05

Narrative, concept, and form generation

5.1   Introduction

Many cemeteries disregard the experience of the user, even though cemeteries are for the living and not for the deceased. According to Eggener (2010) cemeteries are not scary and creepy places, but moving, rich, provocative places with the potential to be powerful and meaningful. The argument made in chapter two states that a landscape could become meaningful through a narrative. This chapter discusses the narrative of the burial site, as well as the concept and the form generation.

5.2   Nekrotopio narrative

According to Potteiger & Puttin (1998) a narrative embedded in the landscape first take shape through naming. The burial site is entitled Nekrotopio, this is derived from the Latin phrases *nekro,* which means death, and *topio*, which means landscape or scenery. Naming bestows identity and reveals the character or projected aspirations of a place (Potteiger & Puttin 1998). The name Nekrotopio, *scenery of the death*, already reveals the essence of the site: it is a sacred landscape where the deceased are laid to rest. The name also discloses the climax of the site: a lookout point with a view over the landscape where the deceased are returned to the earth, the user literally looks out onto the scenery of the dead.

The narrative of Nekrotopio forms part of the *memento mori* art genre. The term *memento mori* is Latin and directly translated means: "remember (that you have) to die" (Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition, June 2001.) It developed with the growth of Christianity, which emphasized Heaven, Hell, and salvation of the soul in the afterlife. The *memento mori* art genre brings viewers to term with their own mortality and the temporality of human life. Similarly, Nekrotopio leads the user through a series of spaces that encourages contemplation regarding their inevitable demise, as well as consideration as to the disposal of their human remains. The landscape becomes a vehicle to understand the place, but also the self. The proposed burial site uses controversial methods to dispose of corpses, these methods are crucial points in the narrative and do not only add to the experience of the user, but also promote sustainable, eco-friendly, and affordable corpse disposal methods.

Nekrotopio is sequenced with the aim of leading users through a series of spaces in a specific order. Sequencing of spaces communicates a strong narrative (Potteiger & Puttin 1998). The spaces juxtapose each other and emphasize the dissimilarities. The first event of the Nekrotopio narrative starts at the composting chambers. In

this space, corpses are individually lowered into chambers where they decompose through the addition of a carbon source. Similar to conventional burial, the corpse is lowered into the chamber; this retains the cultural tradition of lowering a loved one into the soil. However, unlike conventional burial where a grave is dug in the soil, the composting chambers protrude out of it, Figure 57. This stark contrast expresses the controversial idea of composting corpses.
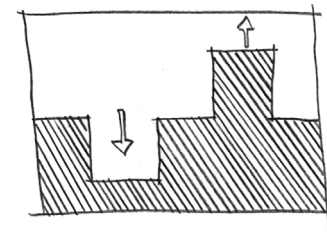

Figure 57. Negative versus positive space of conventional burial and composting chambers (Author 2015).

Corpses are lowered into the chambers on the upper platform, while the walkway below leads the users past them, as illustated in Figure 58 and Figure 59.

Figure 58. Initial chamber vision: An upper and lower level. Corpses are lowered into the chambers and users can walk past them on the lower level (Author 2015).
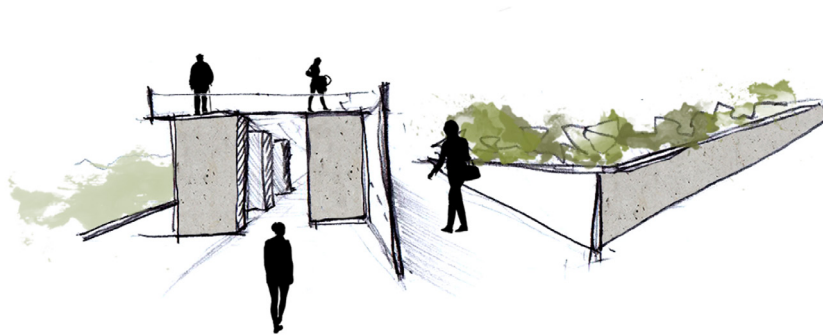
Figure 59. Initial chamber vision: An upper and lower level. Corpses are lowered into the chambers and users can walk past them on the lower level (Author 2015).

The intention of leading users past tall chambers where corpses are composted is to make them aware of their own mortality. Figure 60 illustrates that the user should feel mortal and insignificant. The walkway past the chambers is a confined and dim space with indirect light falling on the memorial wall and direct light entering the walkway in-between the chambers; this creates a serious space, as opposed to a brighter and open space, which feels light-hearted.

Figure 60. The space makes users feel insignificant and confronts them with mortality (Author 2015).

The materiality and detailing of this space is discussed in chapter seven: Detailing.

The second event in the Nekrotopio narrative takes place at the green burial field. Here, unembalmed corpses in woven straw caskets are buried in shallow graves. Unlike conventional graves, green burial graves remain unmarked, because they are reused every ten years. This space in the narrative is a vast open veldt. It is in direct contrast with the composting chambers where the user moves through an extremely enclosed space. From this enclosed space, the user is exposed to a vast veldt. The feeling from moving from event one to event two can be compared to walking through a dense forest and unexpectedly walking into a glade, Figure 61.
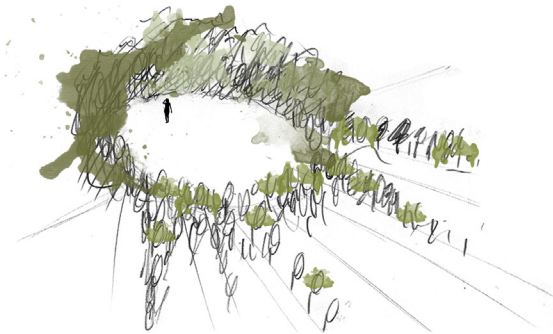

Figure 61. Moving from the first to the second event of the narrative can be compared to moving through a dense forest and unexpectedly walking into a glade (Author 2015).

This contrast should make the user feel exposed and vulnerable. Potteiger & Puttin (1998) describes this as erasing in a narrated landscape; instead of adding onto the landscape, a void or negative space is created. According to Treib (1987), the contrast between positive and negative space draws attention. Upon seeing and then moving through the veldt, the user should realize that the entire veldt is filled with corpses. Figure 62 illustrates that the space is a humbling realization that our bodies are reduced to organic matter once returned to the soil. Nothing of our earthly bodies remains. The absence of tombstones reinforces the notion that we are temporary. Placing a tombstone at the specific point of burial attaches a sense of permanence to the grave, however, within ten years there is no trace left of the deceased. Thus, instead the memorialization of the deceased should happen detached from the specific grave.

The user moves through the veld via a walkway. There is an absence of trees and vertical structures in this space; this is done intentionally to not break the vastness

Figure 62. Green burial veldt where the user feels exposed and vulnerable. The user realizes that all bodies are reduced to organic matter and returned to the soil. (Author 2015).

of the veldt and the sky.

The third event in the narrative takes place in the promession forest. Here, the ash remains of the deceased is placed in an eco-urn along with compost and a small tree. The eco-urns are planted to form a forest. The specific forest trees are selected to ensure they attract wildlife. The intention is to have a vibrant forest filled with grassland birds and animals. The dense forest should provide a sense of safety and calmness. There is a single path leading the user through the forest, sunlight filters through the trees, and birds are chirping. Figure 63 illustrates the envisioned genius loci of the promession forest. When moving thought the forest, the user should realize that each tree in the forest represents a human life. Each tree was nourished using a deceased's ashes. Even though we are mortal and temporary, even though we are insignificant and our human remains deteriorate, from our death, comes life. This is the notion of holism; human bodies are broken down into basic elements and from these elements something new, like a tree, comes into existence.

Figure 63. Promession forest genus loci: holism and acceptance (Author 2015).

After this realization, the narrative leads the user across the Diepsloot stream to a viewing tower. At the top of this tower, the *scenery of the dead* is revealed in its entirety. Potteiger & Puttin (1998) states that revealing and concealing aspects in a narrated landscape builds suspense and encourages users to engage and be inquisitive.

From the tower the user overlooks the shaped landscape along which the Nekrotopio narrative takes place.
The burial site is a composition, the user observes how the composting chambers, the green burial, and the ash forest fit into the landscape and each other. The user should realize, when observing this landscape, filled with generation upon generation of people, that each human is part of the greater cosmos. Death is not the end, but rather a sense of completion in the composition of the universe. Thus, instead of embalming our loved ones, or trying to create permanence with tombstones at empty graves, people should adapt to these suggested sustainable, yet dignified methods of corpse disposal.

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To conclude; the sequence of the narrative is as follow: composting chambers, green burial field, and lastly the viewing tower.

5.3 From follows...

Landscape architects often generate form based on adjacent buildings, existing infrastructure, movement patterns etc. Figure 64 illustrates such an example: the design intervention is a reaction to the existing setup. This strengthens the existing and produces an appropriate harmonious new composition.
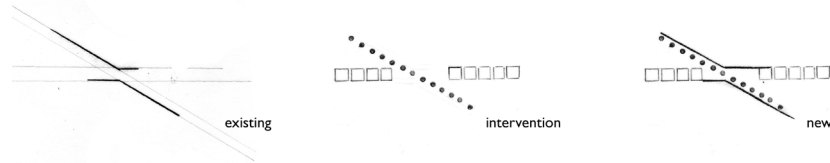
Figure 64. Landscape design interventions are often based on the existing built environment. (Author 2015).

However, what happens when landscape architects are faced with an isolated site? How is form generated? The proposed location for the burial site in the Diepsloot Nature Reserve, is rather isolated. The site, due to its reserve status is virtually undeveloped and has no existing buildings.

According to Ching (2007:195) there are numerous techniques to organize space: centralized, linear, radial, clustered and grid organization. In the event of an isolated site, clustered organization is deemed most appropriate. Clustered organization, Figure 65, relies on the physical proximity of spaces to one another. It usually consists of repetitive spaces, sharing a mutual visual trait, such as shape or orientation.
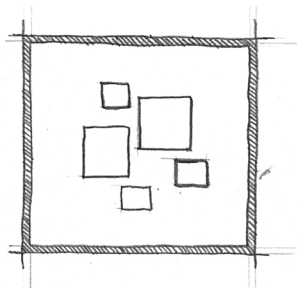
Figure 65. A clustered organization relies on the physical proximity of spaces to one another. (Author 2015).

It is accepted that within a clustered organization, spaces can be dissimilar in size, form, and function, but related to one another by proximity or visual ordering. Clustered organizations are not rigid; they are flexible and accepting of change and growth that does not affect the character. (Ching 2007:222). The design of the burial site is ordered to form a clustered organization. It makes use of three Ching (2007) principles to achieve this: common shape, Figure 66 grouping along a path, Figure 67, and a loop path, Figure 68.
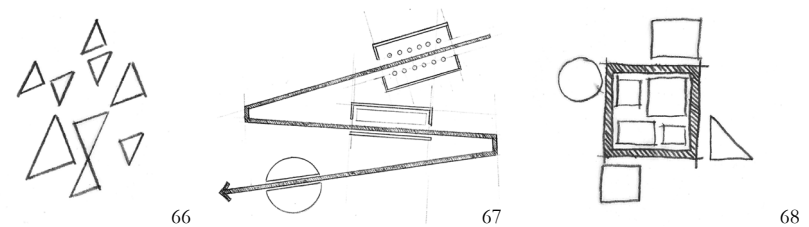
Figure 66. Common shape strenghtens a clustered organization (Author 2015).
Figure 67. Grouping along a path tries elements of a clustered organization together (Author 2015).
Figure 68. A looped path assists in structuring aclustered organization (Author 2015).

5.3.1 Common shape

A repetitive shape strengthens the notion of unity in a clustered organization. The idea of juxtaposition was used to determine an appropriate shape for the design. Although there is no existing built form to respond to, the DNR has a very diverse typography, Figure 69, which creates an organic backdrop.

This organic backdrop can be emphasized using clean geometrical lines. Two examples where an organic backdrop is contrasted with strong geometry are the Kaufmann Desert House and the Glass House. The Kauffmann Desert House, in Palm Springs, California, by Richard Neutra, successfully accentuates the mountainous topography, as well as the modernist dwelling. The Desert House was not designed to blend into the site in a Wrightian style, but rather to contrast it (McGrew 2012). The iconic horizontal planes juxtapose the rugged landscape, Figure 70. The Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, by Phillip Johnson, effectively contrasts the forest in the background. The foliage of the forest creates an organic silhouette in the background. Although the pillars of the house mimic the verticality of the tree trunks, the major space-defining element of the dwelling, the roof plane, strongly contrasts it, Figure 71. This successfully emphasizes
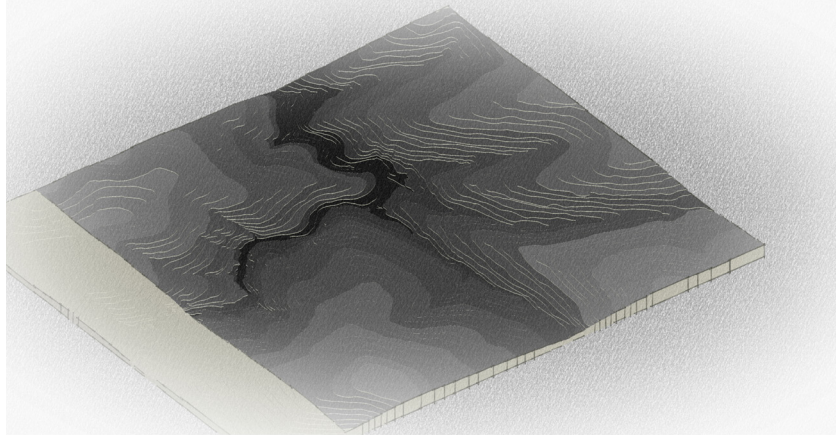
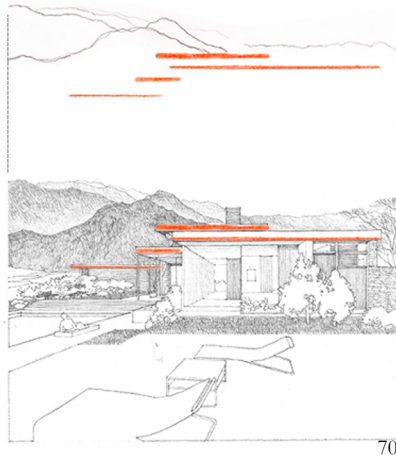Figure 69. Diverse topography of the Diepsloot Nature Reserve (Author 2015).

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Figure 70. Kaufmann Desert House's strong horizontal planes contrast and emphasize the moutainus topography (Ching 2007 edited by Author 2015).
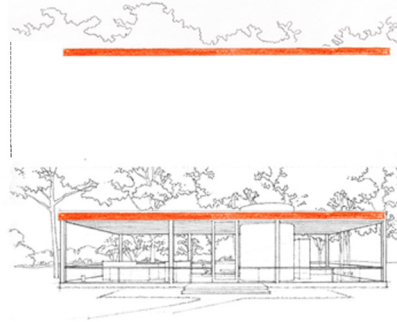Figure 71. The Glass House's dominating horizontal roof slab juxtaposes the organic forest silhouette (Ching 2007 edited by Author 2015).

both the natural beauty of the forest, as well as the geometry of the dwelling. Similar to these examples, instead of designing an intervention that will blend into the DNR, the intervention should juxtapose it with the intention of placing emphasis on the nature reserve, as well as the design.

Figure 72. Juxtaposing elements emphasize each other (Author 2015).

5.3.2 Grouping along a path
The narrative, as described in 5.2, dictates that the user is led through a sequence of spaces. These spaces are grouped in a predetermined order along the main path of the burial site. Ching (2007) states that the grouping of spaces along a movement route strengthens and helps define a clustered organization.

5.3.3 A looped path
A looped path does not only tie a clustered organization together, it also reinforces the narrative. The looped walkway starts and finishes at the same point; this strengthens the notion of the great circle of life. The looped walkway creates a sense of completion, just like death is the completion of life. Each person is nourished using the earth's resources and once they die, they are returned to the earth, from which a new generation is nourished.

Designing the burial site as a clustered organization will bring unity to the design and strengthen the narrative.

5.4   Concept

Although the intention is to design a *memento mori* in the form of a narrated landscape, this does not give form to the design. It merely explains the type and quality of spaces needed to convey the narrative. A concept should enable a landscape architect to give form to the design. The concept is inspired by the
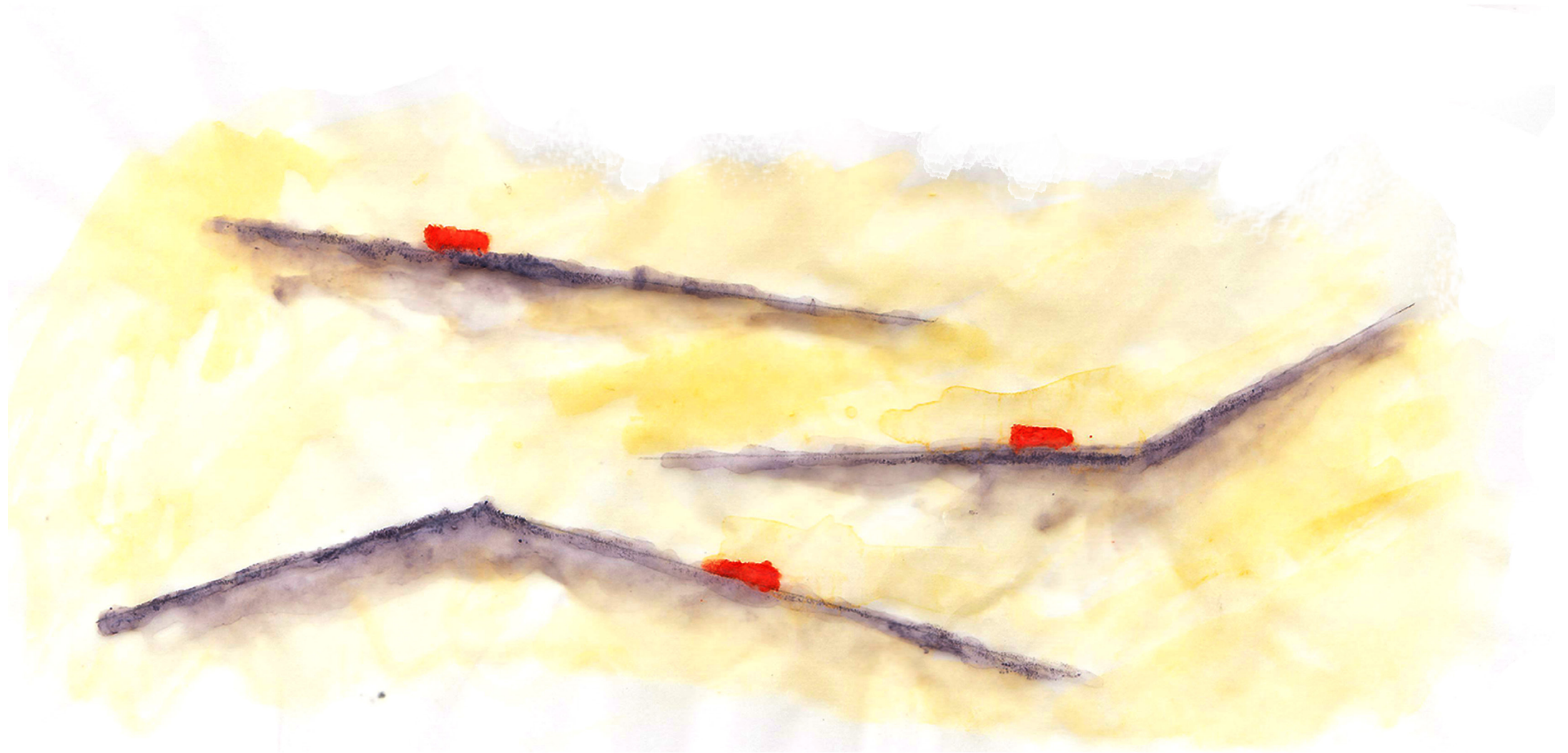
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Figure 73. Concept Painting: Shaping the landscape, through cutting, and creating moments of intensity (Author 2015).
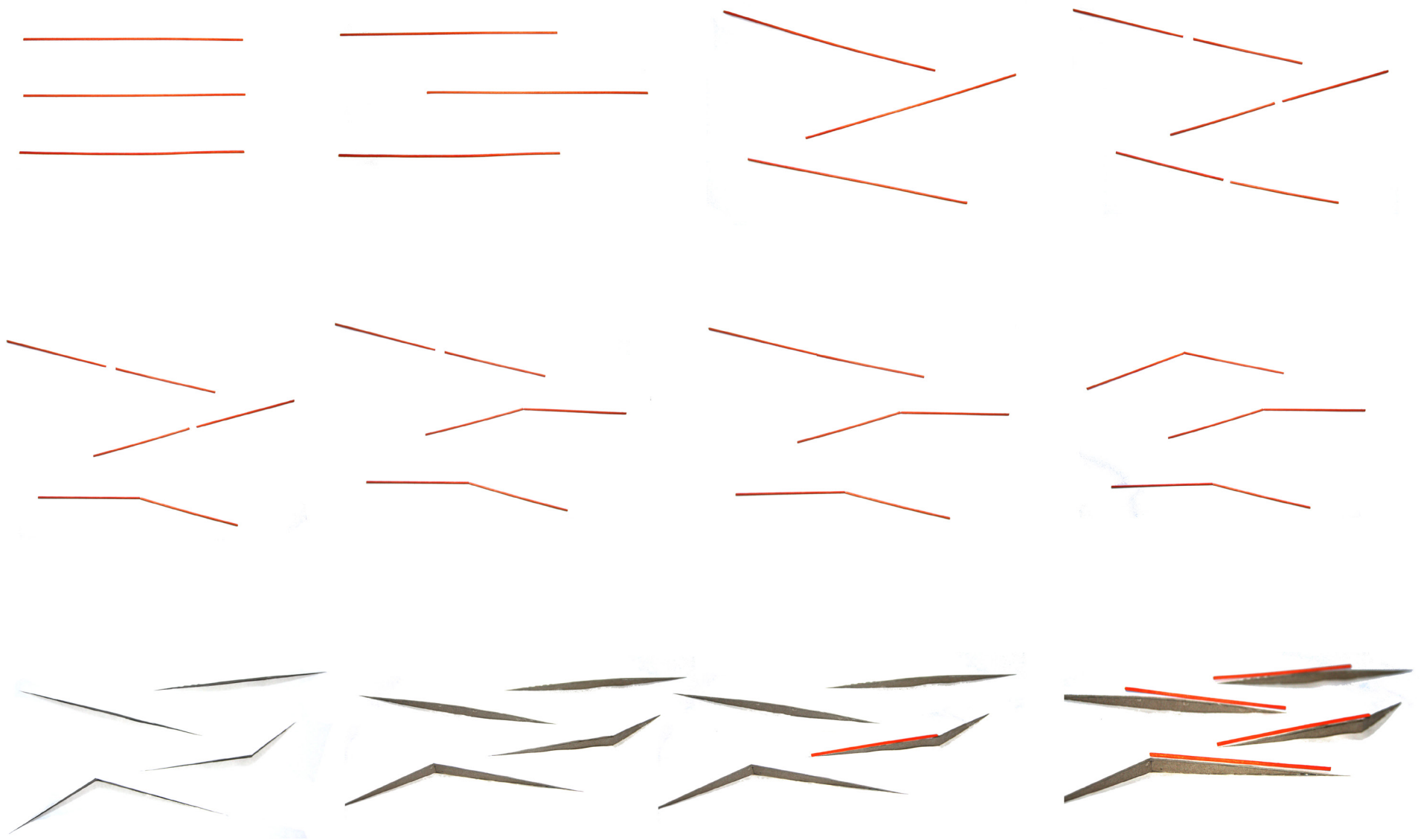
Figure 74. Evolution of conceptual form (Author 2015).

idea of clustered organizations, the narrative, and how the user will experience narrative. The concept is illustrated by the painting in Figure 73: A shaped landscape of common form, with moments of intensity.

5.5 Conceptual Form generation

Figure 74 shows the evolution of the conceptual form generation. As a point of departure the strong horizontal lines, as seen in the example of the Kaufmann Desert House, is used. Through a series of experiments, the lines are moved, rotated, and cut to form a simple composition of triangular shapes. These two-dimensional shapes are then made three-dimensional to create a conceptual form showing a shaped landscape.

5.6 Conclusion

The next chapter shows how the conceptual form generation led to the actual form generation of cutting into the landscape and adding volume to it in order to shape the landscape. This shaped landscape gives form to the burial site's narrative.