Landscape for mourning - adaptive reuse of a rural church and its surroundings as an urn cemetery
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LANDSCAPE FOR MOURNING - ADAPTIVE REUSE OF A RURAL CHURCH AND ITS SURROUNDINGS AS AN URN CEMETERY

"In a sense the places of the dead are pivotal landscapes, places where life and death, past and future, the material world and the spiritual world are held in balance"[1]

This visual essay explores the reactivation of the spiritual experience of religious heritage in the face of secularization. We discuss the reuse of the site of the Saint Odulphus church as a new urn cemetery and landscape for mourning. Saint Odulphus was the parish church of Booienhoven, a village that belongs to the municipality of Zoutleeuw. Surrounded by meadows and grasslands the church has the singular quality of a built landmark set in a rural environment. The site is located in northeastern Belgium bordering on the regions of Hageland and Haspengouw, a picturesque and popular area for local tourism. The church is one of many in Flanders that, in recent years, has lost its religious function as the result of the secularisation of society. With a sharply decreasing number of priests and a very limited group of inhabitants still attending mass regularly, many churches are abandoned or underused. Radical transformations in terms of reuse too often disregard the complex spiritual and social role of church buildings in local communities and urban and rural settings[2]. To encourage a meaningful adaptive reuse, various organisations in Flanders have recently launched a research program (2016 – 2018), supervised by the Team Flemish Government Architect, to conduct feasibility studies for the transformation of parish churches.[3] The aim of these studies is to investigate whether, and how, through research by design, a proposed new use can be implemented in an existing building. Saint Odulphus is one of the churches in this program. The proposed new use is a columbarium, a building or structure to store cinerary urns. The space has a limited interior capacity. Therefore, we decided to expand both the scope and the area to be studied to incorporate the church's architectural ensemble, comprising the church, the presbytery and former guild house,

Figure 1: View of the Saint-Odulphus church and the surrounding landscape

1 Worpole, K. (2003). *Last Landscapes. The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West.* London: Reaktion Books. p. 11
2 Author 2 & Author 1, Conference paper; Author 2 et al., book chapter
3 One of the selected teams to conduct these studies is xxx (left out for blind peer review), of which these authors are part. More information on the programme can be found xxx (left out for blind peer review)

as well as the protected surrounding landscape.[4] Beyond that brief we tried to conceptualize and broaden the function from a mere columbarium to a burial ground for urns and a contemporary place for mourning. Originally foreign to Christian tradition in western culture, cremation is relatively recent. The growing popularity of this practice, gives the site the potential to function as the central urn cemetery for the municipality.
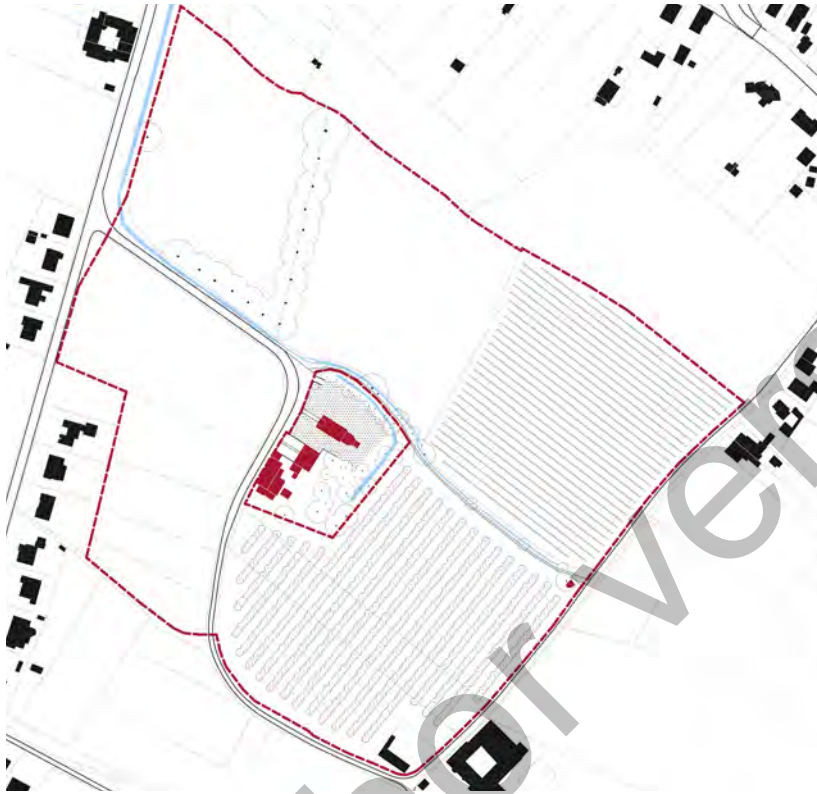

Figure 2: Situation plan of the Saint-Odulphus church and the surrounding landscape

ADAPTIVE REUSE OF THE SITE OF SAINT ODULPHUS

The design research proposed interventions on three different scale levels from the church and its interior, to the clearly demarcated "island" with the architectural ensemble and its outdoor spaces, to the protected rural landscape surrounding the site. This presentation follows the design process in its intention to uncover older layers of tangible and intangible values. These layers provided potential design parameters for the new interventions, anchoring it back to the layered memory of the site. For each scale level, we analysed several options or "scenarios" and present a selection in this essay. Besides the site's specific history, we were also inspired by traces or personal memories of other places. Revisiting some of these places was a source of inspiration and provided a critical framework for our research. These places helped us to reflect and evolve from an intuitive and associative approach towards a cohesive narrative.[5] We have, therefore, added short descriptions of three cemeteries as reference projects. Further, we analysed their "interiority" and relevance in the context of this project.[6]

4 In Flanders the legal protection of immovable heritage may involve buildings, sites, and urban and rural landscapes.

5 This approach resembles the notion of heterotopia by Foucault. In his text Foucault also refers to the cemetery as a clear example of it. Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *diacritics*, 16(1).

6 We define 'interiority' as the collection of interior qualities and atmospheric properties (created by light, texture, climate, relation inside-outside, …) of a particular space or place. For more on this, see also Author 1 & Author 2, journal paper

The columbarium as interior

The first step in the study takes up the actual issue of transforming the interior of the church into a columbarium and to examine its spatial possibilities. The church is relatively small and dates back to 1840. Built in a neoclassical style, it has a simple, but elegant plan extending from the front to the back with a (built-in) tower, the nave with three bays, a polygonal apse and a sacristy. We developed a variety of options for placing the urn cases in this space and compared those options with existing examples. The reuse of churches as columbaria is a common practice especially in Germany, known as Gedächtniskirchen[7]. Urn cases here are often positioned centrally in the space as if to stand in for the people who attended mass in the past but also prevents the church from being used for other functions.[8]

Figure 3: interior of the Saint Odulphus church, current state (left) and sketch of the proposed scenario (right)

In contrast to the look and feel of a solemn storage space, we opted to position the urns as a dado against the inside of the façade walls of the church, thus embracing the central space of the nave and leaving it open. The urns are positioned at a height of two floors. They are made of oak to create a more familiar, or warm, atmosphere that would resemble that of a library with bookcases on two levels. A spiral staircase in the sacral axis of the church gives access to a surrounding walkway on the first floor. For reasons of accessibility, an elevator is integrated in the tower which connects

7 Literally translated as "remembrance churches".
8 Examples of Gedächtniskirchen are the Grabeskirche Sankt Bartholomäus in Cologne, Grabeskirche Liebfrauen in Dortmund, Grabeskirche St Joseph in Viersen.
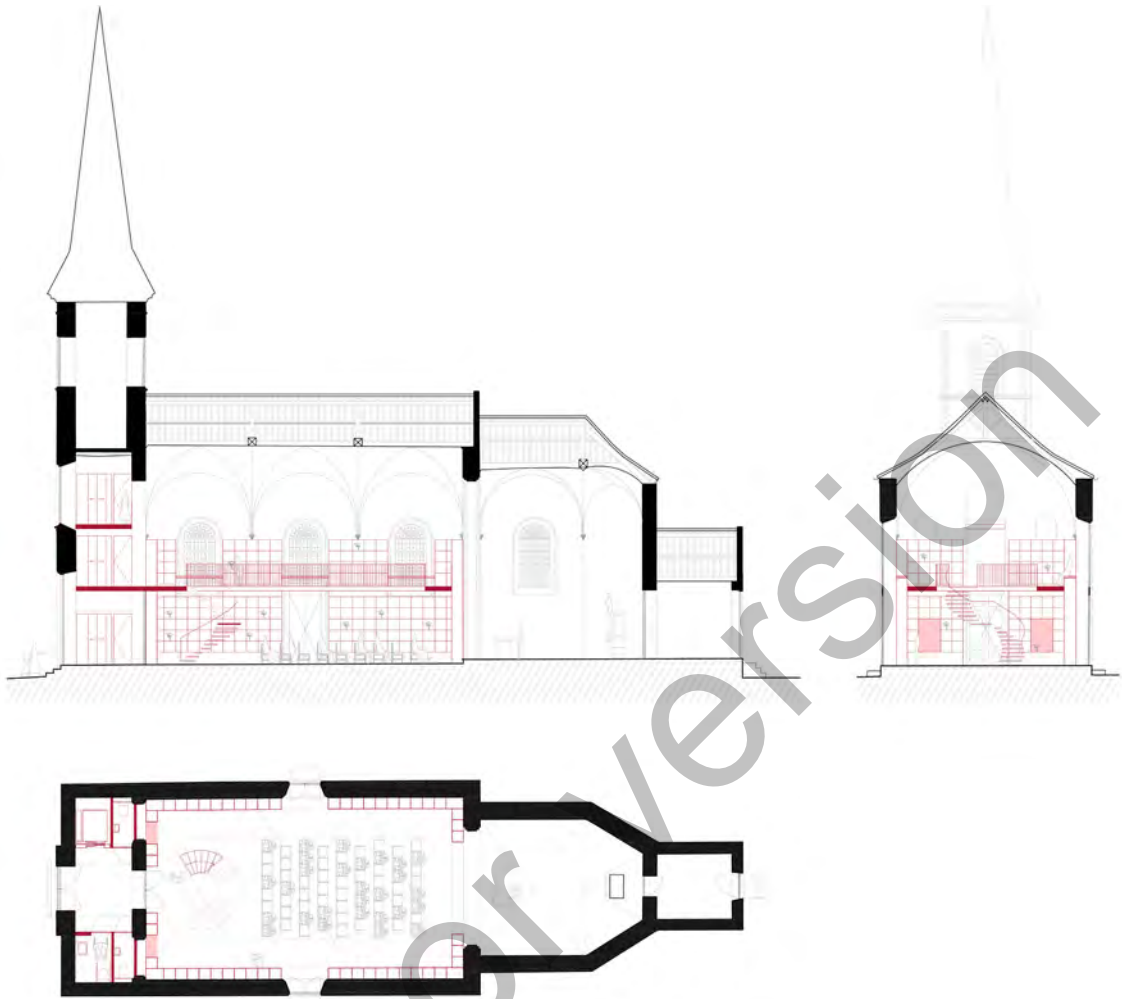
Figure 4: Columbarium in the Saint Odulphus church, ground floor plus longitudinal and transverse section

to the first floor and second floor in the tower. From the tower visitors would have a panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. During a funeral service, the stairs can be used to perform a ceremonial role and strengthen the scenographic quality and potential of the church interior. The proposed transformation maintains the role of the nave as a small, albeit collective, space. It allows for ceremonies similar to those formerly held, as well as intimate concerts or gatherings. A small, but historically important organ found on site can give an added value or incentive for this additional use.

The Cemetery Père-Lachaise is one of the most famous cemeteries in the world and one of Paris's top tourist attractions. It is well known as the final resting place for various writers and artists. Today, it is a dense structure of grave monuments and cobblestone pathways, integrated into the urban fabric. When Père-Lachaise opened in 1804, however, it was located outside of the city center, in the countryside on the outskirts of Paris. It was conceived as a "picturesque" garden cemetery, incorporating the principles of the English landscape garden.

The design, by Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart, marked an innovation in European cemetery design. It also marked a cultural turn in Western civilization in the wake of the Enlightenment. The emergence of mausoleums and expressive tombs for individuals and families is borrowed from eastern cultures but also fits with the anticlericalism typical of the time. In this context death is no longer considered to be a transition between life and resurrection but as the definitive end of life. The tomb, therefore, serves as a "monument" to the remembrance of an individual.
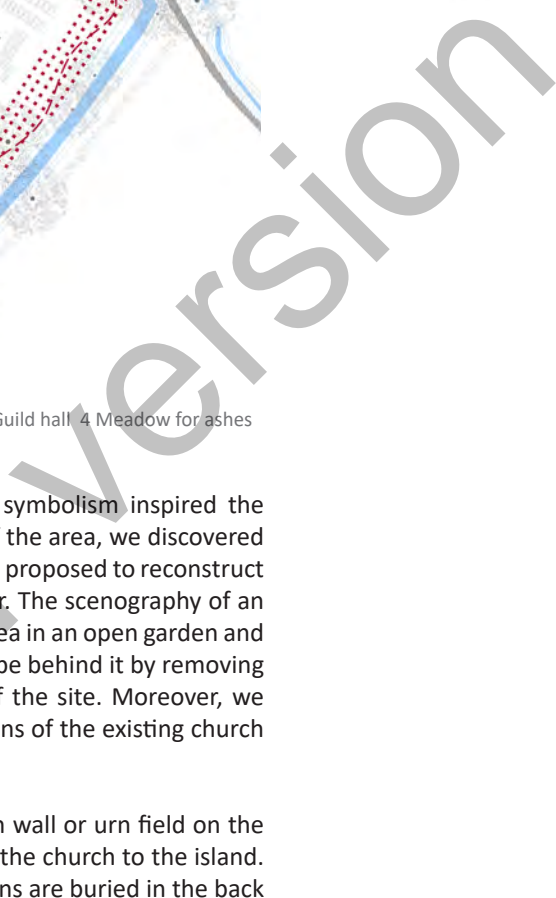
The crematorium, with a small columbarium in the crypt, was built in the 1880s and was the first crematorium in France. Cremation at that time was still a marginal practice as it was not accepted by the Catholic Church. Four larger columbaria encircling the crematorium were added later. The columbaria's design, with urn cases stacked on top of each other, is also a reflection of eastern cultures where cremation was a common practice.

Figure 5: An old postcard depicting the columbarium in the Père-Lachaise cemetery

Island of Remembrance

The second step in our study on the Saint Odulphus church was to think about the transformation of the larger site of the architectural ensemble of the church, presbytery, guild hall, and outdoor spaces. The site can be perceived as an island marked by the spire of the church tower and the simple brick architecture of the adjacent buildings in an otherwise undeveloped rural landscape. A protected village view since 1994, it is separated from surrounding fields through a lower wall at the side of the street and a hedge, lower vegetation, and the remains of a former moat bordering the other sides. The location's isolation is due to the area's historical transformation. The first, and main cause of this isolation was the destruction of the housing settlement around the church during the 1705 siege of Zoutleeuw. The second factor is the displacement of the main road which originally passed this site to the north between Zoutleeuw and the village Wilderen.

Figure 6: 'island' plan – 1 Saint Odulphus church 2 Presbytery 3 Guild hall 4 Meadow for ashes 5 Urn field 6 Path leading back to the street

The spatial figure of the island and its potential symbolism inspired the design. In conducting research of historical maps of the area, we discovered that the moat originally encircled the entire site. We proposed to reconstruct this moat to strengthen the site's isolated character. The scenography of an island was further reinforced by joining the outer area in an open garden and creating a clear view from and towards the landscape behind it by removing the lower bushes and smaller trees in the back of the site. Moreover, we propose to replace the gravel that covers the remains of the existing church yard with grass.

Various options included the introduction of an urn wall or urn field on the site, extending the function of the columbarium of the church to the island. The drawing here shows one option in which the urns are buried in the back of the site in the form of a grid, with individual stones horizontally placed in the grass. The introduction of two bridges allows the introduction of new rituals at the site, as they symbolise the crossing of the moat as the passage from life to death.[9]

At the Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof in Langemark (BE), 44 000 German soldiers that died during the First World War are buried on the former frontline in northeast Flanders. The cemetery was designed by Robert Tischler and built between 1930 and 1932. The site is entirely surrounded by a moat, crossed by a small bridge, which clearly marks the transition from the street to the cemetery, giving a sort of ritual character to the action of entering the site. This impression is strengthened by a massive stone entrance pavilion. Its interior, with a central passage and a square room at each side, functions as

9 The most potent example of this are the various paintings depicting Die Toteninsel (Isle of the Dead) by Arnold Böcklin (several versions produced between 1880 and 1886), see also below

a memorial space. The interior walls of the rooms are completely covered with oak panels that contain the engraved names of all of the soldiers. The graves form a repetitive grid and are marked by square stones horizontally positioned in the grass. A low wall encloses the site, allowing a view towards the surrounding rural landscape and its agricultural activities. The enclosure of the landscape through the moat and wall transform the landscape into a large interior,. This quality is strengthened by the high trees standing amidst the graves, which crown the cemetery space as a virtual ceiling, the enclosure of a natural cathedral. Together, its pictorial features, sculptures, and other elements (often clearly based on Christian iconography), give the place a melancholic feel. Unlike the Commonwealth's military cemeteries with their sense of victory and heroism, this site creates a tangible and more human sadness for the lost ones.
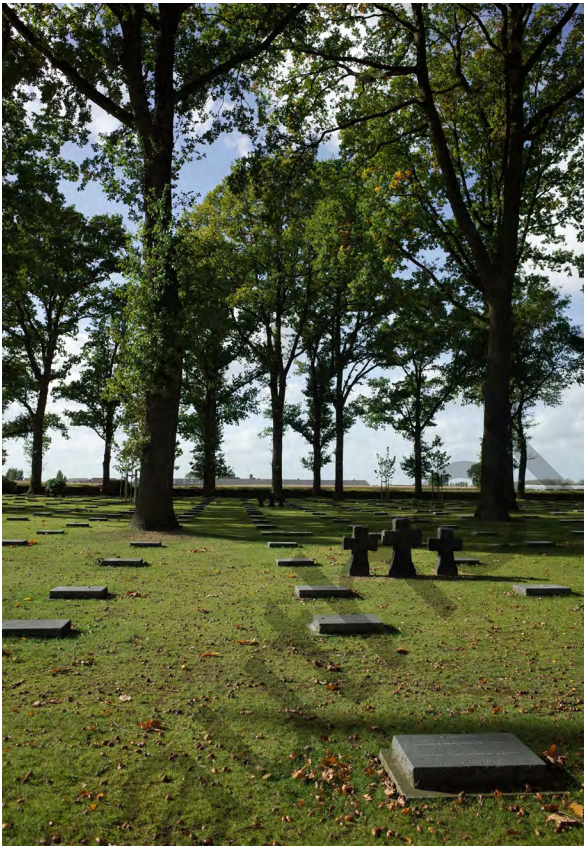

Figure 7: Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof in Langemark with agricultural activities in the background

A landscape for mourning

Figure 8: 'Urn orchard', the combination of an urn cemetery and a high stem orchard

The final option for the island, as proposed in the study, was to separate it from new burial grounds and keep it free. In this option the cemetery was to be integrated into the surrounding, protected landscape. In this context, a more suitable function could be given to both the presbytery and guild house congruent with the new function of the church. For example, the church could serve as a place for gathering after a funeral service as well as other social events. In this scenario, the island would be developed as a "refuge for the living", a more functional and active entity, while the surrounding protected landscape would be transformed into a "landscape for mourning."

The third step in our study thus introduces urn burial in one or several fields surrounding the island. Rather than replacing the cultivation or vegetation we tried to use the existing productive landscape and its history to add a new layer and reinforce its quality. Different examples were developed to illustrate this approach. One of these examples was an "urn forest" where urns are buried in an existing or newly created forest, and an "urn orchard" where an urn cemetery is combined with a high-stem orchard.[10] The last example is illustrated here and shows a variation in which we replaced the low-stem apple trees in the south-eastern field with high-stem trees. This variation is based on the landscape's original cultivation, as seen on historic maps and old aerial photographs, that is quite common for the region. Under and around the trees, urns are placed in circles, indicated with stone markers

10 Traditional fruit cultivation was based on high-stem orchards characterised by larger trees and more space in between them. In the context of agricultural industrialisation these were replaced by smaller and densely planted trees with low hanging fruit. A recent evolution reintroduces high-stem orchards as a way to increase the bio-diversity of the land and to restore the (protected) landscape.

in the grass. In this way we strive to move beyond the use of the landscape as mere places for burial towards more meaningful places or gardens that offer stillness and repose.

Strikingly, it is also in the surrounding landscape that the origin of the religious site is to be found. The stream of the Saint Odulphus has its wellspring at a nearby chapel, at the edge of the protected landscape, that bears the same name. As an final proposal, and inspired by this wellspring, we introduced a "birth forest." Birth forests are commonly found in many Flemish municipalities. A tree is planted with the birth of each new child in the community. The landscape for mourning thus combines death with the celebration of life.

The Skogskyrkogården, or Woodland Cemetery, in Stockholm is an example of a natural cemetery designed by Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz. In their competition entry and subsequent designs (1914) they built on the characteristics of the pre-existing landscape, a former stone quarry, adding new elements to reuse is it as a place for burial, mourning, and remembrance. Different parts of the landscape are assigned different functions and atmospheres and the buildings fit within the topography of the site as found. While nature through time has become most prominent, the graves are inserted in the landscape partly out of sight under the pine woods or as horizontally placed stones in the grass. Asplund and Lewerentz also gave significant attention to the landscape's scenography and the ritual power it holds. This power is reflected in the design of the route and pathways. They focus on architectural elements when entering the site and open towards nature when leaving the chapel. Through time, the blending of architecture and nature established a particular spiritual character. It was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994.

Figure 9: Woodland Cemetery Stockholm, photographer Zas Brezar

A SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE

The process of secularization has profoundly affected not only the use of religious architecture but, perhaps to a greater extent, the meaning and experience of spirituality. Funeral infrastructure as a whole, and cemeteries more specifically, are silent witnesses of this transformation. They force us to reflect on the inevitable or existential questions that transcend life and thus on the remaining role of spirituality in our lives.

The redesign of the Saint Odulphus church and its surrounding buildings and landscape reveal the various potential meanings and functions of a cemetery, moving beyond its sole function as a burial ground. What began as a question on adaptive reuse of a church developed into research on how to design a contemporary urn cemetery through the adaptive reuse of the surrounding landscape. Three characteristics seemed essential for its design: the cemetery as a public space, the need for (new) rituals, and the layered quality of the landscape.

The cemetery as a public space

Since the French revolution and through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, secularization and individualization in society have caused death and mourning to be increasingly withdrawn from public life. Instead, they seem to have become a more private or intimate experience. This change also affects the planning of cemeteries. Cemeteries are no longer positioned in the heart of the community, e.g., as a church yard, with some graves positioned even within the church interior. They have been banned from the community's center and moved towards the outskirts, or more recently, lost in suburbia.[11] The increase of cremation, as a subtle sign of secularization, further emphasizes death as an outcast in current society. As a response, often aesthetically refined and functionally well planned crematoriums are designed and built. At the same time, they are the (often pompous) expression of death as the full stop after life, an anonymous and monumental event outside of it, marking an end instead of being seen as a part of a cycle. As argued by Sennett and Foucault, however, there is a need for places to mourn that are part of public space to counteract to the neglect or denial of death as a part of life. That need sees a place for mourning as a place for comfort instead of alienation, a place to meet and to remember rather than to part and forget. We recognise the need for intimacy but, embedded in a space with a collective nature. Thus, we believe the cemetery should remain as a public space, albeit an informal one that allows retreat, repose, or contemplation. Beside a columbarium and a funeral space, the site may be used as a place for the celebration of life and its memory or simply as a meaningful place to meet with family or friends.[12]

Ritual space

Current secularization is the consequence of an alienation from institutionalized religion. When it comes to death, however, as in other important moments in life, more often than not we still seem to be willing to borrow its rituals and spaces. This practice could be explained as a pragmatic

11 See among others: Sennett, R. (1974). *The Fall of Public Man*. Cambridge, London, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press; Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.

12 Observational research has mapped out the various uses of cemeteries beside being places for mourning: Evensen, K. H., Nordh, H., & Skaar, M. (2017). Everyday use of urban cemeteries: A Norwegian case study. *Landscape and Urban Planning, 159* (Supplement C), 76-84; Deering, A. (2012). *Over their dead bodies: a study of leisure and spatiality in cemeteries.* University of Brighton.

resort to their ready availability in difficult and pressing times. Beyond this reason, however, we believe that the need for rituals is not only functional, but answers cultural[13] and spiritual needs as well. It is an attempt to give meaning to an incomprehensible aspect of life. Where the bodily presence of the deceased person is very prominent in traditional Christian burial rituals, cremation takes a more abstract form. It seems further removed from the bodily experience and closer to nature. The introduction of a columbarium and urn cemetery calls for, as it were, a renewed tradition and accompanying rituals.

Layered quality of the landscape

The landscape has different layers, related to both its natural morphology and its narratives. In most ancient and indigenous cultures, the ritual of burial was strongly related to nature. Hence, those rituals left their marks on the landscape (e.g., tumuli or burial mounds) and vice versa. The morphology and experience of the natural environment also influenced those rituals (e.g., positioning of graves at prominent or unique places such as an island, hill top, or shoreline). Therefore, the landscape is often seen as "sacred" in explicit or implicit terms with its use as a burial ground becoming an added layer of meaning. In our design research we did not approach the cemetery as an enclosed enclave for the dead. Rather, we explicitly worked towards a cemetery that builds on, and merges with, the existing landscape, in which the cemetery becomes a new layer upon existing agricultural and historical layers. Or, as described by Worpole, it is indeed this joined presence of life and death that gives a burial site its salience and emotional power.[14]

CONCLUSION

With Malpas we argue that there is a long tradition that links place to memory through the connection of particular images or ideas with specific locations.[15] This can provide an ontological basis for our project. Memory and the meaning of space – in our spectrum from the interior of the church to its surrounding landscape – are deliberately linked to the memory of the deceased. The new narrative of mourning becomes anchored in the site's spatial memory, and is thus embodied and contained within the building and its surroundings. This narrative is characterized by considering the cemetery as a public space, the creation of a scenography for new rituals and building further on the tangible and intangible layers of the landscape.

The research program on adaptive reuse of parish churches in Flanders that we have described is conducted with the involvement of local municipalities, representatives of the parish, heritage organizations, etc. Together with these stakeholders one scenario is chosen, of which the financial and technical implications are investigated. These results will form the basis for the next step: the realization of an adaptive reuse project. In the case of Saint Odulphus the project will be developed in different phases starting with the columbarium in the church.

13 Worpole describes how funeral and burial rituals vary among different times, cultures and regions: Worpole, K. (2003). *Last Landscapes. The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West.* London: Reaktion Books.
14 Worpole, K. (2003). *Last Landscapes. The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West.* London: Reaktion Books, p. 21
15 Malpas, J. (2012). Building memory. Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts 13: 11-21.

Beyond this concrete outcome, the study initiated further research on funerary architecture and landscape and the role of spirituality in the adaptive reuse of churches. Throughout history, the Christian religion assimilated pagan rituals and customized devotional practices according to local needs. Similarly, in our proposal for adaptive reuse of the Saint Odulphus church and the surrounding landscape, its Christian tradition may be passed on in its turn. Together with other references from different cultures and regions this tradition can also be absorbed and reinterpreted in new rituals. In order to revive the spirit of the site, the design thrives on links to the past and other spaces. Picking up the pieces of a thoroughly secularized culture, we are trying to assemble them and create a meaningful landscape charged with old and new layers of spirituality.

Compared with the living, the dead have an overwhelming numerical superiority, not just the dead of this war's end but all the dead of all times, the dead of the past, the dead of the future; confident in their superiority, they mock us, they mock this little island of time we live on, this tiny time of the new Europe, they force us to grasp all its insignificance, all its transience.[16]

Figure 10: Die Toteninsel, Arnold Böcklin (1880), Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum, Basel

16 Kundera, M. (2010). *Encounter.* New York: Harper Collins. p.177.

The authors of this paper are part of the team TRACE, responsible for designing this project and linked to the research group at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts, University of Hasselt. The research group is specialized in the adaptive reuse of religious heritage. In each project, TRACE applies a designer approach toward the transformation of churches, monasteries, and other sites while building further on their historical meaning and holding dear their spirituality. The team TRACE is a collaboration between the Faculty of Architecture and Arts with Architecten Broekx-Schiepers, Architect Saidja Heynickx, and UR architects. The presented project is part of a research program they are conducting on the adaptive reuse of abandoned church buildings commissioned by the Team Flemish Government Architect between 2016 and 2018.

Bie Plevoets (1985) studied Interior Architecture and Conservation of Monuments and Sites and obtained a Ph.D. on adaptive reuse, approached from an interior perspective. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher focusing on adaptive reuse theory and preservation of spirit of place. She teaches several theory courses on adaptive reuse in the bachelor's graduates and master's graduates (interior) architecture and in the International Master at Hasselt University.

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Koenraad Van Cleempoel (1971) studied Art History in Leuven, Madrid, and Oxford. He obtained a Ph.D. at the Warburg Institute in London. Since 2004, he is vice dean and professor art history at the UHasselt. He was involved in laying the foundations of the research group ArcK (of which TRACE forms a part). In 2017, he held the PP Rubens Chair in Berkeley University (USA). He teaches the seminar in the International Master.