MODERN SPACE AND FORM OF POLISH CEMETERIES AS A CULTURAL AND AXIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

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Motto: *"Essentially the shape of our lives is determined by values."*[1]

Résumé

Bez cintorínov by európske mestá určite nepredstavovali tie isté mestá. Smrť, ktorá je prísne spojená s procesom ľudského života, spolu s rozvojom kresťanstva v Európe zmenila úlohu cintorínov v spoločenskom prostredí a kultúre. Kresťanský prístup viac popularizuje tradičné pochovávanie než kremáciu. Takýto stav vecí má svoje implikácie vo forme a priestore cintorínov, ktoré sú miestami osobitného kultu.

Článok sa zaoberá úlohou a významom tohto priestoru v meste, ako aj v regiónoch s demografickými a kultúrnymi zmenami sledovanými zmenami v duchovnej sfére. Zdá sa, že jednou z premís, ktoré môžu zachrániť naše cintoríny, je úcta ku kultúrnemu dedičstvu – kultúre alebo k našim predkom. Rozvoj harmónie je v tomto zmysle pokračovaním a nie zamietnutím kultúry z ktorej pochádzame.

It is hard to ponder on the problems of spatial structures' development without referring to the world of modern and historic values, which decide and have decided about particular spatial choices and decisions.[2] Undoubtedly the stronger our negative reaction, the more clear and more unambiguous is the fact that negation of our world of values took place. That is why it is necessary to point out that this text is written by a person that is European, Polish, and Christian.

Undoubtedly without cemeteries our European cities would not be the same cities. Death, which is strictly connected with the process of our life, along with the development of Christianity in Europe changed the role of cemeteries in our culture. In antiquity burial grounds were either special places (or rather places of special worship), or places of small significance. Christian culture introduced sort of more democratic rules – when it comes to burial grounds.

Christian mindset, according to which bodies will be resurrected, makes traditional burial more popular than cremation. Such factual state has its implications in form and space of cemeteries, which are places of special cult, and respect paid to the dead in areas where faith is strong among local residents. Simultaneously "regardless of faith" the earliest cemeteries in our cities and countries are silent witnesses of history of our nations.

It can be said that such conservative and patriotic approach leads to describing the cemetery as an important place in the urban fabric mainly because of historical and cultural identity of the society, as it was said before. Modern tendencies of cultural homogenization, as Leszek Kołakowski put it, lead to diminishing the role and significance of this space in the city.

From purely utilitarian point of view, these places often take too much space in a "very valuable urban fabric". Although in Poland there are no clear tendencies to remove cemeteries from historical city centres yet, still the liquidation of churchyard cemeteries, or cemeteries situated in direct proximity of the churches has been advancing since XIX century. This caused loosing the perception of the temple itself as a place reminding about the fact of death, and also led the space around the temple to become gardens or squares. Due to lack of cemeteries' legal status regulation and lack of clear rules of their operation, some cemeteries fall into decay.

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[1] J.M.Bodeński s. 43.

[2] He started his chapter about values, need of contact and conflict in a similar way, in: O tożsamości Urbanistyki. Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2008, s.68.

High mobility of the society causes many burial grounds to be neglected and forsaken, which influences the form of the cemetery and makes it more and more savage, neglected and forgotten. Simultaneously it can be said that lack of legal regulations, which would force the state to take care of cemeteries as places of cultural heritage[3] caused, that along with demographic and cultural changes cemeteries of Jewish communes and small Christian parishes "died", or rather were forgotten or liquidated, especially on the areas of post-war resettlements on the Eastern side of Poland.[4]

Spatial role and significance of those places also change, mainly because of cultural changes. It seems that removing cemeteries' surroundings like parks and alleys deprived them of "vestibules", intermediary places, and gates between spiritual and secular worlds. The idea of cemetery gate as a specific symbol of transition was lost.

Mainly due to locating cemeteries in direct proximity of parking lots, following the example of big supermarkets, where one sometimes just stops by for a short while. The spiritual world was thus deprived of "purgatory" understood as space "in between" – which allows people to calm down and get into the right mood.

The mood, as many researches and town-planning theorists emphasise[5] is a very important part of urban fabric, because, among others, it is the mood that defines the identity of the space. The mood also bonds the person with the place they stay at. It strengthens the process of identification with particular space. Thus spatial activity that changes and interferes in the mood of the cemetery, changes its visual image and the degree to which people identify with this place. One of undesirable actions from historic assumptions point of view is cutting down old trees without planting new ones. As a result of that, cemeteries that are poor in trees lose their park-like mood, and start to resemble rather poor in green plants modern suburban cemeteries. Thus there are clearly visible signs, that cultural models used while planning and building new suburban cemeteries penetrate the world of city cemeteries, the historical, functional and spatial origins of which are totally different. This way they lose their identity and atmosphere, and as they are an important part of urban fabric while being subject to change, they also change the identity of the city.

Another element, which is rather important in the form of the cemetery, is its fence. Massive, high, fixed walls, apart from their utilitarian role of separating the cemetery area from urban fabric had also a very important symbolic meaning, i.e. closing and hiding it from the outside world. In the inside world of the cemetery, the outside world of economy, politics, intensive life is an alien world, which only small reflections and flashes can reach, sort of like Plato's shadows of the real world.

Along with changes that our civilisation is subject to, cemeteries themselves change undoubtedly. As it was said before, the cemetery is a place extremely connected with the culture and time in which it comes into existence. The XX century cemetery in the centre of Lisbon, which has a form of a small town with characteristic white houses-chapels with lace curtains in windows and doors is a completely different thing than high-tech cemetery in Tokyo, where urns with ashes are delivered to a given customer and connected to mini-altars, just like books in a fully automated library, while on relevant LCD screen there appears a photo of the dead person.

The problem of cultural differences as described above is not strongly felt by the Poles, who are culturally and ethnically a fairly homogenous nation. Majority of cemeteries in Poland are Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic, Evangelical and Jewish are quite a common sight, but there are only 2 Muslim cemeteries on Polish territory. The problem of nature and cultural changes is felt by us, Poles mainly abroad, e.g. in Chicago, it is forbidden to light candles on tombstones, to bring fresh flowers to cemeteries, or even to build tombstones. A wooden cross placed over a grave was removed and thrown away, and it is not uncommon to step on the graves, which have a form of plaques lying on the grass.

In time of advancing globalization and European Union directives interfering in the sphere of religion, one could start to dread attempts to limit the cultural identity in this field, similar to recent events in Italy, where an attempt was made to remove crosses from schools. Such policy may lead to removal of crosses and other religious symbols from cemeteries.   This way Christian character of cemeteries can get secularised, and thus irretrievably lost.

[3] Cemeteries, according to Polish law, are managed by cities and religious bodies.

[4] The main reasons of this phenomenon are Holocaust and other World War II consequences, like moving Polish frontiers towards West and migration of the Jewish to newly established country of Israel.

[5] The problem of the mood is a scientific interest of among others: Konrad Kucza – Kuczyński, Sławomir Gzell, Barbara Bartkowicz, Aleksander Böhm, Ewa Cichy – Pazder.

religious symbols from cemeteries.[6] This way Christian character of cemeteries can get secularised, and thus irretrievably lost.

Polish law stands in slight opposition to directives of the European Union in this field, because its regulations concerning cemeteries often refer to and rely on decisions of religious bodies. Polish law is also quite restrictive when it comes to liquidation of cemeteries, which cannot take place earlier than after 40 years from the last burial on relevant cemetery, and only after contacting above mentioned religious body.

It seems that one of the premises than can save our cemeteries is the respect for cultural heritage – the culture or our ancestors. This fact is not only relevant from the point of view of the space of cemeteries located in cities, but also from the point of view of the city itself as an area of specific compositional and spatial values. Turning towards recognized historical values, as emphasised during III Congress of Polish Town Planning, seems to be the only right direction, which guarantees harmonious development. Basing on so called "value priority", which concerns every sphere of human spatial activity, i.e. ecological, cultural, social, and economical fields, seems to guarantee permanent, integrated and balanced development of urbanised areas. For it is the recognized values that guarantee preservation of the priority of common good and minimisation of social conflicts. Development harmony is in this sense continuation, and not denial of the culture we stem from. (Picture 1).
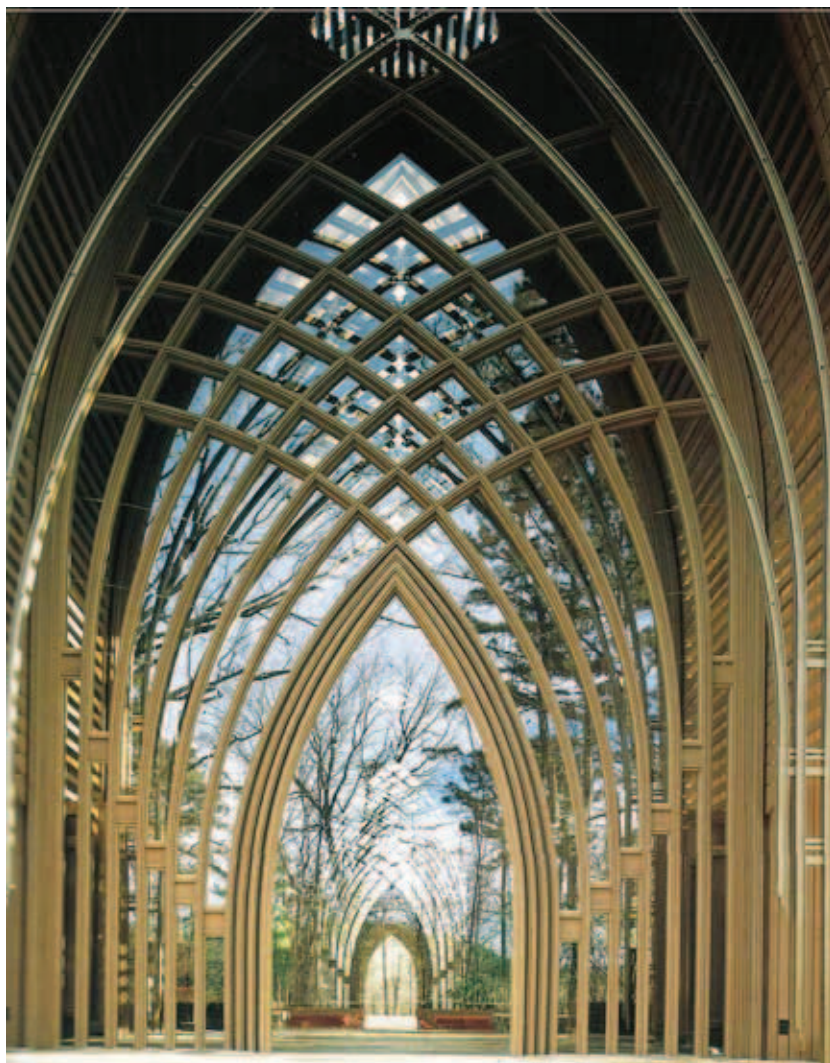
Picture 1 Example of proper transition through funeral chapel   from spiritual to secular world.

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[6] Although theoretically today those facts are not connected with spatial problems of cemeteries, but in Poland there is a clearly visible tendency for cultural denial of our nation's heritage.

[7] Based on the manifest of the III Congress of Polish Town Planning published in: http://www.reflectorstudio.pl/URBANISTA/index.php?page=III-Kongres-Urbanistyki-Polskiej.