal Building Advisor) the year before<sup>10</sup>. The Südost

Bestattungsanlage, as it was called, was made up of grave fields enclosed by dense tree rows outlining the pathways, much in the fashion his terraced housing flanked the streets in his Reform Siedlung in Magdeburg. A group of expressionist buildings housing the crematorium, mortuary, administration facilities together with a large funeral hall topped the site with a crystal-like glass roof, materialising the city crown ideal Bruno Taut had described in his book *Die Stadtkrone*. In spite of the radically different architectural language of both cemeteries, his own project description might as well portray Mays proposal: "Paths follow the terrain. Dominant height covered densely with trees. Existing quarry –on the funeral hall's axis- transformed into an urn garden- Large funeral hall with glass roof merges with the site. Good views onto the Elbe river plains"<sup>11</sup>.

With a similar comprehensive approach to urban and funerary matters, Joze Plecnik planed Ljubljana's northern extension together with the Zale cemetery<sup>12</sup>. Drawing heavily from Howard's garden-city diagram, the northern neighbourhood of the Slovenian capital gravitated along a radial avenue that spanned between two cemeteries. On one end, the Nauje memorial paid tribute to outstanding Slovenes on the grounds of the former cemetery around the church of Saint Christopher. On the other end, the municipal cemetery of Zale should have put an end to this main avenue with the classical gate to the so-called 'garden of all saints'<sup>13</sup>. Both the city and the Zale cemetery had a radial layout, with low density housing among greenery in the urban area becoming mortuary chapels with their own gardens in the sacred realm. Only the classical forms and the hand-made construction methods defer from May's proposal.

A closer approach to the Frankfurt program is that of Willem Marinus Dudok in Hilversum. From his somewhat mediating position between the modernist ideals of *de 8* and *Opbouw* groups and the more conservative attitude of Grandpré Moliere and the Delft School, he too designed the new cemetery as part of an overall project to transform this Dutch town into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The Noorderbegraafplaats or northern cemetery is the green core of the plan to extend the city beyond the railway line in the north-eastern section of Hilversum<sup>14</sup>. Like the surrounding residential units, it is designed as a garden-city following a regular grid, thus avoiding the picturesque features of the examples mentioned previously. A rotating pattern imbues both the cemetery and the new neighbourhood with a centred dynamic, much in the trail of the de Stijl works like the Schroeder House by Gerrit Rietveld or the spatial compositions Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren made for the L'Effort Moderne art gallery. In a somewhat iterative procedure, the cemetery asserts its sacred nature by performing as a green core of the neighbourhood which was not to be trespassed. Once inside, the grave fields rotate around a central lawn which insists in this idea of an inviolable center<sup>15</sup>. The white prismatic volumes of the keeper's house and the funerary hall pay tribute to the same modernist trends followed by Ernst May, but Hilversum's cemetery project lacks the mass production intentions of the Frankfurt proposal.

Thus, in the 1920's the garden-city model lay behind a broad spectrum of urban proposals ranging from conservative classicisms like that of Plecnik to radical modernisms like that of May, also including the expressionist approach of Taut and the neoplasticist influence of Dudok. While this consensus lasted in the European

debate, urban patterns continued to provide with valuable models for cemetery design. A year after May's cemetery was finished, Frankfurt hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> CIAM Congress devoted to the minimal dwelling. Together with the Stock Market Crash of 1929, it led to a radical simplification of forms and means in Ernst May's design policy, aiming at cost reduction. Further, the rationalist discourse introduced by the CIAM conferences in urbanism erased the space of commemoration from the urban realm. Designed as a machine to live in, the functional city paid no attention to funerary space. It was not until the modern paradigms were revised to introduce all those issues that appeal to man's soul –that is, that part of architecture that belongs to the domain of art, according to Loos- that cemeteries ceased to be regarded as an inconvenient issue within the modern metropolis.

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- 1 Ernst May worked at Raymond Unwin's office between 1910 and 1912, being involved in the design of the garden-suburbs of Letchworth and Hampstead. Significantly, he asked Unwin to write the article 'Die neue Stadt' (The new city) for the first issue of his magazine *Das neue Frankfurt*.
  - 2 Heike Risse (1984): *Frühe Moderne in Frankfurt am Main 1920-1933*, Societäts Verlag, Frankfurt
  - 3 Bettina Erche (1999): *Der Frankfurter Hauptfriedhof*, Denkmalamt, Frankfurt
  - 4 Ernst May (1928): „Die Erweiterung des neuen Hauptfriedhofes', *Das neue Frankfurt*, n° 6, p. 101
  - 5 Raymond Unwin (1909): *Town Planning in Practice. An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs*, London; checked in the Spanish translation (1984): *La práctica del urbanismo. Una introducción al arte de proyectar ciudades y barrios*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, p. 118
  - 6 Frankfurt City Minutes, 11.09.1928, p.3
  - 7 Howard's radial scheme can be traced in many urban proposals of the time, such as the Törten Siedlung in Dessau by Walter Gropius or the Prozorovoskaia garden-village near Moscow, by V. Semenov.
  - 8 Adolf Meyer (1928): ‚Die neue Friedhofsordnung', *Das neue Frankfurt*, n° 6, p. 99
  - 9 See (1928) *Das neue Frankfurt*, n° 6, p. 106-107
  - 10 Joachim Kolb (1996): *Bruno Taut als Stadtbaurat in Magdeburg und das farbige Bauen*, Grin Verlag für Akademische Texte, Norderstedt, p.7
  - 11 *Der Neubau*, Berlin 1924, p. 87, quoted in A. Nippa (ed.): *Bruno Taut, Eine Dokumentation, Projekte-Texte-Mitarbeiter* (1995), Stadtplanungsamt, Magdeburg, p. 70
  - 12 A. Hrausky, J. Kozelj, D. Prelovsek (1997): *Plecnik's Ljubljana. An Architectural Guide*, Dessa, Ljubljana, p. 206
  - 13 See D. Prelovsek (1997): *Joze Plecnik 1872-1957*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, p. 305
  - 14 See Dudok's report for the city council sent the November 22<sup>nd</sup>. 1927 kept in Noorderbegraafplaats Correspondence, box I (1925-1932), Streekarchief voor het Gooi en de Vechstreek, Hilversum
  - 15 Herman van Bergeijk (1995): *Willem Marinus Dudok, architect-stedebouwkundige 1884-1974*, V+K Publishing, Naarden, p. 305