

Explorations | Exploraciones

Deathscapes in Latin America's Metropolises: Urban Land Use, Funerary Transformations, and Daily Inconveniences

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Abstract:

This essay argues that due to demographic changes and continued urbanization processes, adequate planning and governing of deathscapes is expected to become increasingly important in Latin America over the next decades. Based on existing literature about the spatial and socio-cultural transformations of death spaces in other regions – particularly Asian metropolises – the author assesses possible scenarios for the development of deathscapes in Latin American metropolises as contributions to a new research agenda. Examples from Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico are presented to highlight current debates surrounding a gradual conversion from burial to cremation and power struggles within the funerary chain. How a rationalization of dead-disposal activities favours some social groups and disadvantages others forms one of the core questions of the proposed research agenda. The author further acknowledges the need to produce more reliable data on the capacity, layout and management of deathscapes in order to address Latin American regional patterns and stimulate sustainable alternatives. *Keywords:* Deathscapes, urban land use, funerary transformations, metropolises.

Resumen: Los necropaisajes en metrópolis latinoamericanas: uso del suelo urbano, transformaciones funerarias e inconvenientes diarios

Este ensayo sostiene que debido a los cambios demográficos y a los procesos de urbanización continuos, cabe esperar que en las próximas décadas una planificación y gestión adecuadas de los necropaisajes (*deathscapes*) cobren cada vez más protagonismo en Latinoamérica. Basándose en la bibliografía existente sobre las transformaciones espaciales y socioculturales de los necroespacios en otras regiones – en particular en metrópolis asiáticas –, la autora evalúa posibles escenarios para el desarrollo de los necropaisajes en metrópolis latinoamericanas como contribución a una nueva agenda de investigación. Se presentan ejemplos de Colombia, Ecuador y México para resaltar los debates actuales en torno al paso progresivo de los enterramientos a las incineraciones y las luchas de poder dentro de la cadena funeraria. Hasta qué punto una racionalización de las actividades relacionadas con la gestión de los muertos favorece a algunos grupos sociales y desfavorece a otros constituye una de las cuestiones primordiales de la agenda de investigación propuesta. Además, la autora reconoce la necesidad de producir más datos fiables sobre la capacidad, la disposición y la gestión de los necropaisajes con miras a abordar los patrones regionales en Latinoamérica, y así estimular alternativas sostenibles. *Palabras clave:* Necropaisajes, uso del suelo urbano, transformaciones funerarias, metrópolis.

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In the current ‘urban millennium’, adequate planning and governing will become increasingly important not only in spaces for the living but also in spaces for the dead. Environments with high population and building densities, and especially those societies with an aging population in the coming decades, will most probably need to develop new arrangements to dispose of their dead. This article explores the situation regarding death spaces in Latin America. Several characteristics of Latin American societies make this a topic of renewed urgency. First of all, the region is the most urbanized one in the world (UN-Habitat 2012). Second, the demographic profile of the region is changing. In 2010 the median age was 27.3 years, but in 2050 it will be 40.6 (UN-DESA 2013, 28). Third, economic, political and cultural dynamics will influence the transformation of deathscapes and burial arrangements. Economically, the funeral sector is expected to boom in specific parts of the region. Politically, the pressure to increase the environmental and social sustainability component in city planning will push policies forward that promote technological alternatives in the disposal of the dead. Culturally, new spaces for the disposal of the dead and the increased popularity of Internet will alter memorialization practices.

A new research agenda

This article proposes to develop a new research agenda on the transformation of deathscapes and funeral practices in Latin American metropolitan areas. To sketch the multifaceted character of societal problems involved in this transformation, comparisons with other regions are in order. The *Washington Post*, for example, recently published an article on cities in China where only cremations are allowed. The newspaper states that the Chinese state actively promotes sea burials to diminish the burden on urban land, acknowledging that ‘the problem will only get worse as China’s elderly population increases’ and that ‘most provinces will run out of burial room in the next 10 years’ (*The Washington Post* 2013). In the US, scholars have similarly pointed out that the ‘looming and dramatic rise in the U.S. elderly population will likely culminate in an increased demand for space in which to inter the dead’ (Couatts et al. 2011, 254). A lack of cemetery capacity in densely populated areas is expected to raise the costs of dead disposal between now and 2050, but it will also generate new technological solutions. Those transformations need policy guidance to ensure equal access to death spaces and funerary services for all. The time frame the Latin American research agenda is meant to consider is the period 2015-2050.

The analytic notion of a ‘deathscape’ as a landscape of the dead includes processes of place-making and representation, which are often fraught with

power inequalities (Kong 1999, 1; Maddrell and Sidaway 2010, 5). In the literature, the deathscape concept not only includes cemeteries and columbaria but also alternative memorial spaces such as roadside memorials and cyberspace condolences. In this article deathscapes are primarily understood as landscapes of dead disposal in which processes of mourning, memorialization and meaning giving are intertwined with more pragmatic biological and environmental matters concerning the decomposition of corpses in urban space. To explore the specific topics that could be included in a research agenda on Latin American deathscapes, some examples from the region are given based upon public media discussions. Bogotá will be presented as an illustrative case; fieldwork on the changing deathscape of Bogotá will be conducted by the author in April 2014. That pilot-study will serve to develop a larger multidisciplinary research project, in which urban planning, economic, environmental and public health aspects will be integrated.

Changing deathscapes in an urban world

Throughout history Latin American cities have had to deal with controversies and superstition surrounding burial grounds. Ideas about adequate burial grounds coincided with ideas about a 'good death'. In the sixteenth century, Roman Catholic norms stimulated people to be buried in churches. In the late-eighteenth century a new moral order favoured public health over devotion, relegating burials to cemeteries outside town (Will de Chaparro and Achim 2011, 9-10). In various cities, the displacements were met with strong protests. In Lima, public health regulations that summoned citizens to bury the dead outside the urban core were not contested but simply disregarded. Status distinctions were played out in ever more extravagant inner-city funerals (Warren 2011, 190-191, 200). History shows that burial reforms that aimed to prevent epidemics in growing urban areas 'exposed the weakness of doctors and religious and state authorities in refashioning urban life, ideas about hygiene, and notions of "progress"' (Warren, 2011: 201).

Demographic pressure and cultural transformations are expected to influence Latin American deathscapes in the near future. Between 2015 and 2050, metropolitan areas will face an expected crude death rate of six per 1000 inhabitants. This means that authorities need to be prepared for a disposal capacity of a few dozen tombs or graves on a daily basis (UN-DESA 2012). Comparisons with other regions, especially with the well-documented transformation of deathscapes in Asian cities are useful to explore possible scenarios for Latin America. Literature on Asia, Africa, the U.S. and Europe shows that city governments tend to regard cemeteries as a 'waste' of valuable land or even as 'polluted' areas (Tong and Kong 2000; Tan and

Yeoh 2002; Huang 2007). Over the last decades, densely populated cities have taken measures ‘to reduce the use of space for the dead, to release land for the use of the living’ (Kong 2012, 415). The recent promotion of woodland, parkland and sea burials in Asia, Europe and the U.S. is motivated by governments as being less environmentally aggravating (Francis et al. 2000, 47; Kong 2012). Common policy tools to discourage burials are an increase of land prices and the replacement of unlimited ownership of graves by limited lease constructions. Also, subsidies for ‘cleaner’ and less space-occupying methods such as cremation are customary (Teather et al. 2001; Tremlett 2007). Disposal of corpses in biodegradable ways has become a political spearhead in attempts to increase the efficiency of cemeteries: once ashes are mixed with the earth, burial spaces can be used again. Yet in daily practice stacked burial and grave recycling are not always culturally accepted. For Jewish, Muslim and Confucian citizens the change of grave tenure from perpetual ownership to temporary lease constructions is a highly sensitive matter (Francis et al. 2000; Afla and Reza 2012; Kong 2012). Such religious and cultural considerations can thwart the efficient and compact use of cemetery space.

How urban land pressure influences burial practices in direct and indirect ways is nicely demonstrated in a South-Korean case-study. A lack of urban space in South Korean cities caused a change of housing preferences from traditional houses with a *madang* (inner garden used for funeral ceremonies) to apartments or terraced houses. The lack of a *madang* transposed funerals to places outside the home, usually to institutional funeral halls. Parallel to changing housing preferences and the transposition of funeral ceremonies, cremation began to replace traditional Confucian burials in the 1990s, when torrential rains massively damaged existing graves. From then on, a few leading figures in society openly opted for cremation and the mass media started to support the government’s pro-cremation campaign. Remarkably, even urban columbaria to store urns are now running out of space in South Korea, so more cultural and policy adaptations can be expected in the near future (Park 2010). As Asian death rituals are being more and more detached from the exact burial places, they are increasingly accompanied by internet memorialization practices: ‘new methods of ash dispersal and burial seek to move beyond spatial compression to spatial transcendence’ (Kong 2012, 418). However, according to leading scholars new burial methods and virtual mourning rituals can never fully replace existing practices, because the ritual connections between families and their ancestors depend on the ability to visit the site where ancestors are located (Kong 2012). Although this is not the place to make full comparisons between

Asian and Latin American metropolises, the differences in cultural-religious and socio-economic frameworks are relevant to the proposed research agenda.

Ethnographic studies about death and burial in Latin America demonstrate that discourses about the transition from live to death are typically situated within broader class-based debates. It is shown that urban poor and marginalized groups have little to choose when it comes to burial preferences. Scheper-Hughes (1992) for example describes how the average Brazilian cemetery is divided in an aristocratic section with stone mausoleums in which people are buried above the ground to remain there eternally, a section with individual graves that have personalised tombstones, and the field where anonymous poor are buried in the ground for a limited amount of time. In the pauper section, the graves are not their own: 'Because of overcrowding, they can expect to keep their spaces only for a year for an adult, six months or less for a child. Pauper graves are shallow – two feet is common for a child – and when the site is needed again, the order is given to exhume the remains' (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 261). Leferink (2002) similarly describes the 'third-rank funeral' that 'third-rank citizens' of the *villas miserias* of Cordoba, Argentina, are familiar with. Latin American cemeteries spatially reflect such social and moral categories, and the question is: how might increased pressure on urban land exacerbate inequalities. While the religious influence on burial and mourning in Latin America is predominantly Christian – and perhaps less diversified than in Asia – the role of social movements and the organized struggle for acceptable alternatives to dispose of the deceased may be more visible and more politically contested than in Asia.

Memorialising rituals and the ceremonies practiced in Latin America to connect the dead to the living vary across the continent, but all are shaped by religion and history. Mexico and Central-American countries are known for the worshipping of Santa Muerte, the saint of death (Brandes 2006). In Brazil, Suriname and other areas where Afro-American populations are numerous, rituals are based on celebrations of the continued presence of the dead in daily life. In Suriname death is seen as a continuation of life albeit in another form: 'Living-dead have therefore to be handled with utmost care and respect' and communication between both worlds is crucial to a peaceful existence of the living (Van der Pijl 2007, 565). In a similar way, ancestor rituals are the basis of burials in Andean countries, where the notion of 'circular time' structures connections between the realms of the living and the dead (Abercrombie 1998; Strong 2012, 324). Abercrombie (1998, 76) describes that ritual drunkenness is a core activity in the three-

year funerary cycle in Bolivia because it enables travels across time and space. The travel of the dead body and the trajectory of a soul to purgatory or heaven are paralleled by the travel of the living into the realm of the ancestors. The meanings of ‘earth’ and burial are essential parts of those travels. People believe that the earth, who gives life, should be nurtured by the physical remains of the dead (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982), hence the dominance of burial. Scattered publications about the funeral sector in different Latin American countries all seem to confirm that burial is still a dominant practice (Mates 2005). Due to the prevalence of religious beliefs, whether Roman Catholic, Evangelical or ‘folk religions’, burials are regarded as the most decent way to lay the dead to rest. The descriptions of Scheper-Huges (1992) illustrate the sets of physical structures for dead disposal that have been most common in Latin America: graves constructed *in* the ground; tombs or closed-off vaults constructed *above* the ground; and columbaria to store urns. However, the spatial forms for dead disposal are currently diversifying. In Cementerio El Batán in Quito, for example, a nine-storey ‘vertical cemetery’ has been built to store the ashes of 24,000 deceased on a very small footprint of 1000 m² (*El Comercio* 2012). Cremation is promoted region-wide as a more ‘modern’ way of corpse disposal, most prominently so in Colombia, Argentina and Mexico but also in other countries (Mates 2005, 298). Newer technologies such as cryomation (freeze-drying) and resomation (alkaline hydrolysis), which are promoted by U.S. and European-based companies as more ecologically favourable, might become an alternative to cremation in Latin America too.

The commercial component of the changing deathscapes should not be ignored either. In Mexico, the increase of cremations has attracted foreign direct investment. Grupo Gayosso, a nationwide company with 25 funeral homes, 21 cemeteries, six mausoleums, 16 chapels and 12 crematories estimated to service almost half of the Mexican population, has become a flagship of a regional growth sector. More than 60 per cent of their customers is said to opt for cremation (Advent International 2007; *El Sol de Mexico* 2013). In 2007, the company was acquired for 317 million U.S. dollars by the US-based firm Advent International, one of the largest global private equity firms. Their press release states: ‘The Mexican funeral services market is expected to experience consistent long-term growth, as the population ages and the death rate rises in line with the country’s demographic evolution. Further, the expansion of Mexico’s middle class and increase in disposable income mean more people will be able to afford pre-need death-care services’ (Advent International 2007). Like Mexico, Colombia has a well-developed private sector for funerary and crematory services. The

combination of a violent political past characterized by high death rates and a relatively advanced legal framework that regulates urban land use is said to underpin Colombia's pioneering position: 'This circumstance of being confronted with death on a daily basis had as a result that in Colombia and especially in cities such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali all kinds of activities related to death are developed at higher rates than in other cities and countries....' (Ministerio de Protección Social ND, 21).¹ The country has become a leading actor on the international market for the export of coffins (*Confidential Colombia* 2012; *Portafolio.co* 2013). Another question that should be considered in research is to what extent these commercial activities are sustained by illicit money flows.

As most cemeteries and columbaria are located within populated areas, new research needs to explore if vertical storage and increased cremation rates will offer sufficient capacity over the next decades. If not, could low-density parkland and woodland burials – now still relatively unknown in Latin America – offer an alternative to lower the environmental and public-health impact? Related to this topic, research should explore the locations where such facilities and services are offered: near highways or shopping malls, or in newly-built residential areas. It should examine the logistics involved in the various funerary arrangements and the actors involved. An architect in Quito informed me that the above-mentioned Cementerio El Batán near Quito offers clients the possibility to have their ashes dispersed in the air. Could this indicate that customers of funerary services are increasingly susceptible to spectacle and fashion? Under a strong economic impetus, changing deathscapes will influence customs and beliefs, albeit not without social contestations.

Regulating deathscapes in metropolitan Bogotá

Nobody knows exactly how many cemeteries there are in Colombia – no statistics are available – nor who is responsible for their management: the Catholic Church, the government or another entity. To improve state control over that obscure part of society, the Colombian government approved new legislation in 2009 for the provision of services with regard to cemeteries, burial, exhumation and cremation of corpses. In the metropolitan district of Bogotá the new regulations coincided with the implementation of a master plan that aimed to improve affordable funerary facilities and to reduce the negative environmental, sanitary and urban-development impacts of the city's cemeteries. Starting from the premise that all citizens should have equal rights to urban facilities, a 'Master Plan for Cemeteries and Funerary Services' (abbreviated as PMCSF) was considered a neces-

sary tool to guarantee access to affordable funeral services for all (Alcaldía Mayor Bogotá D.C. 2006). Bogotá's funerary chain includes: services for legal handling; laboratories for thanatopraxis (to restore and conserve the corpse until it is buried or cremated); funeral transportation; services offered at funeral parlours; provision of coffins and urns; and services offered at the location of final destination. Until 2009, parts of the funerary chain used to be offered by the private sector and targeted to the middle class. Public cemeteries catering to the urban poor hardly offered any funerary services. At the time when the master plan was developed, 50 per cent of the population of Bogotá lived below the poverty line. The mismatch between supply and demand of funerary services was said to result in irregularities concerning burial land. The plan suggested some drastic improvements in the approximately 25 cemeteries in the metropolitan area, with 31 December 2019 as a final deadline. In 2019 the city is calculated to have 9.1 million inhabitants. Over 40,000 corpses will have to be stored yearly, resulting in an average daily demand for 113 plots or tombs (Alcaldía Mayor Bogotá D.C. 2006, 29). Following the improvement measures stipulated in the plan, the Ministerio de Protección Social (2009) designed a resolution to regulate cemetery services nationwide. It states among other things that cemeteries have to be situated at appropriate distances from housing, schools and public spaces. In practice, this is not the case: approximately 90 per cent of the cemeteries in Colombia are situated in urban areas or surrounded by buildings (*El Espectador* 2009).

As could be expected, the implementation of new regulations and the spatial adaptation of existing cemeteries resulted in controversies around land claims, but also in public health inconveniences and competition over the provision of funerary services. A newspaper critically summarized the controversies the plan generated in Bogotá:

A master plan that is in its first stages and of which the total costs are still to be defined is in spite of that already generating disagreement in different sectors. It concerns a controversy that exceeds the anxieties expressed by the residents of La Merced Norte and that furthermore motivated a legal action at the Administrative Tribunal of Cundinamarca for alleged violation of free competition (*El Espectador* 2010).²

This quote is presented here because it highlights two components of the social struggle surrounding the transformation of cemeteries. First, it points to the opposition of the curtailed private sector. Second, the quote mentions the controversy surrounding the adaptations of the Northern Cemetery situated in neighbourhood La Merced Norte. Some neighbours fought against the forced expropriation of their lots to extend the cemetery. More serious

perhaps, was the fact that four cremation ovens were installed there to increase cremation rates. Residents in the area complained about the emission of gases and nauseating smells (see *El Nuevo Siglo* 2012, 2013; *HSB Noticias* 2013). On El Tiempo City TV residents stated that the smoke and smell affected their respiratory system and that food and clothes in their homes went bad as the crematorium attracted large quantities of mosquitos, which also caused other health inconveniences. In their protest they stated that 'the dead are killing the living' (*El Tiempo* 2013). Such controversial statements illustrate that the social consequences of changing deathscapes need to be studied 'on the ground' to understand the consequences in daily life.

Discussion

This exploration started from the premise that deathscapes in Latin America's densifying urban areas will undergo changes to meet contemporary norms for cleaner, healthier environments, a decent disposal of the deceased affordable for all, but also a more rational use of scarce urban land. The demographic transition from relatively young to relatively old populations will put further pressure on urban land-use decisions. Under those parameters spatial, cultural and political interests will have to be realigned over the next decades. As the examples from various countries show, conflicting interests are expected to define the nature of those deathscape transformations. Asian cases have shown that the role of central governments was decisive in stimulating alternatives to burial, whether conventional cremation or the scattering of ashes in seas or parklands. Urban governments in densely populated urban areas in Latin America will have to prepare for such transformations.

A new research agenda on Latin American deathscapes should therefore be sensitive to regional similarities and differences in the cultural practices of burial and memorialization. In a few Latin American countries, notably Mexico and Colombia, relatively high mortality rates, pressure on burial lands, and an influential private sector in funerary services have already resulted in a gradual conversion from burial to cremation. This transformation influences the traditionally strong commemorative practices that characterize the region. At the same time, higher demands for cremation do not automatically improve the quality of life in high-density urban areas, as the example from Bogotá showed. In that case, citizens demanded the replacement of those services to the urban periphery. The polarization of the debate on cemeteries in Bogotá also shows that state attempts to strengthen control over the funerary chain activate new power struggles. To what ex-

tent similar stakeholders are involved in such debates in other cities and countries, remains to be investigated. Which social groups benefit from an increased offer in burial or cremation arrangements, and which ones are disadvantaged by the intensification of dead-disposal activities forms one of the core questions of the proposed research agenda.

To summarize: a new focus on deathscapes in Latin American metropolises has been suggested in this article. First of all, scholars would need to produce more reliable data about the number, capacity, and ownership of cemeteries and columbaria in the region. Such research should include capacity considerations related to vertical storage, grave recycling, and the reuse of composted organic material from cemeteries. It should also explore if parkland and woodland burials offer an acceptable alternative. Besides, the spatialization of services across urban territories and its logistics need to be mapped out and analysed in terms of access and prices, to understand which social groups benefit and which ones are disadvantaged. Furthermore, regional similarities and differences in rules and regulations and the role of the private sector need to be explained. And finally, we need to understand the cultural transformation of funeral arrangements and its consequences in different parts of the region. This is especially relevant in Latin America's metropolitan areas where mortality numbers will begin to soar over the next decades.

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Notes

1. 'Esta circunstancia de estar diariamente enfrentados con la muerte ha hecho que en Colombia y sobretodo en ciudades como Bogotá, Medellín y, Cali se desarrollen, a unos niveles más acelerados que en otras ciudades y países, todo tipo de actividades alrededor de la muerte....'
2. 'Un Plan Maestro que está en una de sus primeras etapas, cuyo costo global está aún por definir, y que a pesar de ello ya está generando inconformismo en diferentes sectores. Se trata de una controversia que va más allá de las inquietudes planteadas por los vecinos de La Merced Norte y que, incluso, motivó una demanda ante el Tribunal Administrativo de Cundinamarca por una supuesta vulneración de la libre competencia'.

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