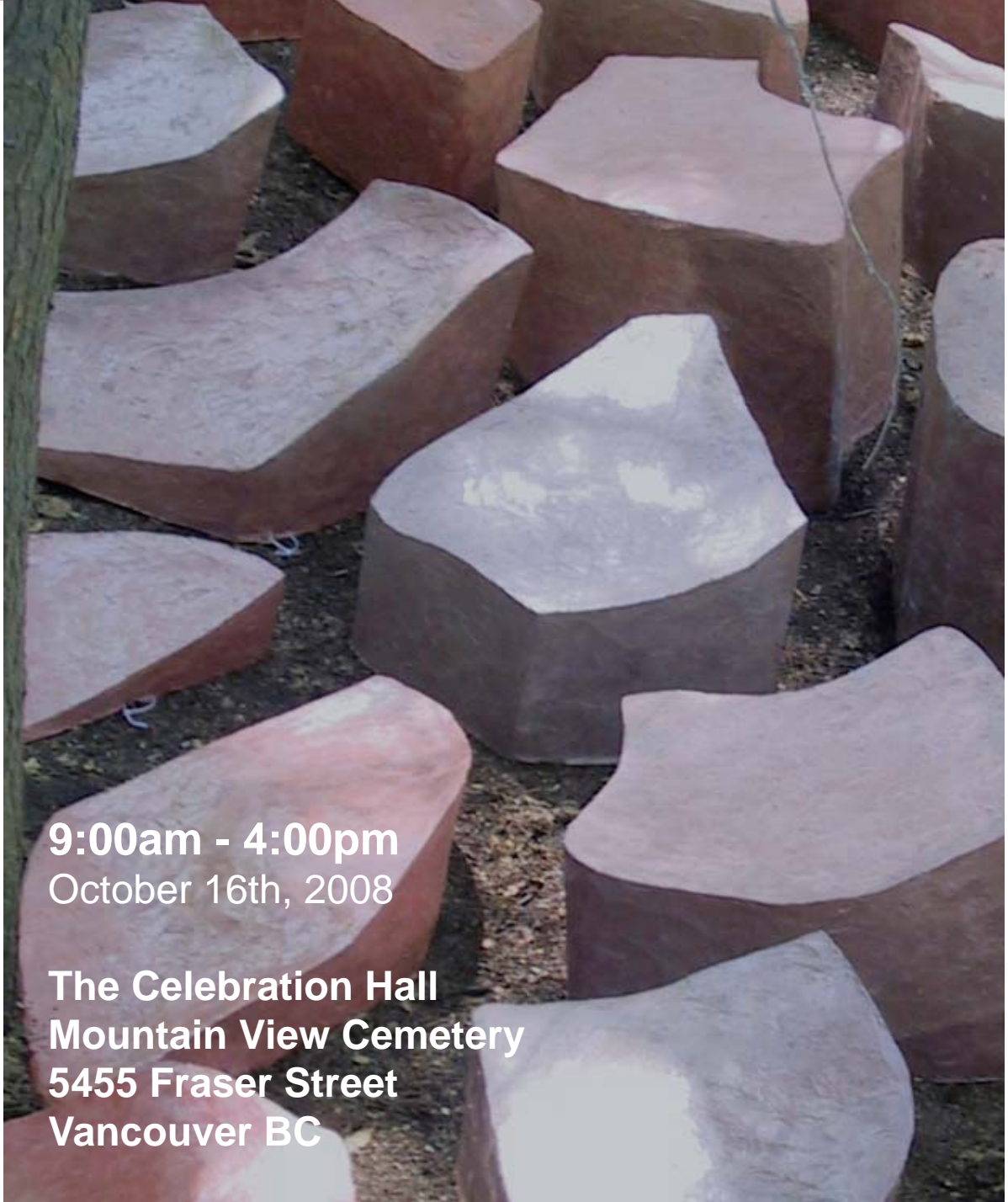


# ART AND MEANING IN THE MODERN CEMETERY SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS

LEES + Associates ANNIVERSARY SYMPOSIUM



**9:00am - 4:00pm**  
October 16th, 2008

**The Celebration Hall  
Mountain View Cemetery  
5455 Fraser Street  
Vancouver BC**



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## Background

In celebration of our 10th anniversary LEES + Associates organized and hosted a one day symposium on October 16, 2008. The objective was to discuss the role of cemeteries as contemporary sites for community gatherings and public art that link directly to bereavement, community memory, and commemoration.

The event brought together parks professionals, academics, landscape architects, professional artists, cemetery managers, and others committed to enriching the cemetery experience in Western Canada. The intent was to foster creative discussion about how art, performance and public engagement leads to increased community connections, meaning and revenue in municipal cemetery systems.

The feature presentation was delivered by Cecily Miller of Forest Hills Cemetery Education Trust (Boston) who heads the public programming at that historic cemetery.

The Symposium was planned to consider the following questions:

- How have installations, events and expressions of art added to meaning and “place-full-ness” in cemeteries?
- What are some of the barriers or challenges when bringing art into the cemetery environment?
- What are other opportunities in cemeteries for artful expression or public engagement that might enhance the experience of place?

### AGENDA-AT-A-GLANCE

8:30 – 9:00	Coffee and Registration
9:00 – 9:15	Introductions
9:15 – 10:00	<b>Cemeteries as Places of Meaning, Art and Ritual</b> <i>Leila Zeppelin, LEES + Associates</i>
10:00 – 12:00	<b>Art, Sculpture and Ceremony at Forest Hills</b> <i>Cecily Miller, Director, Forest Hills Cemetery Education Trust, Boston MA</i>
12:00 – 1:15	Lunch and cemetery walks, tours of the new buildings and redeveloped areas
1:15 – 2:15	<b>Opening New Doors, Changing Landscapes</b> <i>Dan Bellan, Bellan Design, Vancouver BC</i>
2:15 – 2:30	Coffee break
2:30 – 4:00	<b>Art and Artists at Mountain View Cemetery</b> <i>Paula Jardine, Artist in Residence and Glen Hodges, Manager, Mountain View Cemetery</i>

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# Presentations

## Leila Zeppelin: “Cemeteries as Places of Meaning, Art and Ritual”

Leila Zeppelin is an Associate with LEES + Associates Landscape Architects. She is committed to bringing her passion for art and landscape together in creating meaningful spaces in the public realm. Leila studied Landscape Architecture in both Sweden and Vancouver, earning a Master of Landscape Architecture from the University of British Columbia. At UBC, her thesis, “Memento Mori; Siting the Sacred in the Urban Realm,” explored the role of contemporary cemeteries as vibrant civic spaces that allow people to grieve, gather and celebrate.

Leila’s presentation began with a critical analysis of Woodlands Cemetery in Stockholm, Sweden. Woodlands was the result of a competition, won by Swedish architects Asplund and Leweritz, who sought to treat the cemetery landscape as a complete artistic expression versus a collection of individual grave sites.

The site’s former use as a gravel quarry and woodlot are integral layers to the cemetery. The architects did not bury these uses; instead they utilized the land form created by gravel extraction and the wood lot as the canvas upon which the cemetery was built. As a result, the landscape has even been described as revealing deeper notions of life and after life.



*Funeral Procession, Woodlands Cemetery, Sweden Photo Credit: Erik Lees*



*A place for solitary reflection, Woodlands Cemetery. Photo Credit: Leila Zeppelin*

Some of the special qualities of Woodlands Cemetery include:

- A sense of the infinite
  - Enclosure and comfort
- Invitation to views
- Retention of past landscape character
- Integration of landscape and architecture.

The grieving process can take many different forms. Consequently, distinct spaces at Woodlands are designed to be conducive to different types of grieving; some for collective grieving and or ceremony and others for more solitary reflection.

The success of this cemetery can be largely attributed to its integration of rich commemorative elements, the variety of social uses, and the incorporation of the larger landscape. The cemetery goes beyond



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strictly being a place for mourning the dead. It is an important wildlife corridor and even is a destination for kids to sled in winter. So, in many ways it allows for the full circle of life and death to take place.

Leila's presentation closed with images from Mexico, where there is an annual tradition of public grieving during the "Day of the Dead" in early November. It is marked throughout Mexico by a plethora of colourful rituals and customs that vary across each region.

Common to all, however, is the preparation of colourful artwork, costumes, special foods, unique gravesite offerings, and commemorative altars. The celebration is inclusive and multi-generational. It is at once a public event and an expression of personal grief.



*Prayer Flags, Day of the Dead, Mexico City.  
Photo Credit: Tilo Driessen*

A dominant theme in Leila's presentation was that cemeteries need to do more than just be places to remember. As space becomes scarce and our need for human interaction becomes greater, cemeteries are becoming important civic spaces. They need to be places of artistic expression, places to gather, grieve, meet, socialize and celebrate life and death.

## **Cecily Miller: "Art, Sculpture and Ceremony at Forest Hills"**

Cecily Miller is Executive Director of the Forest Hills Cemetery Trust in Boston, Massachusetts. She has more than 20 years of experience in community arts administration. Before joining Forest Hills she served as Director of the Somerville Arts Council, where she developed an all-volunteer municipal commission into one of the most active local arts agencies in the state. At Somerville, she developed an array of award-winning programs including exhibitions in fine art and alternative spaces, an artist fellowship program, education and employment programs serving at-risk youth, and two public art commissions.

Since joining Forest Hills in 2001, Cecily has developed innovative programs inspired by the landscape, history and spiritual mission of the Cemetery. She has raised the visibility of the Cemetery as an urban greenspace, arboretum, historic site, open air museum, and venue for contemporary art, music and poetry.

Forest Hills Cemetery was actually Boston's first public park. It was founded in 1848, 30 years before the development of Olmsted's Emerald Necklace. It was also one of the first places the public could view art - Forest Hills is known for having one of the most important collections of 19th century sculpture in America. The works of art in the 19th century collection reflect virtues of the of past: the tradition of portraiture was clearly at its height as were other representations of personal identity. While we now perceive these

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works as historic sculpture, they were contemporary in their day.

In 2002, on the 150th anniversary of the cemetery's founding, Cecily initiated an exhibition program to revive the 19th century practice of engaging artists to design work for this unique landscape. The exhibition program features contemporary sculpture and temporary site-specific installations. It has met with great success and has inspired similar efforts in cemeteries and botanical gardens around the country. Exhibitions were held at Forest Hills in 2002 (Spirit in the Trees), 2003 (The 4 Elements), 2004 (Revisited) and 2006 (Dwelling), and all were jury curated. A more permanent legacy of this effort is the "Contemporary Sculpture Path," an ongoing exhibition of sculpture installed along a meandering one-mile route through the Cemetery grounds. The path is composed of a small, but growing, permanent collection as well as works that are on loan for a year or more.

The art installations at the cemetery take many forms. There is a variable quality to the new works as they interpret the concept of legacy in different ways. What remains constant is the sanctity of the cemetery as place of safety for public art. In many ways, the cemetery landscape affords a maximum of freedom to the artist. Cecily noted that the purely functional designs of many modern cemeteries mean they are not conducive to spending time in. In most cases, what modern cemeteries are missing is ritual and social practice. In our culture, facing our own mortality is often associated with feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. At Forest Hills, the infusion of ongoing cultural activities has attracted diverse new audiences. Surveys at major events reveal that 30-70% of visitors have never been to Forest Hills Cemetery before.

A sampling of the past artist installations at Forest Hills are described below:

#### Leslie Wilcox, Nightshirts (2002)

Nightshirts evokes a Victorian family which has returned to the world of the living for a brief visit. The five ghostly figures are represented with stainless steel and mesh.



*Leslie Wilcox, Nightshirts (2002)  
Painted stainless steel screen,  
Spruce. Photo: Forest Hills*

Wilcox explained, "To me this is a place full of people. I want to celebrate the generations of extended families and friends that have shared these hallowed grounds for over 150 years."

The figures hover above the ground, as if in another dimension, almost otherworldly. As they sway in the wind they are a gentle reminder of the many communities buried at the cemetery. The piece also recognizes of the importance of trees in the cemetery landscape.

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Carol Spack, Bark Balls (2002)

Created from casts of actual bark, these pieces reflect an interest in subtle patterns of nature, patterns which are often the language of life and growth. Fleeting or overlooked textures and forms are captured in bronze, and so revealed in a way that makes us pause and see them in memorable ways. One might start to notice similar patterns elsewhere in nature, such as the lines of our own fingerprints, or the marks left by frost. The pieces pull people into the landscape and reflect a desire to find beauty in traces of time and nature.



*Carol Spack, Bark Balls (2002) Bronze, European Weeping Birch Photo: Forest Hills*

Lisa Osborn and Danielle Krcmar, Resting Benches (2006)

Lisa Osborn and Danielle Krcmar collaborated to create three functional benches. These small concrete Victorian-style beds play on the idea of a “resting place” and explore the origins of the tombstone as a headstone. As one of the centres of life in the home the bed is a place for rest, rejuvenation, conception, birth, illness and death. The sculptures reflect the significance of the bed to life. The sheets are thrown back giving the impression of both absence and presence. These small beds are beloved by children and visitors are welcome to have a seat.



*Lisa Osborn and Danielle Krcmar, Resting Benches (2006) Concrete Photo: Forest Hills*

Looking to the future, Cecily is now working to raise funds for future preservation projects at Forest Hills and for the development of a comprehensive Master Plan for the Cemetery’s landscape. She strives and to make the cemetery a place that continually evolves to reflect the spirit of contemporary society, and to draw new audiences to discover the many dimensions of Forest Hills.

## **Dan Bellan: “Opening New Doors, Changing Landscapes”**

As Principal of Dan Bellan Design, Dan’s passion is custom-designed, deeply symbolic monuments that feature unique elements including hand worked textures and lettering. He is also interested in materials that weather well in the West Coast rainforest environment such as basalts, limestones, bronze, glass and ceramics. “Each monument should be as unique as each life or event it is meant to represent.” Two sites where his commemorative art is taking hold are the Robinson Memorial Park in the City of Coquitlam and the Boal Chapel and Memorial Gardens in North Vancouver. Dan has traveled and written extensively on cemetery art around the world.

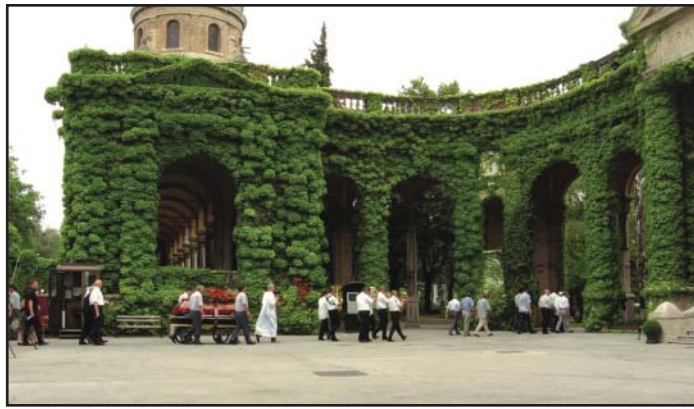
In his presentation, Dan led the audience on a dynamic visual account of



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his travels throughout cemeteries of Eastern Europe to North America, from the former Yugoslavia and Slovenia to Denmark and Chicago.

Dan's images captured a range of contemporary approaches to commemorative art. He noted that the trend towards cremation means smaller grave footprints, which forces the creation of more unique approaches to commemorative art, specifically with respect to cremation burial.



*Funeral procession at the main courtyard entrance, Mirogoj, Yugoslavia Photo Credit: Dan Bellan*

In Europe, artists and sculptors are forging new frontiers in commemorative art with highly contemporary and personalized sculptural work in a variety of materials including stainless steel, bronze, stone, concrete, and wood.

Dan discussed the idea of the cemetery itself as a memorial. He presented Mirogoj cemetery in Yugoslavia as the epitome of this idea. Mirogoj is a place where each unique work of commemorative art plays a part in contributing to the whole.



*Mirogoj memorial - offset granite blocks with a bronze head Photo Credit: Dan Bellan*

At Mirogoj the architecture, monuments and horticulture of the cemetery merge to create a wholly transcendent experience. It is a complex landscape that has been created over time by a cast of artists, craftsmen, cemetery designers and administrative directors.

From the outside Mirogoj appears as an impenetrable fortress, but once inside, it resembles an airy forest that is full of light, shadows and sensory experiences. The cemetery has a vitality that is shaped by the coexistence of many different styles. At Mirogoj, the cemetery landscape has been enriched by a guild of accomplished sculptors and stonemasons who have created personalized monuments in many different media. Dan noted that at Mirogoj, and in many other Eastern

European cemeteries, the "engine of art" is permitted to run independently of national politics. In many ways the cemetery is probably the most accessible democratic landscape. In a public cemetery, works of commemorative art can reflect what and who they need to reflect, irrespective of surroundings or political will.

It is this realization that solidified Dan's dedication to interpreting stories for commemoration in unique and conceptual ways. Dan demonstrated that when a cemetery landscape is visually stimulating and culturally meaningful, many people will want to visit and be part of the experience. He called on local commemorative artists to imaginatively push the boundaries of what can be achieved, and to strengthen the role of cemeteries as venues for contemporary art, and as cultural reference points within their communities.



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## Glen Hodges and Paula Jardine: “Art and Artists at Mountain View Cemetery”

After entering the field of cemetery management as a neophyte, Glen Hodges spent six years in Saskatoon learning and honing his craft. In 2002, he left his prairie roots and took on the challenge of reopening and redeveloping Vancouver's historic Mountain View Cemetery. With a degree in business, a knack for all things analytical, and a need to innovate, he is well on his way to establishing himself as a leader and builder of the modern cemetery.

Paula Jardine, a noted community artist with over 25 years of experience became the Artist-in-Residence at Mountain View Cemetery in 2005. The focus of her work as an artist has been to revive and redefine community art and the role of the artist in the community. She is the founding artistic director of the Public Dreams Society, where she initiated the annual Illuminares Evening Lantern Procession and the Parade of Lost Souls Halloween event.



*Candle vigil at the Night for All Souls, 2005*  
Photo Credit: Mountain View Cemetery

She met Glen Hodges at the Mountain View Cemetery in January 2005, and presented him with an idea for establishing an art event around All Souls. Glen hired her as an employee, thus creating a position of Artist in Residence at the cemetery. The first “Night for All Souls” debuted that same year, and since then Glen and Paula’s collective vision for Mountain View Cemetery as a place for public engagement has flourished.

The first step in planning was a series of workshops which brought together community artists, neighbours and the public. The workshops were a social situation, where people came together to build personal shrines. It turned out that they shared experiences of grieving as well. The workshops and the event itself have created a public atmosphere for grieving, to draw us away from our tendency to avoid death. Paula explained that events like this help make us more comfortable with death.



*Commemorative shrine at the Night for All Souls*  
Photo Credit: Mountain View Cemetery

The Night for All Souls is intended to provide opportunities for the public to commemorate their dead in a family oriented community art event. Artists and the public come together to create a sanctuary for remembrance and reflection. The idea is to bring back a space for people to honour dead in their own way, and to bring whatever their tradition is around death and dying. Paula explained that the event demonstrates how art can build community

identity and create capacities for community interaction. The Night for all Souls has been attended annually by over 1,000 people since its inception. Paul wants to offer Mountain View Cemetery, which contains the remains of

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more than 200,000, as a place where all people can come to remember, even if their loved ones' ashes are scattered, or buried elsewhere.

Paula acknowledged that she was surprised how affected she was by the Night for All Souls. In many respects, the event has been a process of discovering what is the right way to remember our dead as a community in a public cemetery. "This is how culture evolves...this is culture being created by a group of people, Canadian culture."

Glen noted that the Night for all Souls is a very appropriate commemorative event for Mountain View Cemetery - an event that should have happened a long time ago. North American cemeteries have in a lot of ways increased restrictions on what you can do – in the early 1900's you could bring flowers, maintain your own grave, and create personalized monuments. Today, the cemetery rules dictate flat markers, sizes, and limitations on flowers. The All Souls night is about coming to the cemetery and making something completely personal – be it a memorial shrine, a lantern, or simply lighting a candle or writing a message. These types of rituals have been missing from the cemetery for a long time. Those who have loved ones who were cremated and scattered, or buried elsewhere, now know that Mountain View is a place they can come to reflect on those loved ones lost. The Night of All Souls is only one of a series of events designed to honour the dead and the living at Mountain View Cemetery, which Glen wants to see become a centre for Vancouver history, culture and art. Glen and Paula continue to demonstrate that there is an important role for art and artists in the sacred life of the community and in the public cemetery.



## Closing

Erik Lees ended the session with summary remarks. He noted that the Symposium drew together a unique mix of cemetery managers, parks professionals, designers and artists who have not previously come together on this issue. Erik thanked everyone for their contributions and commitment to making our public cemeteries venues for art, performance and public engagement.

Finally, he encouraged participants to share key learnings and outcomes from the Symposium with their colleagues and home organizations.

LEES+Associates looks forward to hosting additional symposia around cemeteries in the future. For an electronic copy of these proceedings visit our website at [www.elac.bc.ca](http://www.elac.bc.ca).

