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# Cemetery as an Archaeological Research Center

Gothic Art in the Saint Vincent Paul Cemetery in Ponce, Puerto Rico

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Recent studies in Caribbean Archeology have exposed various temporal dimensions of cultural traditions, a fundamental element for studying past societies in the Circum-Caribbean. However, a new point of view towards studies of the afterlife world through the architectural elements of artistic gothic styles in funerary structures create a possibility for interdisciplinary investigations that emphasize intellectual searches in the field of Archeology of Death. This article presents a multifaceted look full of archaeological and architectural evidence, opening debates within these historical spaces of funeral storage.

By Nichole Bodin on December 24, 2024

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The term “Historic Cemetery” is used primarily to describe all burials before the beginning of the 20th century. But with that, there is a distinction between “cemeteries” and “burials”, where burials are areas of land intended for these sepulchral practices and cemeteries are more associated with churches. For this reason, the historical and architectural value of necropolises interests both art historians and anthropologists.

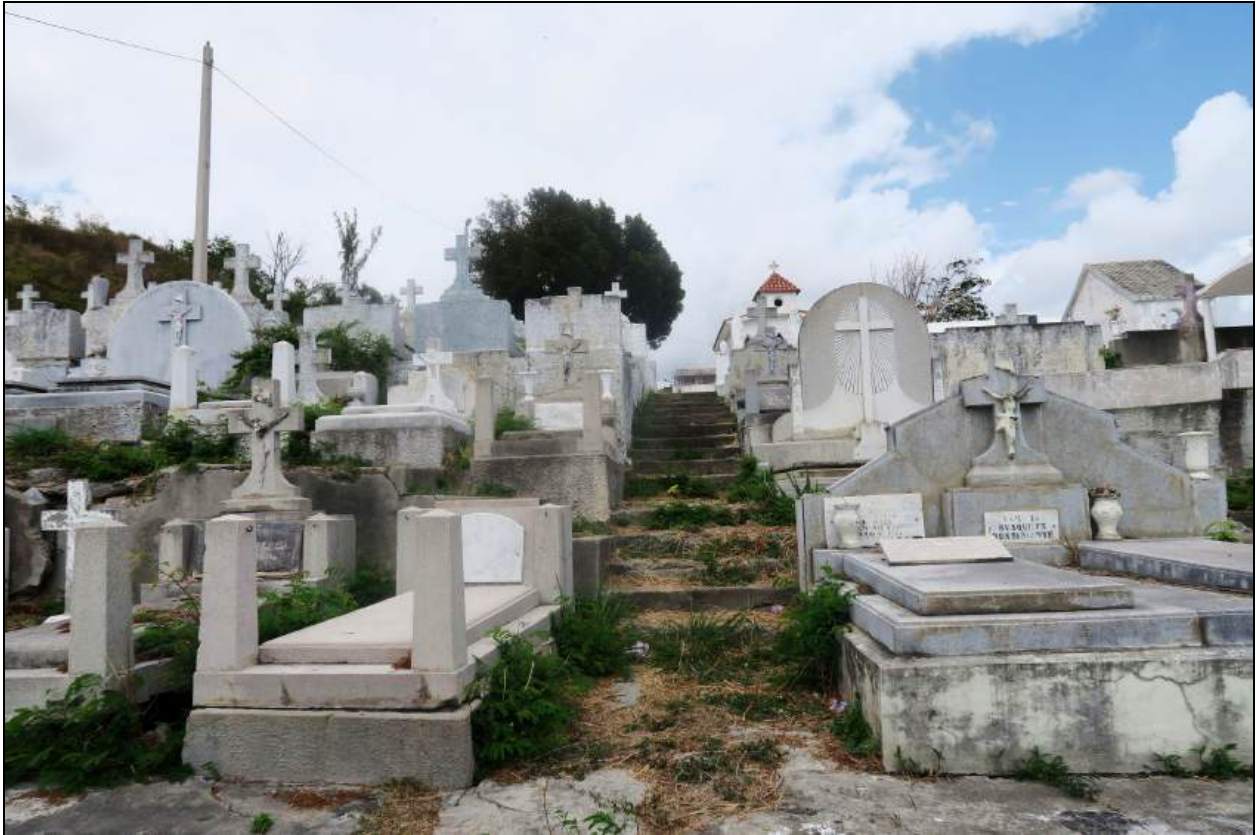
Artistic execution takes a fundamental role in putting into practice the experiences in funerary constructions with different models and iconographic styles. The disposition of the Necropolis, its tombs and types of statuary and iconography respond to social, cultural, aesthetic and historical conventions that are guided by different approaches for the study of funerary records.

However, there are cemeteries with valuable artistic and cultural heritage linked to history itself that deserves to be preserved in order to stop the irreversible deterioration of sculptural and architectural works of funerary art. Historical funerary archeology provides an enormous source of iconographic information with aspects related to worship, grief, loss, memory and identity.



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In this way, funerary spaces provide direct and inevitable evidence of material culture which is presented through iconographic language, being an example of a strong presence of religious cults within artistic elements.



When different elements appear within studies in the archeology of death, different interpretations offer a space for research to clarify possible answers about undocumented colonial daily events. Likewise, the conservation processes in the Archaeology of Death field are responsible for the study of the funerary world and have their own peculiarities and specific methods of study. Their studies are extremely important because they offer many clues to the researcher, a key element for the development of objective archaeological exploration and its interpretation of true historical appreciation. Gothic architecture has a structure that allows it.

Through the use of technique, the use of a transfigured light dematerialized elements of the building, achieving clear sensations of elevation and weightlessness. Depending on the complexity of the architectural construction, there is also the complexity in the variety of artistic manifestations.

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Cemeteries are spaces that all populations through time have practiced with burials. There are cemeteries with valuable artistic and cultural heritage linked to history itself that deserves to be cataloged and preserved to stop the irreversible deterioration of sculptural and architectural works of funerary art. Historical funerary archeology provides an enormous source of iconographic information with aspects related to worship, grief, loss, memory and identity. Currently, the new religious buildings in cemeteries are characterized by the definition of a space for faithful believers towards the religious and symbolic values of each era. In this way, funerary spaces provide direct and inevitable evidence of material culture which is presented through iconographic language, being an example of a strong presence of religious cults within Gothic elements. Therefore, when different elements appear within the studies in the archeology of death that are related and exist within the variants of the Gothic elements and their components in the methodology, different interpretations offer a space to clarify possible answers about not documented everyday events.

Gothic Art is an artistic manifestation that develops in different chronological moments, highlighting a broad development in the face of differentiations and their variants. The mystical attitude of the Gothic is expressed in the architecture of the representation in the church-nave (church with several naves of the same height that are not directly illuminated by high windows, since it receives light from the windows of the collateral naves (Panofsky , 1951).



*View of Castillo Serralles and Cuceta de Vigia in Ponce*

At the beginning of the 20th century, the city of Ponce, Puerto Rico was an example of how such funerary monuments reflect a concern on the part of the wealthiest families to follow the fashions of artistic styles thanks to the work of architects and designers.

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The Catholic Cemetery of the city of Ponce can offer a 'rich vision of artistic memories, connected to an 'art history' that is perhaps not very pure due to the mixtures of elements' (Álvarez, 1982). At first glance, 'the architectural' predominates over the sculptural' (Álvarez, 1982), highlighting a history of Architecture in the pantheons, tombs and mausoleums.

The ornamental and decorative richness of the Cemetery allows us to contemplate the beauty in the sculptures as a unique visual attraction. It has a group of niches built to form a basement and the burials buried below ground level give the effect of a catacomb. It was included in the National Register of Historic Places of the United States as the "Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Cemetery", on August 25, 1988.



The land was purchased by the rich in the area for \$60, marking the beginning of the economic growth with magnificent funeral structures. Today, the cemetery suffers from its limited space due to the expansion of urban residential developments that now completely surround it. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, plus the massive exile due the economic hardship has taken a toll on the area. The cemetery still has an iron gate surrounded by two masonry columns; it does not have a chapel at the entrance, or anywhere in the entire enclosure.



The construction plan was made following the Spanish tradition of having two main axes creating a cross in the middle of the cemetery and the rest of the design was made in the form of a grid. The cemetery follows the contours of the steep terrain on which it is located and for this reason, some of the access roads were built as stairs.





It has the largest graves placed along the main central and secondary axes and the smaller graves then spread out from the larger ones. The vast majority of the largest tombs are usually mausoleums and represent different architectural expressions from classical



revival, Gothic art and even art-deco. Even the daring to start a structure should be valued more as a technical or economic challenge (sometimes due to political or family rivalry) than when it is started without having planned how to finish it. The sculptural work represented through the magnitude and diversity of the Gothic concept in contemporary funerary enclosures is an example of the cultural and artistic richness funerary production has. This artistic execution takes a fundamental role from professionals when putting into practice their personal and spiritual experiences in funerary constructions and different iconographic models.

Simultaneously, the Gothic style requires a mutual interference between the parts, so that we can deduce, not only the interior from the outside or the shape of the side aisles of the central nave but also, for example, the organization of the entire system of the cross section.

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# MAUSOLEUMS WITH ELEMENTS OF GOTHIC ART

## SERRALLÉS FAMILY MAUSOLEUM



Inaugurated in 1901, the Serrallés Family mausoleum was built and designed by Alfredo Wiechers and the construction materials are based on marble and plastered concrete. Its predominantly artistic components are the various sculptures, reliefs and blacksmith work.



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Its structural condition is stable, with excellent finishes, but there is an observation that the aesthetics of the garden surroundings could be improved (The Builders Group, 1989). Damage from earthquakes can be seen in the before and after photos where the cross at the top is now missing.

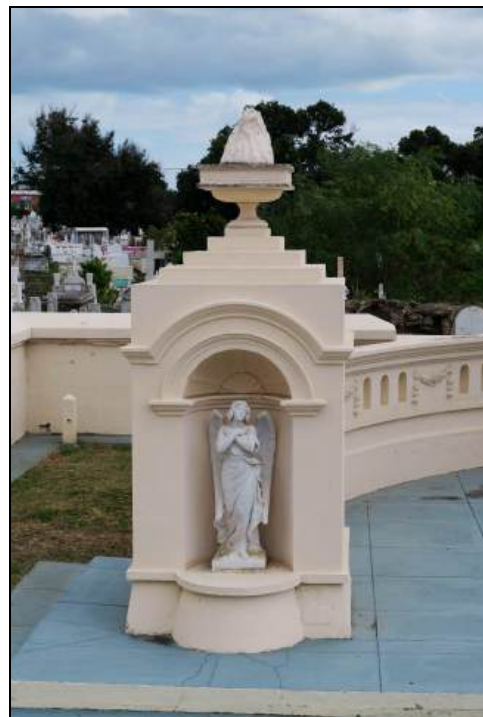
The lateral structures create a marked theological-allegorical, traditional 'sense'" (The Builders Group 1989). It can be seen that in the Mausoleum Chapel there are two angels that were imported from Spain, and it is unknown to this day whom the sculptor (craftsman) of this work is.



*Photo taken 2013*

The mausoleum maintains the use of the funerary iconography of angels, an element that has appeared artistically since the origin of Gothic culture (Cirot, 1997). The angels are very anthropomorphic and are at the same distance from the central enclosure. The angel manifests an interpretation as a symbol of the invisible, of the forces that ascend and descend between origin and manifestation (Cirot, 1997).

The sculpted engravings are in 'scaled' marble and the composition and structure in front relief is made of Carrara marble stone, and reinforced concrete. Created by the Lucca Argiginni Brothers, it was brought from Italy by the Ponce firm José Cott de Garrada Marble Arts Works (Álvarez, 1982).



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The stained glass windows inside the mausoleum have a composition made with colored glass. Through an almost artisanal style, these are assembled using lead rods soldered with tin. The glass window helps sunlight transform with incandescent crystals, symbolizing the spiritual vision of each being of light (according to its proximity to the divine Sun) to form a colorful design. This magic is capable of trapping Light in each of its forms, which is why this funereal space occupies a large 'semilunar' space, created by the sloping walls without the use of iron in fences.



*Right side of the Mausoleum, 2024*



*Wall detail, left side of Mausoleum, 2024*

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## TORO VENDRELL FAMILY



*Front side, 2024*



The Toro Family mausoleum features a very elegant funeral chapel. This structure shows a predominance of religious inspiration in Gothic art and its elegance remains undisputed in this construction by Alfredo Wiechers. Following the plans designed by the architect J. Bértoli and the stained glass artist Blás Silva Boucher, its materials consist of Carrara marble, one of the most appreciated marbles for its whiteness, almost without veins, and fine grain with a floury appearance.

*Back side, 2013*

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In addition to cement and bricks, this structure has materials with elements of continuity in the timeless conception of the work (The Builders Group, 1978). One of the characteristics that define this structure is the pointed arch, and its vaulted shape can be considered structural or decorative in its doors and windows. This mausoleum closely resembles the style of churches and cathedrals, especially due to the use of grouped columns and pointed vaults.



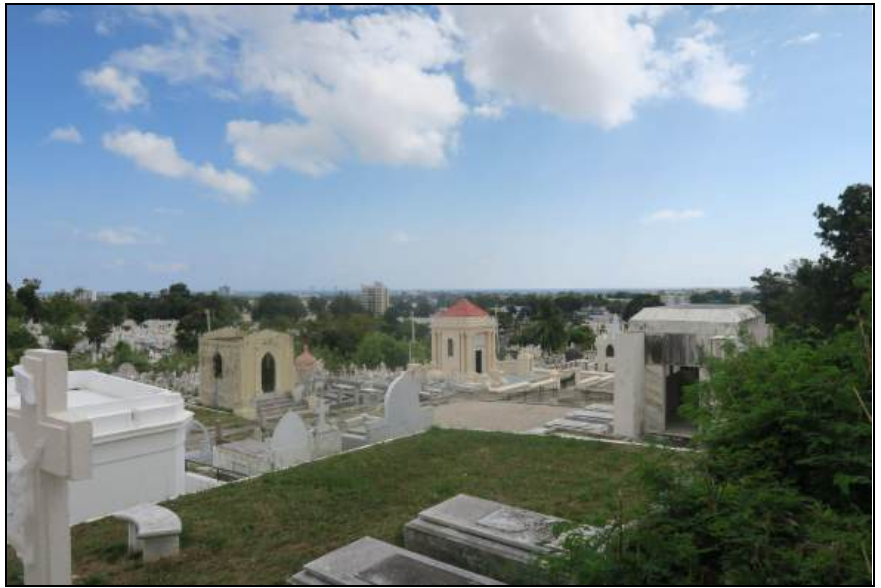
*Right side, 2024*

It has a section of the pointed arch that is also manifested in the same moldings of the pillar. It has an arrowhead shape that, due to its vertical shape, allows the height of the building to be raised. The use of the pointed arch in its Gothic arches and its tracery ultimately leads to the artistic manifestation of the creation of the term “pointed architecture.”

The pointed arch weighs down the bearing columns at a steep angle, allowing the structure to be lifted through much higher vaults and emerge through the immense weight of the mausoleum's roof and vault. The quality of the construction of this Toro Family mausoleum is such that it is considered a posthumous mansion for the relatives buried there.



*Chapel inside Mausoleum, front side, 2024*



*Back side included tombstones outside the Mausoleum, 2024*

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## ARMSTRONG FAMILY



This mausoleum is located in block 9 of lot 6 of the cemetery, with dates dating back to 1920. Its construction materials are based on stained concrete, metal, with artistic components in the stained glass and ironwork



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The structural condition has deteriorated through time, even though it had excellent finishes that captured any viewer. In regards to the elements of Gothic art, it expresses the protective and sublime aspect of the angel at the door. The entrance suggests a resemblance to an elegant archivolt, tracing a simple semicircle without representation.



On the tympanum of the structure you can see two arrowed hearts under a cross, emphasizing the possible love that transcends after the death of possible lovers or husbands buried in the mausoleum. Its construction materials are based on stained concrete, metal, with artistic components in stained glass and ironwork (The Builders Group, 1989). These materials are truly durable and resistant, with an undeniable quality that is transmitted to the buildings that are erected with them. The structure has a banked arch, whose curvature begins above the impost line and is taller to achieve an image that is slimmer than any other type of circular arch. A restoration is necessary and patching the corners (exploded concrete) would be beneficial for the conservation and preservation of this historic structure.





*Front side, 2024*



*Right side, 2024*



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## SUBIRA FAMILY

This funerary structure has elements of the neo-Gothic style and its construction materials consist of brick/concrete and plastering. It is located in block 10, lot 6 of the cemetery, with restoration dates to 1914, 1927, 1940. Its architectural components are basically found in the sculptures, its reliefs, the blacksmithing and Gothic interiors.

There is a necessary priority for the restoration of the structure, which is in a state of progressive deterioration. The arch of the door and the windows are pointed, characteristic of the Gothic movement. It has a pointed arch as the entrance door to the mausoleum and in its rear and side windows and are formed by two curved parts that form an acute angle at the upper point.



2013



2024



Back view, 2024

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## FORTEZA SUAU FAMILY



The condition of the structure of this mausoleum has deteriorated over time, but still has excellent finishes. Restoration is necessary because one of the gates was forced (The Builders Group, 1989) and most of the iron work has been removed.

The mausoleum is located in block 1 of lot 30 of the cemetery, with dates dated to 1971, 1976, 1981. Its construction materials consist of plastered/stuccoed concrete, integral concrete/terrazzo, with artistic components found in the stone sculptures and mosaics on the altar. The arch at the door is characteristic of the keeled arch of the Gothic style.



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## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The sculptural work represented through the magnitude and diversity of the Gothic concept in contemporary funerary enclosures is an example of the richness of the funerary production of a country. This artistic execution takes on a fundamental role by professionals in putting into practice the experiences in funerary constructions and the different iconographic models.



A historic cemetery has many inscriptions about families and communities facing challenges such as epidemics and conflicts. Other terms must be defined for the purpose of the study of history and heritage, the concepts of memory and commemoration. In short, historic cemeteries have the capacity to provide a resting place for loved ones through a place of remembrance that has immense value as heritage of archaeological and architectural interest, as wildlife habitats and as repositories of local, sculptural and artistic genealogy. The proper conservation principles for an inventory of historic heritage and its different categories would give a small valued sample of how prodigious the jewel of funerary art is.

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