

OPEN-AIR CITIES OF DEAD - WALKING, MEMORY AND THE CITY OF THE DEAD: THE FLANEUR BETWEEN URBAN SPACE AND THE NECROPOLIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the interrelation between walking as an urban practice and the spatial condition of the cemetery within the evolving fabric of the modern city. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theory of walking as a performative act of reading the city, Walter Benjamin's flâneur, and Guy Debord's notion of dérive, it investigates how the figure of the urban wanderer engages with spaces of the living and the dead. The study traces the historical evolution of cemeteries—from central churchyards to peripheral necropolises—highlighting the socio-spatial and legislative processes that led to their exile from the urban core during the 19th century. Using Père Lachaise in Paris and the Taxiarchon Cemetery in Volos as case studies, the paper argues for the reintegration of the “city of the dead” within the living urban fabric. Ultimately, it suggests that reuniting these spaces restores collective memory and a deeper sense of humanity in contemporary

Key words: cemeteries, cities, flâneur, necropolis, sustainable environment - development.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, describes walking as a practice of “a primary form of experience of the city.” It is a process of reading the urban space, as the bodies of pedestrians follow the written traces inscribed in the urban text. The network of these moving and intersecting inscriptions, along with the multiple layers of events and trajectories, compose the city's palimpsest (De Certeau, 1984). De Certeau argues that the practice of walking transcends the geographical two-dimensional or even three-dimensional nature of the urban landscape, shifting instead into another spatial dimension—one defined through anthropological experience.

Walter Benjamin's *wanderer* is the “archaeologist of the city” and serves as a crucial methodological tool for the socio-spatial understanding of the urban landscape. The contemporary city is a place in constant transformation, characterized by both conflict and harmony. It is a pulsating organism of flows, tensions, and tendencies (Psarras, 2014). Through walking and wandering within the urban fabric, individuals appropriate space, recognize its uses, accumulate experiences, and participate—consciously or not—in urban design. According to De Certeau, “the walker moves within an existing spatial organization of the city, but chooses, or even condemns, certain places to inertia, to obscurity—or the opposite” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 99).

Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin, and Guy Debord—the latter as a founding figure of the Situationist movement (1957–1972) with the concept of *dérive*—were all influenced by Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur*. In his 1863 essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire introduced the figure of the *flâneur*, an artist inspired by the anonymity of the crowd and the endless flow of urban movement (Psarras, 2015). The *flâneur* emerged in the 19th century, alongside major transformations of the urban environment and the rapid evolution of

metropolises. His figure is intrinsically linked to the modern city, which moves at a fast pace, while he observes and creates his own sense of time within it.

In 19th-century Paris, the *flâneur's* essential setting was the *arcade* (Benjamin, 2006). The Parisian arcades were miniature cities in themselves, offering passersby shelter from noise, movement, and the weather. They were spaces of consumption and spectacle, reflecting the new needs of the industrial age. Within them, goods and shop windows became objects of fascination, turning passersby into spectators, dazzled and dreaming before the displays (Stavridis, 2007).

However, in the 1860s, as the *flâneur* wandered through the Parisian arcades, he might have crossed a threshold into another kind of urban landscape—a space of the dead—the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery, established in 1804 by urban planner Nicolas Frochot. Spaces of the dead have historically been referred to as graveyards, churchyards, burial grounds, God's acres, or cemeteries. Yet, the dead possess their own streets, mansions (mausoleums), poor neighborhoods, single-family houses or apartment buildings (columbaria), public buildings (gates, chapels, offices), as well as communal spaces and parks. Collectively, these form their own urban plan. For this reason, perhaps the most fitting term is *necropolis*, literally meaning “the city of the dead”—an urban landscape deeply intertwined with the city of the living.

Père Lachaise was groundbreaking in transforming the image of burial spaces. It evolved from a macabre burial ground into a landscaped garden—a peaceful resting place rather than a frightening one. Cemeteries were intended as places of walking, contemplation, and education, where planting, embellishment, and the architectural quality of monuments offered a rich and elevated experience.

However, the cemeteries of the 19th century also marked the beginning of their exile from the urban core. Historically, from around the 6th century, cemeteries (churchyards) were located within cities, functioning as central landmarks and urban landscapes. The public rituals performed within them made the cemetery an essential public space. With the post-medieval increase in population, industrial growth, and accelerated urbanization, serious public health problems arose. Cemeteries were blamed for the deterioration of sanitary conditions, and their very image became stigmatized. Society's attitude toward death shifted, and cemeteries became visually and symbolically unpleasant. Walls were erected, visually isolating them from the city.

Legislative acts such as the *Decree of 23 Prairial, Year XII* (1804, Paris) and the *Burial Act* (1851, London) formally exiled cemeteries from cities while simultaneously beautifying them. The 19th century institutionalized the displacement of the dead from churches and, consequently, from urban centers—on sanitary, philosophical, and urban-planning grounds. As Vovelle (2000) observes, this movement of relocation beyond city limits transformed cemeteries into “places of exile for the dead,” hidden from the gaze of the living.

Meanwhile, large-scale urban interventions restructured cities to restore order and accommodate commercial expansion. When Père Lachaise was established, it lay nearly two kilometers beyond Paris's limits and was considered remote. As the city expanded, it soon became one of its most central cemeteries—an integral part of the 20th arrondissement. During the same decade in which the *flâneur* roamed the streets, Baron Haussmann—Paris's great urban reformer—sought once again to “relocate” the dead outside the city. Yet, despite having demolished and redesigned vast portions of Paris, Haussmann failed to move the dead. As Worpole (2003) notes, his plans faced strong opposition under the slogan “*Pas de cimetière, pas de cité.*” This resistance reflected not only scientific advances that dispelled earlier fears of miasma and contagion, but also the cemetery's new role as a domesticated and assimilated necropolis within the city itself.

Many 19th-century cemeteries followed a similar fate, gradually absorbed by the expanding urban fabric and now appearing as urban cemeteries. A parallel example is the *Taxiarchon Cemetery* in Nea Ionia, Volos, founded in 1882 (shortly after the city's liberation in 1880) in the area of Xirokampos, well outside the then-approved urban plan (Yasirani-Kyritsi, 1996; Polymenidis, 2019). Today, through successive postwar expansions, the city has enveloped it entirely.

Nevertheless, the tension between the city and the cemetery persists. The legal framework established in the 19th century continues to push burial spaces beyond the boundaries of the living. New cemeteries are founded on the peripheries, adhering to strict regulations. In Greece, the 20th century produced peripheral necropolises—bleak, decentralized, and devoid of funerary monuments, epitaphs, and familial references. As Worpole (2003, p. 56) observes, many contemporary cemeteries appear designed in the spirit of mass production, formed not to evoke spirituality but to accommodate industrial materials (marble, granite, stone) and achieve economies of scale. The cemetery has ceased to function as a space of recreation or reflection, becoming instead a utilitarian necessity.

If the *flâneur* were to wander through a modern Greek city such as Volos today, he would find no urban space of the dead within walking distance. The old Taxiarchon Cemetery remains inactive, while the new cemetery—established in the early 21st century—lies five kilometers from the city center, inaccessible on foot. The genuine experience of walking and drifting through an urban landscape of the dead has thus become impossible without the mediation of the automobile.

Even if the *flâneur* managed to reach this peripheral cemetery, he might experience the same sense of estrangement as in 1860s Paris—a cityscape marked by consumption and spectacle (Psarras, 2014). Yet, in searching, he might also discover “the curious fusion of the archaic with the ultra-modern ... that is, modernity itself” (Pensky, 2004).

Returning to the separation of the city and the cemetery, it is worth noting that modern science has never proven that pre-19th-century cemeteries were responsible for urban epidemics. Sanitary conditions in contemporary cemeteries have improved significantly, eliminating any such threat. Nevertheless, the perception of cemeteries as sources of disease persisted, and most Western legal frameworks—founded upon this misconception—remain in force today (Koonce, 2011). In the contemporary era, the relationship between the city and the cemetery—the city of the living and the city of the dead—has become increasingly polarized. The institutional framework that continues to be produced in Western culture maintains a distance between the city and the cemetery, while at the same time sustaining contemporary society's dissonant attitude toward death.

In the post-industrial city, burial sites have been relegated to the periphery, often inaccessible and detached from the lived experiences of the communities they serve. Ultimately, the urban fabric of modern cities and suburbs denies the mortality of their inhabitants.

Robert Harrison (2010), in *The Dominion of the Dead*, writes: “As long as we think of our cities as places simply for the living and not for dying, they can never truly become our homes.” On a personal scale, if people cannot be buried—or visit their dead—in a place they call “home,” can they truly claim it as such? The bonds of a community are strengthened by both life and death, yet these ties often weaken or disappear after death in today's urban public realm. Case studies have demonstrated that reintegrating cemeteries into the urban core—by providing accessible and functional public open spaces—can greatly benefit the community (Basmajian & Coutts, 2010; Koonce, 2011).

Worpole (2003) warns that if planners and spatial theorists fail to address the question of the cemetery seriously, and to design new types of burial spaces within contemporary cities, we risk creating “cities without memory”—urban environments that deny death and,

ultimately, humanity itself. When it comes to the “housing” of the dead—whether through burial, cremation, or other means—the living desire to remain close to their loved ones.

Perhaps, then, the time has come to reunite the urban spaces of the living and the dead. Perhaps the necropolis should return to the city, even in a new form. Perhaps we should once again envision the *flâneur* walking through the city, crossing the threshold into the space of the dead, continuing to “read” the unified urban landscape of both the living and the dead.

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