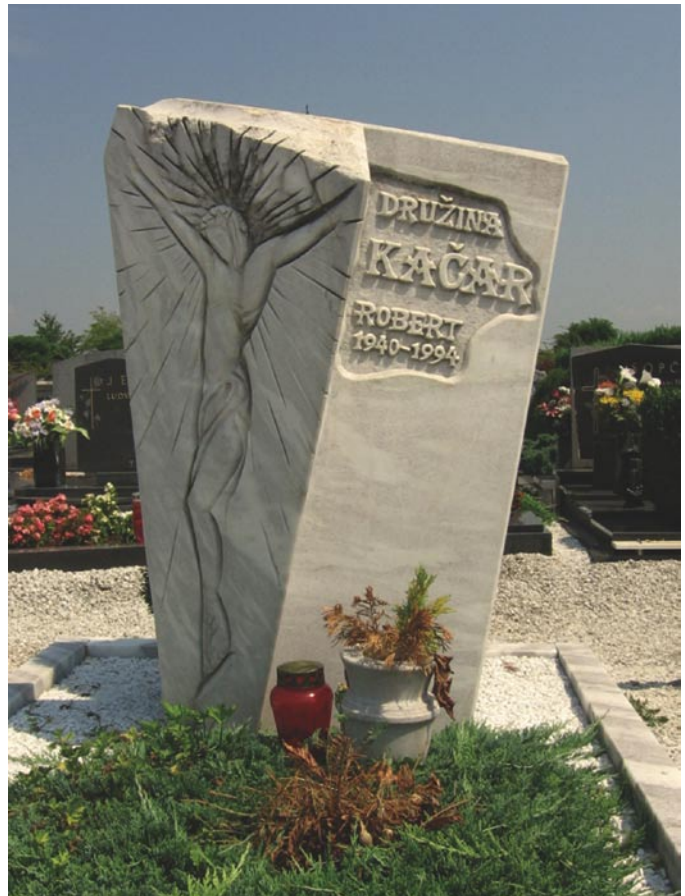




A recently erected tombstone, this work captures balance and unity in the form of a pan-Slavic interpretation of yin and yang. Approximately 2 cm. (less than one inch) separates the two stone spheres, which appear to be touching one another.



In this 40-year-old work, a simple and colorful folk art mosaic brings a vitality to the otherwise dull-textured limestone tablet and granite members. The mosaic inset has weathered the varied Ljubljana seasons with ease.



This innovative design uses a local marble quarried around the Karst region of Slovenija. The handset lettering in relief brilliantly compliments the sculpted figure.



Completed in 1940, the main entrance to Žale, designed by Joe Plenik, is emphasized by an imposing *propylaeum* framing the catafalque, tribune and central oratory.

Are We There Yet? Cemeteries of the Former Yugoslavia—Part I

By Dan Bellan, CM

Jozef Tito presided over a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia from 1945 until his death in 1980. During the 11 years following his death, the country gradually fractured into regionalism and ethnic divisions, which finally led to Homeland Wars in 1991. The land once known as Yugoslavia is now a region consisting of six new countries: Slovenija, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and most recently, Montenegro.

In this first of two articles that explores the work of Yugoslavian stone masons and monument builders, I'm compelled to answer the question posed by my column by saying "Yes, we're here, we have arrived." After experiencing the wonderfully diverse cemetery landscapes and architectures throughout former Yugoslavia, it's certainly refreshing to know that the monument builders, stonemasons, and craftsmen from the region are supported from the cemetery administration management who simply say, "Make sure whatever

you design and erect into these landscapes is unique and good. And the more unique, the better." That said, let's begin our tour in Ljubljana.

Zale Cemetery Ljubljana, Slovenija

In what was once Yugoslavia, the newly formed republic of Slovenija (1991) has become the most recent addition to the European Union. The capital city of Ljubljana is home to Žale, one of the most impressive cemeteries I have visited in Europe—or anywhere else for that matter. On January 25, 2007, Žale was the recipient of the European Heritage Award, an initiative to support and protect cultural goods, monuments and natural and urban areas. The purpose of this initiative is to foster European identity and the awareness of mutual European history based on European heritage.



This intricate and textured limestone monument looks like a section from a medieval Bosnian bridge. Note the simple line engraving of the hand-set Cyrillic script, and how the rhythm of the lines animate the stone.

Designed in 1940 by Slovene architect Jože Plešnik, the vision for the cemetery was to combine tradition with modernism. Plešnik managed to create a cemetery that links the community to its roots, while at the same time, anchors them to the present. Perhaps the greatest vision that Plešnik had was that the cemetery was not to be a ground for mourning, but one for consolation and hope, peace and comfort. This extraordinary model of respect and democratic attitude concerning those who have passed on originated squarely from the heart of European cultural tradition.

While in Ljubljana, I had the good fortune to spend a couple of days touring the grounds at Žale and speaking with Robert Martinčič, an economist who is the director of operations for the cemetery. Those couple of days and conversations had a profound impact on how I see my own role in this industry, and how I now approach the commemorative art culture in my geography and landscape.

Inside Žale

There are many entrances to the Žale cemetery grounds, but the main entrance is fashioned in an impressive traditional Romanesque propylaeum. This inviting propylaeum marks the transition from the city of the living to the city of the deceased. Inside the grounds there is an inventory of chapels, oratories, and various workshops



In this highly original approach to memorialization, stainless steel (forming the abstract lattice), bronze (the bust), marble, and aluminum lettering are used.

adorned with frescoes and Sgraffiti, complimented by a rich and diverse flora, and many outstanding works of commemorative art.

The construction at Žale was accomplished using modest resources, and conceptualized on the old Semper theory, which says that architecture should originate from the craft trades. In short, the Semper theory decorates construction, rather than constructing decoration. The work of commemorative art is the object that serves a purpose and service, while the architecture provides a space that elevates the experience of use. This approach to creating the Žale landscape has resulted in a brilliant example of diverse works with high artistic quality—a far cry from the typical classical and dry eclecticism that result from corporate forces that demand integration and uniformity.

The cemetery landscape also represents a cultural and historic monument area and a space of sculpted nature. The driving philosophy behind the operations of the cemetery is to maintain and preserve ambience, architectural unity, and the environmental value of sculpted nature. Žale's diversity offers an array of absorbing sensory experiences, making the landscape one of the most original solutions regarding cemetery architecture in the 20th century.

Besides the impressive works of commemorative art, there are three important factors making Žale unique: (1)



Forging new frontiers in commemorative art, this contemporary sculptural work in stainless steel, welded onto a steel lattice, depicts a reclining woman. Accompanying the sculpture is a simple turned granite flower vase.

It was the first cemetery in Europe to become ISO9001 certified; (2) although the preferred method of disposition is cremation (the rate is 92 per cent), it is interesting to find that monuments, not columbaria, accompany the majority of the interments; and (3) the cemetery maintains strict guidelines concerning the aesthetic level of monumental works allowed.

The landscape at Žale has very few examples of mediocre workmanship. The three main companies that design and supply the majority of commemorative art for the Žale landscape are VM Kunovar (which is the largest), followed by Svete and Završnik. To illustrate the advanced level of cooperation between the cemetery and stonemasonry guild, Robert Martinčič explained, "The cemetery works very closely with these local companies and must approve all design ideas before they can be placed into the landscape. Because the cemetery is a protected area, emphasis is placed on the preservation of the artistic, cultural and historical value of the individual graves. The monitoring of the work of commemorative art to be placed into the landscape begins before any stone is cut or any metal cast. This monitoring continues during the implementation, and ends after the work is finished, while all procedures are defined beforehand according to the organizational regula



Incorporating a contemporary Egyptian theme, this entrance to the new section of the cemetery was designed by Slovene architect Marko Musi.



For a cremation plot, this work of commemorative art shows a stone aggregate work framed in slate. This certainly pushes the boundaries of cremation memorialization.



A white marble pillar is flanked by a contemporary bronze sculpture in two parts. This "halved circle," symbolically and abstractly, can be interpreted as the duality of human nature.

tion of the ISO9001 standard. After the monument is in place, the gravesite is reviewed and documented with photographs and notes for the archives."

Cremation Trends & Commemoration

Because the trend in Ljubljana is no different than many other parts of Europe and North America, with cremation

dramatically increasing and cemetery land becoming scarce and expensive, my first question was, "Why, if there are so many cremations, are there so few columbaria in the cemetery?"

Martin i 's answer was simple and to the point: "People in Slovenija don't want big houses with many urns. Most people, if given the option, prefer smaller graves with personalized monuments. It is usually not about the money when families know there are artistic options available for cremation burials and commemoration."

This emphasis on the small grave footprint forces the creation of more unique approaches to commemorative art, specifically with respect to cremation burial. It's obvious that when cemetery planners and local stone masons sit down to discuss the future of the land-

scape and economic viability, keeping the landscape aesthetically interesting is the preferred solution because the long-term vision is mutually beneficial for everyone. When a cemetery landscape is visually stimulating and culturally meaningful, many people will visit and be part of the experience.

And, as far as keeping the landscape interesting, in 1988 the vision Slovene architect Marko Musi had for a new cemetery area adjacent to the existing Žale was realized. The new cemetery construction was laid out in a grid consisting of a series of streets leading



An effective, attractive and subtle example of good economy in design. This gray marble work follows the contours of the iron sculpture to depict what appears to be an opening for an old skeleton key.



The "Fountain of Life" by sculptor Zdenko Kalin offers a refreshing spot to relax in a park-like section in the middle of the cemetery.



A superb study to appreciate the interaction of bronze patination into a light limestone. This work also shows the functionality of a textured limestone backdrop acting as a "frame" to the bronze sculpture. The copper patina run appears as a soft blue band beneath the sculpture.



A cremation monument: A repeating band of simple relief patterning of leaves sitting atop a gray-veined Thassos marble block; lettering is gilded in gold.



Mastery in design is evident in this contemporary approach to commemorative art. This monument in white marble topped with a bronze bird, is a combination of carved relief, background bush hammer texture, and polished flat area for the lettering.

to private, enclosed-wall burial areas. These enclosed areas provide a quiet space for contemplation and solitude. Entrances to the new section incorporate Egyptian themes using pyramidal shapes, and inside the new cemetery are some very unique examples of contemporary commemorative art.

Security? Regulations?

With so many significant works in stone and bronze, so much publicly accessible art, “What about security?” I asked Mr. Martin how the cemetery addresses this concern, and was amazed to learn that there hasn’t been any theft of any significant works or sculptures. He explained that petty theft does occur, but is typically confined to flowers or a small candle. In 2004, a video surveillance system was implemented, and I had the opportunity to see the bank of multiple monitors at the nerve center of the cemetery office. The webcams are so inconspicuous that the average person would never know he/she could be on camera. This aspect, Martin told me, allows the cemetery to maintain vigilance of the grounds, which contain numerous irreplaceable works of art.

What is the regulating factor for the types of commemorative works allowed in Žale? Although not surprising, Robert Martin’s answer was: “There is no regulation as to what type of commemorative work goes into the landscape. Only the dimension of the plot determines what can be physically placed onto the grave.” That helped explain the various works in concrete, steel, bronze, limestone, marble, sandstone, granite and wood. And why some stone pieces were 1 – 2 inches thick, and others more than a foot thick. Undoubtedly, if most North American cemeteries could seriously study and implement Žale’s advanced model of cemetery management, the net result would certainly be of benefit to our culture and industry.

If anything, a cemetery should be a reference point for a community to remember its past and consider its present relation to it. In short, it is a question of how history is made. There can be no new architecture, no new monuments and landscapes, unless what preceded it becomes historical. The real challenges for any dedicated designer of commemorative art is to change history

and create a body of work that doesn’t eclipse the past, nor appear as a mere appendix to the work that preceded it. ■

About the Author

Dan Bellan, CM, of Dan Bellan Design, is originally from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has lived in Vancouver, BC for the past 20 years. A bi-monthly columnist, he’s been a frequent contributor to MB News and other well-known industry publications. Dan has a degree in chemical engineering, but the corporate world of engineering wasn’t hands-on enough for him, so he came into the monument industry full-time in 1994. An observant artist who travels widely and keeps his mind open to new ideas, Dan promises to share new perspectives with readers.

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