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OUR HONOURED DEAD
PRIVATE LOSS, PUBLIC MEMORY AND THE PASSIONATE ART OF ERIK LEES

The dead are invisible here. Under the fierce summer sun, the slope of ragged lawn and stately trees behind the now abandoned Woodlands institution at the corner of McBride and Columbia in New Westminster doesn't look much like a cemetery. Down the hill the derelict buildings of the province's former institution for mentally challenged patients brood over more than a century of sorrowful history. A cheerful billboard announces that a new housing development will be built here soon.

The bronze plaque, riveted to a small boulder beneath a giant sequoia, is harder to find than the billboard, and it only tells the curious visitor that he's standing in park "dedicated to the memory of those residents who died in provincial institutions 1900-1955." Nothing on the plaque tells the visitor that he's looking out over the graves of more than 3000 of those residents. From the 1920s to 1960, inmates who died on the grim wards at Woodlands (and a few from the provincial mental hospital, Essondale) were buried on this grassy slope, their graves marked by cast concrete headstones.

The plaque was installed in 1978, and bears the name of William Van der Zalm, then Minister of Human Resources in the province's conservative Socred government. Also cast in bronze is a bible verse that promises, "the needy shall not always be forgotten. The expectations of the poor shall not perish forever." A certain air of bitter irony hovers over this solemn promise, given the fact the government of the day had ordered all the headstones in the cemetery removed just the year before, thus, arguably, increasing the chances that the needy dead would be, indeed, forgotten.

For nearly three decades now the Woodlands dead have slept unacknowledged beneath the meadow grass, while their headstones were scattered to storage sheds, used as construction materials and fill, and left to crumble into the soil. Some of the removed headstones, in a macabre twist, were used to build a picnic area and barbeque for the Woodlands staff. A few still lie in grim disorder, nearly invisible beneath the draped branches of a nearby weeping elm. Local dogs roamed freely for decades and left the gravesites deeply soiled with feces. Despite the promise on the government plaque, there was no evidence that anyone but grieving survivors thought to remember or honour those who lie buried here. They were truly invisible.

But this long disappearance is about to end. Under the guiding hand of Vancouver landscape architect Erik Lees, the neglected grasslands of the old Woodlands cemetery are being reborn this year as a memorial garden designed to honour the former residents buried there. The garden will feature a reflecting pool, pathways, a spring, ornamental plantings and low-slung walls. The approximately 500 headstones that survived three decades of neglect and dispersal will be mounted on these walls. The names of the rest of the dead, for whom no headstones survived, will be on permanent display as well.

The visual focus of the memorial will be a sculptural installation called "A Window Too High." Stark and dramatic, the sculpture is a full size reproduction of one of the most heartbreaking details in the Woodlands story, the barred windows set so high in the wall

in many of the wards that inmates couldn't see out. Not only were the residents invisible to the outside world, the world was invisible to them as well. Set on a broken, rough-edged corner fragment of wall and looming ominously over the graves, the sculpture is a nightmare reminder of how dark and constrained the lives of Woodlands residents could be. When the garden is completed, the Window will stand over and be mirrored in the nearby reflecting pool. The pool, in turn, will be filled by a stream flowing downward from the hill top spring, and will be flanked by a grove of trees.

"This setting reflects the darker part of the Woodlands experience," Lees told the Courier in a July interview. "But it isn't meant to be gloomy. The plantings will grow and evolve, and both neighbors and former residents will, we hope, use the gardens as a site for reflection and contemplation. The names are important here, and the lives lived, but over time, while remaining a space sacred to the ones buried here, the memorial garden can play more and more of a role in the community narrative."

The themes of sacred space, memory and mourning repeat in the work of Lees and his firm. In addition to the Woodlands project, E. Lees and Associates have recently designed an installation in New Denver to honour the memory of Doukhobor children taken from their families and placed involuntarily in residential schools in the tiny Slocan Valley village during the 1950s. The Doukhobor sculpture, a long polished concrete table broken into two levels to symbolize the broken families of the 1950's, now sits partially completed just outside New Denver. Although some observers have praised the eloquent visual metaphor of the shattered family table, debates within the Doukhobor community about what narrative content the site should include have currently stalled completion of the project. Mayor Gary Wright of New Denver told the Courier recently that, "aesthetically, it is a beautiful site. The day the community will accept the statement made by the table will be a great step toward healing in the Doukhobor community." Less controversially, the firm unveiled in Vancouver's Mountain View cemetery this July a set of stone and steel monuments Lees designed to honour the over 900 military veterans whose graves lie unmarked there.

Pat Feindel, communications director for the BC Association for Community Living, has been involved with the Woodlands Memorial Gardens project since it began in 1998. She told the Courier that the Lees design for the gardens,

"has had to address a painful past as well as be respectful, contemplative, and aesthetically pleasing... a tall order! I think Erik has found a way to incorporate memory and honour into the design elements in a way that really works."

Much of the impetus for retrieving the lost headstones and creating a memorial to the Woodlands residents came from the Self Advocacy Foundation, a support and self help group for people with cognitive disabilities. The Foundation works in partnership with the Association for Community Living, and together the two groups sponsored the art show/oral history event "Inside/Out" at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre in 1998. "Inside/Out," designed to gather up and make public the lost oral history of the generations who lived and died within Woodland's walls before the institution was finally closed in 1996, uncovered many references to the lost cemetery, and generated a desire amongst Woodlands survivors to see something visible done on the old burial ground.

"The Woodlands Memorial Gardens are a very good thing," said Richard McDonald, president of the Self Advocacy Foundation and himself a former Woodlands resident, in

an August phone interview with the Courier. “It was not so pleasant to live at Woodlands. We got put into the ‘side rooms’ for punishment, sometimes in straight jackets. We got fed bread and water. We have to figure a way to never let that happen to people again. The opening will be our accomplishment. We need to tell these stories. We need to be in history.”

McDonald looked back on the changes in his life and the lives of other former residents since the closing of Woodlands with some satisfaction.

“It is a better life for us out in the community,” he said. “We’ll help other self advocates around the province do what we did. We’ll help other handicapped people do this for other graveyards around the province. Some people are afraid to tell their stories, but our support groups help people.”

Perhaps inevitably, some controversy exists around the Memorial Gardens project. Greg Shiller, who works with the “We Survived Woodlands” support groups McDonald cited, told the Courier in a phone interview in August that he was critical of the government’s willingness to fund the memorial gardens while compensation money for Woodlands survivors hasn’t yet been provided.

“A class action suit has been prepared, but we shouldn’t have to go to court to get something for what happened to people at Woodlands. Why are they spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a garden before helping people who suffered? I’m not opposed to the memorial, but the gardens shouldn’t come before compensation,” he said.

Lori Woods is an instructor at Douglas College who trains community and school support workers who will go on to work with clients who would have been warehoused in institutions like Woodlands in the past. She takes her students to visit the Woodlands cemetery at the beginning of each term, and was herself a volunteer in the work of retrieving and cleaning the headstones that had remained in storage on the institution’s grounds. Remembering that process, Woods told the Courier recently:

“The cataloguing of the first 300 stones in a tiny garden shed on the Woodlands property in 2000 remains one of the most powerfully emotional days of my life. We spent that day lifting heavy gravestones, brushing off the dirt and mud and bugs and spiders and worms! We alternated between sadness and outrage, but mostly we felt very honored to be there. We were able to acknowledge each of those souls whose grave marker stone we touched.”

Erik Lees has come a long way from his North Shore boyhood to become one of the premier cemetery design experts in Western Canada. The tall, fit and handsome Lees, who with his fair hair and blue eyes looks a good decade younger than his 51 years, squints into the sunlight and looks thoughtful when he’s asked about the origins of his obvious passion for using landscape architecture as an art form to express grief, and to support mourning and memory. What path led to this lifework helping communities move from private loss to civic remembrance? On a sun-drenched weekend recently, Erik Lees sat down with the Courier to explore some of these questions. He was on a brief break between design work in his office and the open-ocean swim he was looking forward to at the end of the day.

Maybe, he mused, it all began with the influence of his mother, Yetta Lees, who is herself a serious fabric artist and the founder of Vancouver’s pioneering Circle Craft Co-op.

“I can’t say the word ‘texture’ without thinking of my mother, who is an incredible designer in her own right...mostly in fabric, but she talks about texture in architecture

too. I learned so much from her sense of materials and her commitment to working with craftspeople. She has such a strong eye and a wonderful way of articulating what's going on in a work."

His mother's involvement with the Unitarian Church in the 1960's exposed Lees to visiting speakers like Tommy Douglas, and introduced him to a group of Unitarians who were planning to leave professional jobs in the Lower Mainland to establish a communal farm in the Slocan Valley. When his own family left the North Shore in the early 70s for a year of travel and study in Europe, the 16-year-old Erick decided he preferred the adventures to be found in the emerging counter culture and back to the land movements of the BC Interior to traipsing around art galleries and castles.

In the Kootenays, Lees soon chose horticulture as the medium he would use to channel the family traditions of artistic expression, and before long he had discovered mentors in local greenhouses.

"When I was 17 I went in to a commercial greenhouse near Nelson," he told the Courier. "I remember it clearly, it was near dusk, a coolish spring day, the old Dutch grower was smoking his pipe, tending the chrysanthemums. It seemed like there was a lot to be done and so I asked him if he needed help. Two and a half years later I was still there, now as a horticulture apprentice working for all of \$2.25/hour. That was where I got my start in horticulture and landscape construction, which morphed in later years into landscape architecture.

After 3 or 4 years running my own small nursery and landscape construction firm I was hired to run the City of Nelson greenhouses. It was during the prime of that city's parks system. We grew all our own plants, trees and shrubs, including spectacular display greenhouses in the city. It was in the hot humidity of those displays that I first became aware of how gratifying it was to see people enjoy the public spaces and experiences we created. Eventually I ended up as the parks supervisor there, including being responsible for the cemetery. It was and still is one of the great cemeteries of BC, on a steep site, with large trees, and tough, tough ground. It was not uncommon in those years to blast rock and stumps and in the early years many of the graves were dug by hand.

The cemetery was run by a fellow named Ralph and he taught us young guys to "bury 'em up good: straight sides, square corners." Two guys would take turns once the grave was too deep and narrow for two to swing shovels/picks at the same time. It was a sense of accomplishment and damn hard work to dig in that ground, especially in winter. I remember the grave digging being an interesting combination of hard work and reverence for the situation."

After a couple years on his own in the Kootenays, Lees reconnected with his Unitarian friends and joined them on a communal farm in the Slocan Valley known as The Gully. He credits his communal experience with teaching him how to design and execute projects taking into account a variety of voices and agendas, a vital skill for his current work. On the farm he built his own log cabin and designed a large communal garden. Slowly, he was acquiring the experience and skills he brought to bear on the Woodlands Memorial Gardens, the Doukhobor table sculpture, the veterans' installations at Mountain View Cemetery, and the many other cemetery and streetscape projects that keep his company busy.

Lees was quick to insist in his conversations with the Courier that all these projects are collective efforts, developed and executed by a team at his company rather than in splendid isolation. He also underlines the important role played in the design of the Woodlands project by extensive consultation with former residents of the institution, meetings he remembers as very powerful emotional and educational experiences for all involved. Lees is modestly reluctant to accept all the credit for these profound works of public art, but it remains clear that they reflect a singular artistic vision and sensibility. Stand silent before the soldiers' memorial at Mountain View, gaze at the eloquent visual metaphor of the broken family table of his Doukhobor project or look up at the painful image of "A Window Too Far" at Woodlands and you know you are in the presence of a mature and sophisticated artist. The Unitarian kid from the North Shore has grown up to become a speaker for the dead and an eloquent shaper of our public memory.