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Architecture and Ashes. Cremation, its Spaces, and Cultural Heritage. The Case of the Crematorium at Pantheon of Dolores, Mexico City

Ir a versión en español

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ABSTRACT

An element of Western funerary culture that transformed customs imposed by Christianity was the introduction of cremation in the late 19th century. This practice disrupted traditions and gave rise to a new architecture whose ruling elements are the place of the crematory furnace and especially the chimney, which plays a fundamental role due to its size. This article[1] explores the history of funerary architecture related to cremation in the *Panteón Civil de Dolores* in Mexico City and how it has been transformed due to the limited recognition it receives as cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

funerary architecture, Pantheon of Dolores, funerary heritage, crematorium

[1] A preliminary version of this unpublished research was presented at the 9th National Meeting of the Mexican Network for the Study of Funerary Spaces and Culture, held from September 12 to 14, 2012, at the Archive of Letters, Arts, Sciences and Technology, A.C., of the Universidad Vizcaya de las Américas, Colima, Mexico. This work includes part of the report and an updated version of the work, highlighting the transformation of the crematorium area into the Dolores Civil Cemetery, which took place between 2022 and 2023.

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INTRODUCTION

The ways in which societies have treated inert bodies throughout history have generated a large funerary culture that covers diverse areas of expression, both tangible and intangible. In the case of Mexico, cremation was introduced to the general population in the early 20th century with the construction of the first crematorium at the Pantheon of Dolores in Mexico City.

This article explores the history of cremation-related architecture at the civil Pantheon of Dolores in the Mexican capital, including the diverse proposals that were carried out at this pantheon, and the construction that was ultimately built during the early decades of the 20th century. It also details the replacements and modifications that the pantheon has suffered from the 1970's till current times. According to my hypothesis, the continued transformation of this type of architecture shows the little interest that the history of cremation and its spaces has had in Mexico, even though it is an activity that increases yearly in urban areas.

From Burial to Cremation

For the contemporary and urban society, it is normal to talk about cremation as a destiny for inert bodies. Yet, just over a century ago, this was not the case, as in the Western Christian world, the idea caused great animosity. Even though it is a widespread practice across various cultures —in Ancient Rome, it coexisted with burials (Retief and Cilliers, 2006, p. 134)—, with the consolidation of the Catholic faith, fire acquired a dual function: as a purifier and as a tormentor of the soul (Botero Bernal, 2001/2002, p.132). This transformed it into a bodily punishment for witches and heretics. Those who lived in accordance with Christian doctrine gave their body to the earth upon dying, thus continuing the Jewish tradition that informed the funerary liturgy on this subject. Unlike Hebrew and Roman practices, however, Christians remains were not buried far from populated areas, instead they occupied a place in the center of cities.[2]

The decisions made by the Catholic Church over the centuries to control not only over the soul, but also over bodily remains, led to the proliferation of diseases and epidemics, as the overcrowding of corpses inside and outside churches, combined with

[2] In *Naissance du cimetière* (2005) Michael Lauwers discusses the history of Christian cemeteries and their consolidation in the Middle Ages. Even until the 18th century, their structure reflected few changes.

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the daily coexistence with people living in these spaces, fostered contagion. Problems caused by burials within cities had been discussed since the Late Middle Ages, but it wasn't until the last decades of the 18th century that a proposal was made to relocate cemeteries to city outskirts.

France was the first Catholic kingdom to impose measures to reach this purpose (Canella, 2010, p. 53). On April 3, 1787, King Charles III issued the Royal Decree mandating that cemeteries in Spain and its colonies be established outside populated areas. While this theoretically answered the sanitation problems, towards the end of that same century, amid the fervor of the revolution, the idea of reintroducing cremation began to be discussed in France as a method of treating remains.

Meanwhile, in cases of epidemics and wars, cremation reduced the risk of contagion. In times of peace, this method was imposed as a secular option that retrieved the pre-Christian traditions and broke the bond between the Church and human remains (Canella, 2010, p. 162). The fight to confine corpses outside urban centers was still relatively recent (Alcaraz, 2010), and, although several sectors of the Church initially opposed this measure well into the 19th century, they gradually gave in to medical evidence.

By accepting the expulsion of corpses and the creation of cemeteries outside the city walls, the problem of poor hygiene was apparently overcome, and the promotion of cremation was rendered unnecessary. This weakened the case for its promotion. However, deeper motivations in its favor, typical of the Enlightenment era, soon emerged: the separation with Christian traditions and the imposition of a new, secular, and modern order of life. Cremation fulfilled both aspects: it was rejected by the Church, which regarded it as a pagan and pre-Christian ritual, while the renewal of cremation through the methods offered by the era of industrialization allowed it to be carried out, not in the old ways, but imbued with modernity (Canella, 2010, p. 162).

CREMATION AND ARCHITECTURE: THE CONFRONTATION OF THE NEW TECHNIQUE

It was in the second half of the 19th century that cremation began to take root as a modern funerary practice, alongside suburban burials, in Europe and the United States (Britannica, 2025). Crematoria were built within the first civil cemeteries, beyond the reach of Church authority.

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In addition to the social, political, religious, and sanitary repercussions caused by the acceptance of cremation, the practice represented a major challenge for architecture: artists had to develop a model, one that had no precedent in the construction tradition, in one of the most sensitive subjects for human beings.[3] The ancient cremation practices left architects with two elements: the columbarium and the funerary urn. However, these would not dictate the guidelines for buildings, but rather the furnace itself.

Modern cremation methods differed from the ancient ones (where the body was placed on a pyre that was heated until it was reduced to ashes). The new era offered different alternatives: the cemetery had to provide a place for the oven, as well as an outlet for the gases produced (a chimney), a space for the deceased and the mourners —both upon arrival and while awaiting the ashes— and, finally, places to deposit the remains in the form of niches, which retained the name columbarium, by which they were known in ancient times.

Of all the elements that needed to be considered, the chimney —symbol of industry and modernity— inevitably linked the crematorium to the industrial age, with the idea of the factory; one where mortuary remains were no longer foreign to manufacturing processes. As such, it also marked a schism between the traditional conception and a new vision that sought to reduce the deceased —and, with it, death itself— to their minimum expression (the philosophy of the New Age was also embedded in this).

Stylistically, this change overlapped with the period of eclecticism in the second half of the 19th century. There, new construction methods and materials were formally coated in the manner of ancient architecture: Gothic, Renaissance, and Romanesque models were used to conceal the steel and concrete that shaped the buildings. As a result, 19th-century European cremation-related architecture took on a wide variety of forms. In my personal research in France, I noted that at the Perè-Lachaise Cemetery, located on the eastern outskirts of Paris —which officially opened on May 21, 1804— a crematorium was built by Jean Camille Formigé and opened to the public in 1889. (Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, 2005).

The structure designed by the architect evokes the Romanesque style, featuring a large central nave whose entrance is framed by three lowered arches supported by giant columns. The overall or-

[3] In the chapter "Architettura e ideologia," Maria Canella explores the transformations that the new crematoria architecture had to face. Her text, summarized in this paragraph, serves as the starting point for this research conducted for the Mexican case (2010, pp- 165-170).

namentation is sober, combining horizontal edges in white and gray tones. The arch at the top of the entrance features a relief depicting a Roman-style funerary pyre emitting smoke, with a central medallion depicting an amphora —used in ancient times to hold ashes (Figure 1). The interior of the temple is illuminated by a large dome.



FIGURE 1. Crematorium at the Perè Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, France (Photograph by the author, 2010).

While its façade —except for the relief— does not fully disclose the temple's function, the rear section reveals that we are looking at a crematorium. Although Formigé sought to give the building a unified and antique appearance, three structures at the back reveal the location of the modern furnaces. Above these are the two chimneys, which, also decorated in white and gray, add a black finial, suggesting that, although they appear to be columns, they are, in actuality, the nozzles of chimneys (Figure 2). The chimneys occupy the space once dominated by towers, becoming the new beacons of the industrial age,[4] not only in life, but also in death.

The Perè-Lachaise complex is framed on three sides by a porticoed structure, where a columbarium, also Romanesque in appearance, was later built. To this day, the building continues to serve Parisians and stands as a clear example of the late 19th-century eclectic architecture.

[4] On this topic, the author has written the article "Beacons of Progress or Guides to Barbarism? The Smokestacks in the Industrial Landscape of Atlixco, Puebla, and Their Social Implications," in press. "¿Faros de progreso o guías a la barbarie?



FIGURE 2. Crematorium at the Perè Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, France. Rear view (Photograph by the author, 2010).

THE CASE OF MEXICO: THE INTRODUCTION OF CREMATION AT THE CIVIL PANTHEON OF DOLORES

Before discussing the first public crematory in Mexico, built at the Civil Pantheon of Dolores in the country's capital, it is important to mention certain historical precedents. Although Mexican funerary traditions were unified with Christian traditions following the Spanish conquest (Molina, 2013, p. 167), Mesoamerican cultures already included cremation among their mortuary practices. Chroniclers devoted themselves to pre-Hispanic funerary rituals in detail, especially those related to prominent figures. Much of what was said on the subject in the 16th century is recovered in Torquemada's *Monarquía India* (*Indian Monarchy*). Similarly, Friar Diego Valadés, in his *Retórica cristiana* (*Christian Rhetoric*), recreated both cremation and burial rituals from the pre-Columbian world in the "Illustration of the sacrifices cruelly performed by the Indian peoples of the New World, mainly in Mexico" (Valadés, 2003, pp. 463-471).

In New Spain, the evangelization of the Indigenous population imposed upon them the same funerary fate as for the rest of the West. In the 18th century, the Royal Decree by Charles III requested the construction of cemeteries outside populated territories, but this had little effect in the Americas because the Catholic funerary traditions had already been established, and it proved difficult to enforce the new measures.

Although several cemeteries were established in the surrounding areas of what was then Mexico City before its independence

—still tied to the Catholic religion— it was not until the last quarter of the 19th century, when the first civil cemetery was built in our country, that it no longer had a religious affiliation, allowing burial spaces to be used by people of all faiths. This was the Pantheon of Dolores, located between Tacubaya and Chapultepec, which opened to the public since September 13, 1875 (Herrera, 2013, p. 74). Only 25 years after, the cemetery was already experiencing occupancy problems, as was the case in European cemeteries. This can be seen in authors such as Spencer Wells, who, in his article "Cremation or Burial", listed the drawbacks of burial, citing environmental pollution and the high financial burden it placed on families (1884, p. 49). The construction of the first crematory furnaces in our country occurred relatively late, considering that the earliest crematory in Europe dates back to the final quarter of the 19th century. By 1896, the German army had already designed a mobile crematory for use on the battlefield (El Mundo, 1896, p. 5). In 1906, Mexico´s Supreme Council of Public Health began incinerating dead animals to prevent the spread of epidemics (Ramos-de Viesca, Ávila, 2002, p. 583; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, 1906, pp. 4-6). The first crematory furnaces for medical use were built at Hospital Juárez; although they were intended to destroy the hospital's infectious waste (*El Imparcial*, July 28, 1909, p. 8). This was the first step towards considering human cremation, as a solution for unclaimed corpses from hospitals. Individuals who died of contagious diseases were also candidates for cremation.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the first crematoriums in Mexico emerged without a defined architectural plan. They focused solely on the practical —rather than the ceremonial— construction of the ovens, so the elements of cremation liturgy were not considered. It was in 1907 that the "Contract between Engineer Guillermo Beltrán y Puga, Director of Public Works of Mexico City, and Caesar J. Marburg, for the construction of crematory ovens for human corpses, using the Rich Schneider system" was signed at the Civil Pantheon of Dolores (Marburg, 1907).

The contract stipulated the construction of two ovens: one to incinerate each body and another for collective purposes, with the capacity to cremate five bodies at a time. The goal was to perform up to twenty cremations per day in an average of ten hours. The ashes obtained were to be white, and any unburned bone fragments were not to exceed 2 cm in length. The gases produced by cremation had to be neutralized (Marburg, 1907, page 2), for which a chimney had to be raised to a great height. For the construction of the furnaces, which would take two years, the government would

pay 40,000 pesos (Marburg, 1907, page 3). The introduction of this new method of treating remains was added to the activities and constructions with which the Porfirian regime wished to celebrate Mexico's centennial, presenting it as a cutting-edge country.

The material for the crematory furnaces were imported from Germany and transported from Veracruz to Mexico City via the interoceanic railway, which had an access road to the cemetery. Two masons and fifteen laborers were provided for its construction (AHCM, 1908). Twenty thousand four-inch bricks were purchased from the Carbonell Hermanos company in Mixcoac to build the chimney.

The location chosen for the furnaces is particularly noteworthy: they were installed in the second rotunda formed on the main road of the Pantheon of Dolores, immediately after the Rotunda of Illustrious Persons. This demonstrates the importance given to this modern technique; however, the same cannot be said of its architectural appearance, as the only element carefully considered in this regard was the chimney, which reaches 28.5 m in height (Molina, 2012, pp. 156-157).

In compliance with the contract's deadlines, it was announced on January 12, 1909, that the furnace tests would begin, starting with the cremation of corpses from the hospitals. It was at this point that the lack of storage space for the bodies, which arrived "in a state of complete decomposition and completely naked," became evident (AHCM, 1908, page 5). It was then suggested that a space be built to allow for their preservation prior to cremation; that is, a ventilated and suitable area for constant cleaning and disinfection.

It was proposed to create a closed platform over the *Decauville* road, taking advantage of the existing back walls, where the bodies of individuals who could not be buried were stored, either due to legal requirements or because the mandatory 24-hour waiting period after death had not yet elapsed. On this subject, one of the arguments against cremation in Mexico had to do precisely with legal concerns, as it was feared that it would be used to destroy evidence. "It was argued that for the emerging physical anthropology, cremation would have inconvenient results, since the destruction of the corpse would deprive [...] the study of the skeleton" (Ramos-de Viesca et al., 2002, p. 584).

On February 28, 1909, the newspaper *El Imparcial* published an article referring to the crematory furnaces, describing their characteristics: the T-shaped site they occupied, its operation, and the upcoming opening to the public. The article also noted that the ovens/furnaces would be covered with a Gothic-looking

chapel, and that, while it was being built, they would be protected by "a corrugated iron shed, intended to shield them from the rain" (*El Imparcial*, February 28, 1909, p. 8). Finally, it stated that the ashes would be buried in a grave. The article was accompanied by a photograph in which the chimney stands out —to date, the tallest element in the pantheon (Figure 3)— and showing the improvised structure that covered the ovens.



FIGURE 3. Construction of a pantheon. Casasola, ca. 1905 [the date should correspond to 1908-1909]. (Source: Casasola Archive Collection-National Photo Library, INAH).

In May of the same year, *El Imparcial* published another article praising the results of the crematorium. The text reveals a promotional effort on behalf of the technique, mentioning that the government would promote "to the extent of its efforts, the useful system that is already widespread in the main civilized countries" (*El Imparcial*, May 27, 1909, p. 1).

This speech was intended to encourage the population to make use of cremation, thereby securing funding for the construction of

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the building that would house the furnaces, which was not included in the initial program. As in other countries with Catholic traditions, cremation was viewed with suspicion, as the author of the article pointed out that

> ... assuming that well-off families would not remain indifferent to the system adopted in the name of progress and public health, the General Directorate of Public Works has just submitted to the Ministry of the Interior for their approval the preliminary plans and budgets for a building to be erected next to the crematoriums. This building will be used to deposit the ashes of corpses whose families so wish. The proposed building will have its own columbarium and a beautiful skylight at the top... (El Imparcial, May 27, 1909, p. 1).

It was also stated that the building would be constructed according to methods implemented in Europe, assimilating them to the "customs and scruples" of the Mexican people. Its initial capacity would be 1,000 niches, and a second building would be built if necessary. The article concluded by highlighting the amount of land that could be saved through cremation, which indirectly helped quell rumors suggesting that the Pantheon of Dolores might be closed due to lack of space.

Although the cremation was described as "simple and severe, without its apparatus showing the slightest disdain for the corpse" (*El Imparcial*, May 1909, p. 2), the truth is that the lack of planning of the entire program required for the process caused several problems. One of them had to do with the disposal of the ashes, especially those from hospital corpses or those of unidentified individuals.

In a letter dated March 20, 1917, the cemetery administrator requested that eight laborers be provided to build a stump to deposit the ashes, stating that

> It has been customary for the ashes of the corpses cremated at this cemetery to be thrown to the side of a ravine, causing these ashes to fall to the bottom during the rainy season and catch the current of the Consulate River, which can cause serious alienation from the Supreme Council of Public Health... (AHCM, vol. 3518, 1916-1917, page 1).

In response, he was suggested to check whether the ashes could be used as fertilizer before proceeding with the opening of

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the stump. The administrator then indicated that he would conduct tests in the greenhouse, which was then in operation within the cemetery (AHCM, 1916-1917, page 2).

THE CONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE BUILDINGS

According to an analysis of the various projects housed in the Historical Archive of Mexico City, the construction of the crematory building at the Pantheon of Dolores proved to be complex. Several proposals were submitted before its construction could be completed. In 1909, the company responsible for the construction of the two crematory furnaces submitted a project signed by Caesar Marburg, and another in 1911, also signed by him on behalf of the *Compañía Italiana de Construcciones, S.A.* (AHCDMX, 1911). The Latin cross-shaped project had two levels: the lower floor would house the furnaces, while the upper level would be open to the public (Figure 4).

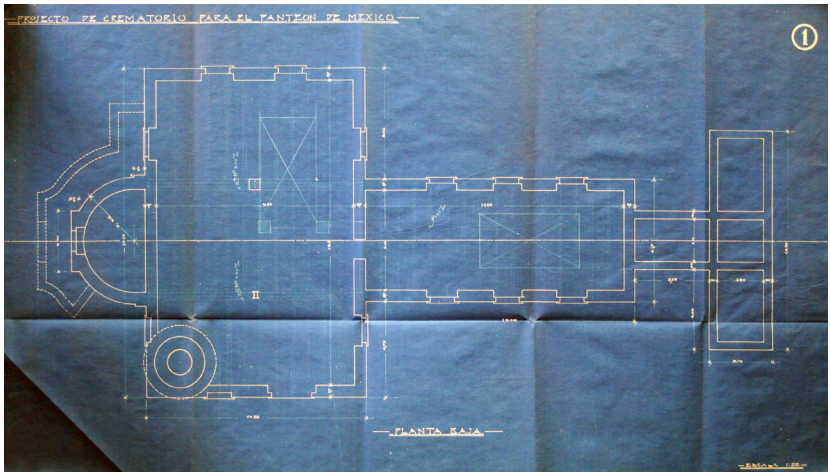


FIGURE 4. Crematorium project for the Mexico City cemetery, ground floor (Source: AHCM, Planoteca, Plans and Projects, box 135, file 2, year 1911).

The site was accessed via a staircase, and the building had a chimney inside. The façade was designed in a Renaissance style; the first level featured a rustic finish, and the second, in smooth stone. The structure was topped with a mixed-linear cornice, the highest point of which bore the word *PAX* (Figure 5). That same year, a contract was signed between the General Directorate of Public Works and the engineer-architect Daniel Garza for the construction of the building, though the project never materialized (AHCM, May 1, 1911).[5]

[5] Ethel Herrera points out that it was in 1918 when engineer Daniel Garza was hired to build the crematorium. (Herrera, 2007, p. 44).

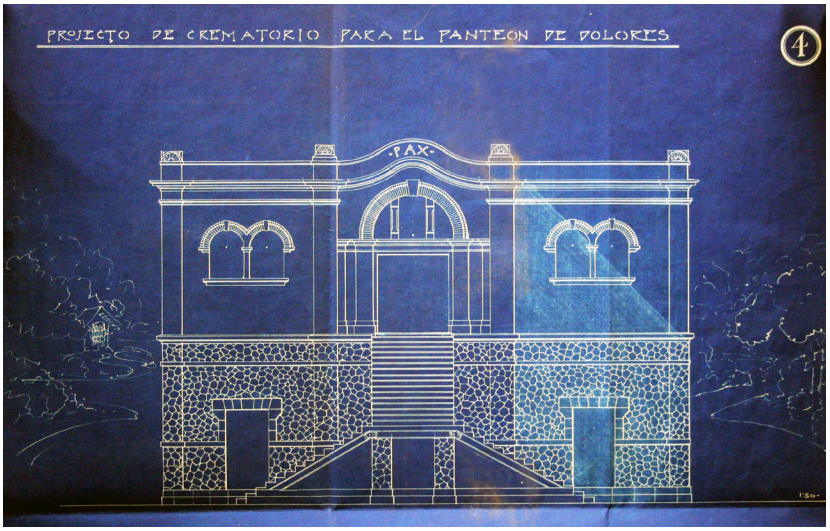


FIGURE 5. Crematorium project for the Pantheon of Dolores (Source: AHCM, Planoteca, Plans and Projects, box 135, file 2, year 1911).

The Historical Archive of Mexico City (AHCM) also houses another project, although this one is recorded in documents from 1915. It probably corresponds to the original design by the Italian Construction Company, as its description coincides with that published in newspapers in 1909: a Latin cross floor plan, with the chimney on the exterior of the building (Figure 6). It also includes two levels, the first for the machinery and the second for the funerary services, respectively. The project's decoration is elaborate, with Corinthian columns, rosettes and garlands, as well as a finely detailed skylight (AHCM, 1915) (Figure 7).

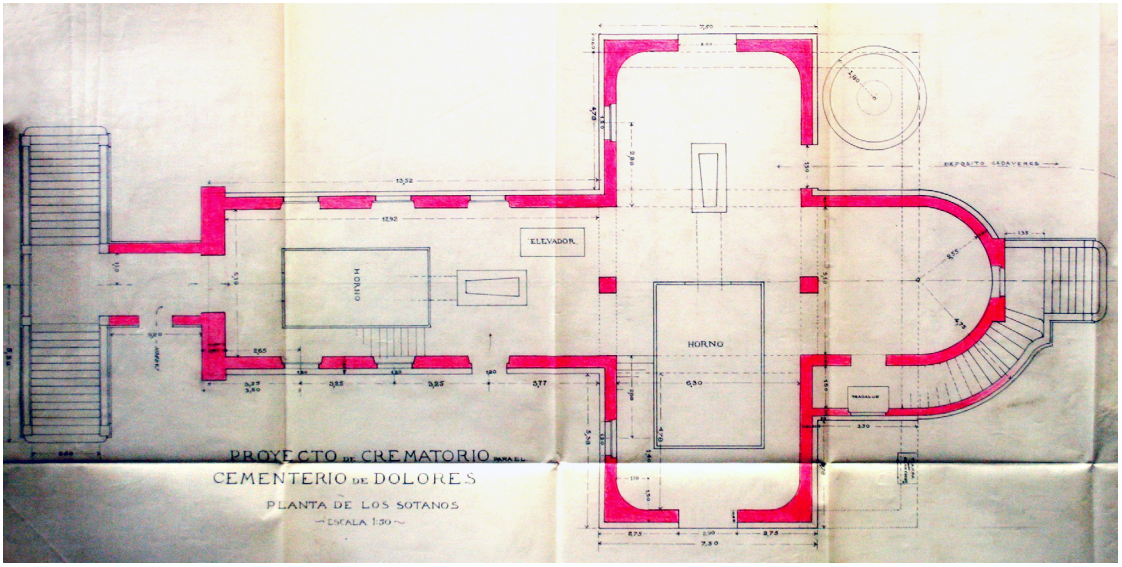


FIGURE 6. Crematorium project for the Pantheon of Dolores, basement plan (Source: AHCM, Planoteca, Plans and Projects, box 69, file 25, year 1915).

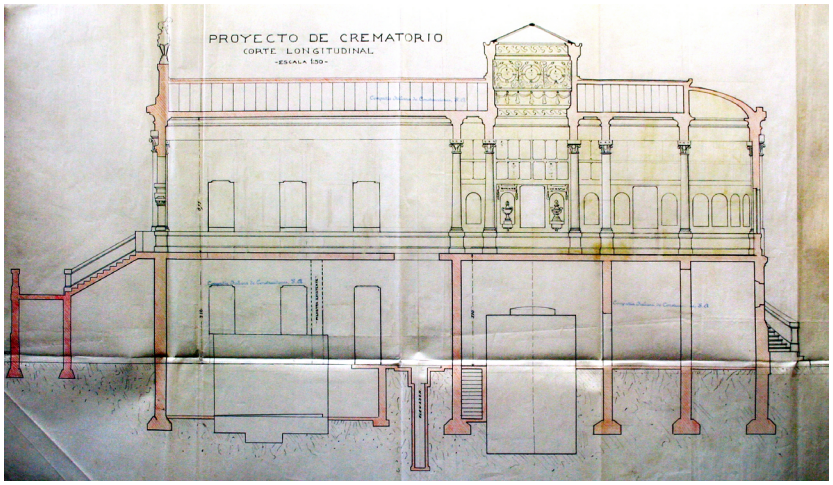


FIGURE 7. Crematorium project. Longitudinal section (Source: AHCM, Planoteca, Plans and Projects, box 69, file 25, year 1915).

The final project dates from the 1920s or early 1930s, as revealed by the formal characteristics seen in photographs from the period. It is a rectangular building, with the façade raised on the narrowest side —like that suggested in earlier proposals— and divided into two levels. Its design reveals the presence of Art Deco architecture, and we can consider it a *sui generis* example within Mexican architecture (Figure 8). The mask placed above the lintel and the angular forms throughout the complex correspond to Art Deco, as does the typographic design indicating the building's function. The use of vegetal scrollwork as ornamental elements lends the structure the appearance of an architectural pastiche.



FIGURE 8. Burial mound in the Civil Pantheon of Dolores. (Source: Inventory No. 88845, National Photo Library, INAH).

At the front of the crematorium, a small rocky structure stands out, topped with a relief of an eagle devouring a serpent. This element gives the complex the appearance of a garden, echoing the quest to reintegrate nature with the new industrial life, embodied by the chimney. The main antecedents for this model can be found in England. Garden cities were developed there (of which we have a reflection in neighborhoods such as Lomas de Chapultepec), and they also extended their proposal to the interior of other structures, such as cemeteries, which were understood as "gardens of memory" (Davides, 2010, p. 213). Even with this new building, the original structure remained, especially the chimney, almost thirty meters high. Next to it was the construction with a tin roof that continued to cover the ovens.

According to the commemorative plaque placed on the building that replaced it, the Art Deco construction operated until 1973. On December 31 of that year, the last cremation took place at that site; A more modern project would take its place and be put into service starting in October 1975. The same plaque states that President Luis Echeverría had commissioned the construction to modernize the facilities, in celebration of the cemetery's centenary. The project, consisting of an ecumenical chapel, a crematorium, and a columbarium, followed the guidelines of functionalist architecture, with a square floor plan and horizontal /layout, where the use of large windows stands out. The only surviving element of the old building was the chimney (Figure 9).



FIGURE 9.
Crematorium built in 1975 (Photograph by the author, 2012).

This structure remained in service until 2022, when its transformation was announced as part of the "Chapultepec Forest: Nature and Culture" project. This was a major cultural project launched by the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, which sought to create a cultural corridor connecting the four sections of Chapultepec Forest, including the Civil Pantheon of Dolores. The renovation work included the construction of a large structure providing access to the cemetery and upgrades to the crematorium section, modernizing the equipment and creating a building that connects the entrance to this space.

The design features clean lines, columns covered in gray stone, and roofs preceded by beams that, rather than serving a structural function, create a "natural" atmosphere that connects it with the new concept of Chapultepec (Figure 10). The project, scheduled for completion by the end of 2022 (Sosa, May 26, 2022) —a date that has since been extended— included the construction of a pet crematorium. The master plan outlines the construction of a wall bordering the ravines (Orozco, 2021, pp. 205-209).

An earlier proposal by Alberto Kalach's studio envisioned a columbarium with 150,000 niches designed into that wall (Arellano, 2019). To date, this space has not been modified. Of that history, the chimney remains a silent witness to all the changes that this architecture for ashes has undergone over the little more than 100 years since cremation was first introduced as a funerary practice in our country.



FIGURE 10. Current crematorium projected for 2022 (Photograph by the author, 2024).

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After the Pantheon of Dolores, crematoriums have been built in more modern cemeteries in Mexico. Although no specific architectural typology for crematories was developed in this country, the history of the Pantheon of Dolores reflects what has happened in other parts of the world, where there has been a shift from eclectic architecture, such as Père-Lachaise in France, to functionalist architecture. Unfortunately, the low value placed on "modern" heritage in Mexico has led to the loss of many works of art, the memory of which remains only in images.

EPILOGUE: THE CHURCH'S REVENGE

The Age of Enlightenment twice deprived from the Church the custody of the dead: first, it removed them from its bosom, expelling them from the interior of churches and their atriums and placing them outside the cities. Then, it took away the Church's materiality, because, with cremation, the dead became ephemeral. For Christian liturgy, the preservation of corpses awaiting the Final Judgment was necessary until the beginning of the 20th century, because it was understood that humans would be resurrected not only in spirit, but also in matter.

When cremation emerged as a modern method, the Catholic Church was opposed to it. In his decree *Quoad Cadaverum Cremationes* of May 19, 1886, Pope Leo XIII condemned cremation, considering it an abominable practice (Mancini, 1886, p. 46). Despite this, the procedure continued to develop, gaining interest over the years. In the Acta of the Apostolic See of May 8, 1963, Pope Paul VI, on behalf of the Catholic Church, finally acknowledged that there are no dogmatic elements that contravene cremation. Therefore, and adapting to changing times, he considered it an appropriate practice for his believers.

Although nearly 200 years ago, dead bodies were banished from temples and urban centers for health reasons, once the Church accepted cremation as a proper practice, various churches have adapted spaces and built niches for the deposit of ashes, thus resuming their safekeeping. However, after years of aggressive imposition of secularist ideology, it seems that faith continues to provide a large part of Mexican society with the answers they seek regarding the fate of their dead. The Church is once again taking up their safekeeping, now preserved in small niches, awaiting the Day of Judgment. Meanwhile, the chimneys of the crematory furnaces continue to smoke, transforming vital processes into "machine-like processes" (Chul Han, 2022, p. 15) and

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accelerating the biblical adage that states: "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

CREMATION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE. FINAL REFLECTIONS

The research presented above aims to shed light on the history of cremation and its spaces in Mexico from a heritage-based perspective. The narrative offered allows us to formulate the following reflections.

Cremation has been present in Mexico for over a century and has become a practice that has taken hold at least in urban areas, particularly in the capital. This practice has generated a unique architecture, which has traveled parallel to the artistic movements of the last century, from eclectic architecture (represented in the first projects developed, although not built) to Art Deco, functionalism, and contemporary proposals.

In particular, the crematorium in the Civil Pantheon of Dolores, due to its age and presence, can be defined, in accordance with the Carta de Burra (1979),[6] as a site of cultural significance. This is because it has "historical, scientific, social," and even spiritual value "for past, present, and future generations." However, its instrumental or use value (Riegl, 1987, pp. 73-77) has prevailed and guided the decisions regarding its appearance, leading to constant transformation in the quest to give it a "modern" aesthetic. The link between cremation and technological development was combined with the low value placed on funerary heritage and, in general, on works produced in Mexico since the 20th century—at least from a legal perspective. This has allowed, and I would dare say, fostered, the destruction of the architectural heritage that has been built upon cremation at the Pantheon of Dolores.

Legally, the crematorium and its architectural elements cannot be considered historical monuments due to their construction date.[7] This is because, according to Article 36 of the Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic, and Historical Monuments and Zones (1972), only structures built before the 19th century are considered as such. Nevertheless, they would fall into the category of artistic monuments, but a federal declaration would be required, which currently does not exist. Therefore, there was no problem modifying the building on three occasions. The only surviving element of

[6] This ICOMOS Australia Charter, adopted in 1979 and updated in 1981, 1988 and 1999, addresses the conservation and management of sites of cultural significance.
[7] According to article 36 of the Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic and Historical Monuments and Zones (1972), those built up to the 19th century are considered as such.

the original construction is the chimney, which dominates the landscape of the Pantheon of Dolores from above, remaining a landmark (Figures 11 and 12).



FIGURE 11. View of the Pantheon of Dolores with the crematorium chimney in the center, peeking out between the trees (Photograph by the author, 2024).



FIGURE 12. Aerial view of the Pantheon of Dolores with the crematorium chimney dominating the height (Photograph by the author, 2024).

Even with the replacement of the buildings that accompanied the cremation, and now with the presence of contemporary architecture, the site can be considered culturally significant, as it still maintains an ancient element of the factory, and continues to carry out its original function in the same place, preserving its "environment, use, associations, meanings, records" and related sites (Burra Charter, art. 1.2).

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In Mexico, it is understood that the practical and uninterrupted use of the crematorium has governed the authorities' decisions, but examples such as the Perè-Lachaise cemetery show that architecture from more than a century ago can adapt and continue to provide service. While the Carta de Burra states that "change may be necessary," it also points out that "the amount of change [...] should be guided by its cultural significance and its appropriate interpretation" (art. 15). This situation has not necessarily occurred, neither at the crematorium nor throughout the Pantheon of Dolores, which shows uneven conservation, despite the efforts of public institutions like the INAH and the intervention of civil associations such as the "Friends and Protectors of the Pantheon of Dolores."

A comprehensive program is necessary to ensure that the history and presence of the cremation architecture, as well as that of the rest of the sites that make up this cemetery, are preserved and culturally valued. So, and finally, it is important to ask ourselves: what legacy are we building and preserving for the future? Or is recent funerary history itself also destined to turn to ashes?

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