



## Deathscapes in Latin American Metropolises

*Institution:* CEDLA / University of Amsterdam  
*Duration of program:* 2014 – 2020  
*Program leader:* Christien Klaufus

Societies worldwide are urbanizing at high speed. In 2050 almost 70 percent of the world population is projected to be urban. Advancing the planning of sustainable urban land use is an urgent theme. Infrastructure has to be provided to 6.4 billion people. This means that water, electricity and sewage systems will have to be improved and smarter mass transport systems to be developed. One of the basic human necessities not explicitly addressed in urban theories and policy prospects is **the need for sufficient dignified spaces for dead disposal and commemoration**, in other words **'deathscapes'**. The right to a dignified final destination is a basic human right. Yet, as part of the urban infrastructure, deathscapes tend to be developed rather haphazardly.

Two tendencies increase the need for more knowledge on urban deathscapes, and hence, for an integrated field of deathscape studies: first, the **demographic transition** underway in several regions that will result in an aging population; and second, the intention formulated in the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, specifically in Goal 11 to build more **compact and high-density cities**. Higher population densities in cities urge us to find more space-efficient solutions for dead disposal too. In practice, this will arguably result in an increasing separation between disposal spaces and commemoration spaces.

As one of the most urbanized regions in the world, Latin America figures prominently in the urban studies literature. In order to be better prepared for rapid urbanization processes taking place in other regions of the Global South, Latin American models are often used to exemplify desired and undesired policy outcomes. However, information about the development and transformation of urban deathscapes in Latin America is remarkably scarce, especially in comparison to the large amount of studies that have addressed deathscapes in Asian cities (e.g. Kong, 2012; Tan and Yeoh, 2002; Teather et al., 2001; Tremlett, 2007).

This interdisciplinary program aims to provide a grounded understanding of the ways in which deathscapes in cities have been developed in the recent past as part of urban space and society, and the ways in which they would need to be developed to safeguard socially and environmentally sustainable urban futures. The program considers the urban deathscape to be a relevant locus for research on cities and, vice versa, it posits that the future of cities depends in part on the question how the 'cities of the living' find new forms of co-existence with the 'cities of the dead'; how deathscapes can potentially be or become formative sites of conviviality for the city at large. Planning and governing deathscapes in high-density urban areas touches upon a myriad of pressing themes that are integrally addressed in this project.

### *Project goal*

First, this project aims to contribute to the field of urban studies by empirically assessing how urban planning hinders or improves a more equitable and sustainable provision of death services. Based on the New Urban Agenda, the search for sustainable urban futures has resulted in policies and theories that direct our thinking on inequality, citizenship and belonging. Geographically speaking the focus is predominantly on cities of 'the living', but how do 'cities of the dead' function in high-density urban areas? What are the consequences of the urban densification agenda in SDG 11 for land destined for burial and commemoration? How can cities with weak institutions solve the contradiction between an increasing pressure on urban land and the basic human right to have access to a dignified burial place for all citizens? These and other questions steer this project, in which formal cemetery governance is contrasted with the daily functioning of deathscapes. By analyzing interactions in, and across the deathscapes in which they operate, the project contributes to theories that engage with mainstream and alternative readings of the 21st century city. Putting the lens on deathscapes invokes theoretically innovative thinking about the global urban transition that has only just begun (Buckley & Strauss, 2016; McFarlane, 2010; Merrifield, 2012; Robinson & Roy, 2016; Roy, 2016).

Second, the project aims to contribute to mainstreaming cemetery and deathscape studies. Until now, the field of studies related to deathscapes operates in a niche. Although burial grounds have always been of central importance to the physical evolution and cultural life of cities, a systematic historiographic interest in the changing relationship of cities worldwide to their death-spaces is lacking (Gandolfo, 2009). Whereas ethical and political questions around matters of life and death dominate our daily life, politics and the public media, and although it is acknowledged that death practices can unite groups and communities and mobilize social change, cross-cutting research that integrates mortuary culture and the study of deathscapes into mainstream urban and globalization debates, is lacking. This project is designed to overcome these knowledge gaps.

Third, the project aims to generate social innovations through policy recommendations, especially with regard to public and general cemeteries. Comparative results about the accommodating capacities of cemeteries and crematoria enables local governments in the case-study cities, and elsewhere, to compare the public workings of cemeteries and memorial sites. If possible, improvements in the organization and management of public municipal cemeteries will be suggested to support local cemetery, cremation and commemoration services.

### *Theory*

When speaking about 'deathscapes', we refer to the landscapes destined for all activities related to the disposal and commemoration of the dead (Kong, 1999; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). 'Deathscape studies' integrate research on death, mourning and burial into an academic debate that addresses all socio-cultural and political aspects involved in the production and use of the spaces for burial, cremation and commemoration. Whereas Latin American cities have been studied intensively since the 1960s, Latin American deathscapes do not yet figure prominently in any debate about 'cities of the dead' in the region's urban centers.

In that sense, Latin American urban historiography differs from European ones. Scholars have described how important moments in the history of European cities have been marked by decisions about the functioning and location of spaces of the dead (Ariès, 1976; Brown, 1971; Chapman et al., 1981). They analyzed how historical transitions in the way in which Europeans positioned itself on earth and in the universe have been accompanied by reformulations of human mortality, and its relation to the physical world. European urban historiography has greatly improved by taking into account the radically changing position (culturally and geographically) of urban cemeteries: from constituting *extra urbem* waste lands until the fifth century to being integrated into the historic-religious heart of cities for more than a thousand years, to be relegated again to the suburbs in the eighteenth century. During the centuries of 'neighborliness' between the living and the dead, urban cemeteries operated as multifunctional places of refuge and commerce (Ariès, 1976; Etlin, 1987). In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas crystalized in changing attitudes towards the place of death in cities, as well as towards cities as a whole. People believed the dead to be killing the living through the spread of 'murderous vapors' (Etlin, 1987: 16). When saturated and polluted urban burial soils became a social problem, new ways of thinking about religion, afterlife *and* the city developed.

Along with colonialism, imperialism and globalization, dominant death-space ideologies influenced urban design paradigms in the global South. The rationalization of hygiene and health precipitated the

decision taken by the French Crown in 1776 and by the Spanish Crown in 1789 to prohibit church burials and to transfer dead disposal to the urban periphery (Etlin, 1987: 32; Ibarra, 2016). While Paris created cemetery Père-Lachaise, the Spanish decree imposed technocratic norms for cemetery design in Spanish and Spanish-colonial cities such as Lima (Ibarra, 2016; Silverman, 2002: 168; Will de Chaparro & Achim, 2011). Latin America's monumental cemeteries still testify to this drastic urban transition. In the twentieth century, the expanding Latin American cities faced new burial challenges posed by massive death from war and epidemics. The yellow fever epidemic and the subsequent Spanish flu pandemic, among other diseases, urged a rapid installation of new burial grounds (Carballo et al., 2006). Such interconnected histories of cities and deathscapes shaped urban conditions in many regions, but more knowledge is needed to understand the connections and their local impacts in regions outside Europe.

### *Project design and methodology*

Social inequalities in Latin American urban communities have resulted in parallel circuits of dead disposal and commemoration practices, in which access to a dignified burial and a decent final destination depend upon social class. The urban middle classes and elites prefer the services of the private sector and a final destination on one of the so-called *jardines cementerios*, green spacious cemeteries. For people from the most vulnerable groups, obtaining a decent final destination means that they rely on the public services offered by the state on public or general cemeteries. This can be an emotionally charged trajectory because it usually involves a short-term grave lease followed by the exhumation of the remains, a second identification, and the obliged cremation of these remains to be more efficiently stored for the long term.

In cemeteries in Latin America various contingent cultural and religious practices abound, in which communication with the souls of the deceased stands central. Cemetery visitors constitute parallel groups, consisting of the relatives of the deceased, but also of pilgrims who practice folk religion on the graves of self-declared saints or 'lost souls'. More recently, tourists can be added to the group of deathscape users, attracted by guided tours or events. Latin American urban cemeteries are increasingly developing policies to find new revenues by offering tours for visitors; the cemetery as an open air museum or leisure park is gaining ground and increases the possibility of gentrification. Many public cemeteries contain valuable monuments that sustain national or local heritage collections, either from an architectural/art point of view or as mnemonics of historical events. Conservation of this local heritage is a challenge for most urban governments. How these divergent uses shape deathscapes and how deathscapes enhance or limit various cultural uses is a question that needs more in-depth study.

The increasing pressure on urban land combined with today's power of urban real estate sectors have resulted in changing patterns of disposal. Cremation is generally on the rise, while burial above the ground has become less popular, sometimes resulting in the dilapidation of buildings that contain niches for corpses, combined with an increased demand for spaces to store ash urns. Public cemeteries governed by the state or administered in public-private partnership constructions are more prone to deterioration than the private ones: local politics and red tape hinder a quick adaptation of the offered services and capacity. Private cemeteries outshine each other with architecturally innovative 'vertical cemeteries'.

In this growing competition over customers many urban municipalities as well as the Catholic Church in many cities, have obtained permission to operate crematories. The environmental and sanitary regulations that need to be applied to prevent pollution and public health issues, are sometimes ineffective. State audits are imperative to guarantee the compatibility of urban cemeteries within residential areas. The economic pressure of an expanding funerary sector and the internationalization of the market can be reason for concern. Morgues, undertakers, insurance companies, burial cooperatives and cemetery workers are not immune to corruption and illegal activities, which can for example involve the right to take a corpse in, the illegal subdivision of graves, the selling on of used funeral wreaths, or the sales of human remains to medicine students.

Histories of violent conflict have shaped Latin American urban deathscapes. On the one hand, the companies offering funerary and dead-disposal services tend to be historically connected to the parties involved in violent conflict: where large numbers of victims occur, efficient death disposal is usually developed. In the case of countries such as Colombia and Mexico, this means that public cemeteries deal with large numbers of anonymous corpses for which protocols were developed, or

have to be developed. This also means, that local companies can prosper on the provision of death services, and that the line between formal and informal provisioning is not always clear. Both the financial flows and the historical development of companies that offer funerary and burial services also need much more extensive analysis.

### *Case studies*

The program is based on complementary case-studies in Bogotá (Colombia), Lima (Peru), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Quetzaltenango (Guatemala). The complementarity is based on two basic similarities and some important differences. The four cities are governed by technocratic managerial administrations, basing their policies on public-private partnerships and decentralization to shape the provisioning of basic services related to burial and disposal. In addition, all four cities have been influenced by a history of violent conflict that is notable and tangible in (attitudes towards) deathscapes.

Bogotá stands out for its relatively well-developed regulatory framework of urban planning and governance. Bogotá, however, houses a large vulnerable population of internally displaced people in the southern part of the metropolitan area. So far, the well-developed regulatory framework does not translate into significantly equitable services. Lima is emblematic for its fragmented landscape of death and the dead, in which informally developed cemeteries (we call them self-help cemeteries) clearly provide a basic need not sufficiently addressed by the state. This is the case in which the ‘cities of the living’ and the ‘cities of the dead’ are most firmly interwoven. Buenos Aires, on the other hand, is characterized by its relatively small capacity of public disposal facilities and public burial grounds. The lack of facilities needs to be placed within a larger context, in which the overall provision of urban public space is low and where the private sector involvement is arguably strongest. In the medium-sized city of Quetzaltenango, the only public cemetery suffers from a total lack of political interest, enormous solid-waste pollution, criminality and a shortage of cheap graves. A grounded and comparative understanding of these challenges is developed holistically by the following research team.

### *Research team*

<b>Case study</b>	<b>Fieldwork</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Financing</b>
Bogotá	March 2014	Christien Klaufus	Principle Investigator	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA EFL Foundation
	March 2015	Christien Klaufus	Principle Investigator	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA
		Camilo Martínez	Research Assistant	Universidad Externado de Bogotá	CEDLA
Buenos Aires	April - May 2016	Letty Reimerink	Research Intern, Pre-PhD	CEDLA/UvA	Prince Bernhard Scholarship
Lima	June 2016	Christien Klaufus	Principle Investigator	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA
		Martina Morbidini	Research Intern, Pre-PhD	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA EFL Foundation
		Werner Jungbluth	Research Intern, Pre-PhD	DESCO and PUCP	CEDLA
		Roel Roscam Abbing	Photographer	Independent	Self-financed
	May 2017	Christien Klaufus	Principle Investigator	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA
		Martina Morbidini	Pre-PhD research	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA EFL Foundation
	Oct - Dec 2017	Erwin Jansen	Research Intern, MA	CEDLA/Radboud University Nijmegen	EFL Foundation
Quetzaltenango	July 2018	Christien Klaufus	Principle Investigator	CEDLA/UvA	CEDLA

### Key publications

- 2018 'Colombian deathscapes: Social practices and policy responses', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 40(2): 209-225.
- 2017 'Cemetery modernization and the common good in Bogotá', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 37(2): 206-221.
- 2016 'The dead are killing the living': Spatial justice, funerary services, and cemetery land use in urban Colombia, *Habitat International* 54(1): 74-79.
- 2016 'Deathscape politics in Colombian metropolises: Conservation, grave recycling and the position of the bereaved', *Urban Studies* 53(12): 2453-2468.
- 2015 'Displacing the dead, Disregarding the living: Public space and cemetery planning in Bogotá, Colombia', *Progressive Planning* 204: 27-29.
- 2014 'Deathscapes in Latin America's Metropolises: Urban Land Use, Funerary Transformations, and Daily Inconveniences', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 96: 99-111.

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