

Restoring identities for the once invisible

Sculpture will recognize residents who died at B.C. mental institution

POSTED ON 16/10/06

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VANCOUVER -- When Vancouver landscape architect Erik Lees was looking for a symbol to mark the hard life and death of residents of the Woodlands mental institution, he heard about the windows. They were too high -- most of the residents couldn't see out and no one could look in.

The mentally handicapped residents were invisible during their lives, locked up in the notorious institution, families and former residents told Mr. Lees. They also disappeared in death. Thirty years ago, more than 3,000 headstones in a cemetery on the grounds of the "insane asylum" that dated back to 1878 were gathered up and the land was converted into a park for dog walkers and soccer players.

But the provincial government is now working with family members, former residents and community advocates to restore the cemetery in an effort to right what all sides acknowledge was a historic wrong.

"They should not have been forgotten and they should not have had their existence wiped out," Cathy Anthony, who discovered the grave stone of a relative while working on the restoration project, said yesterday.

Mr. Lees, of the landscape architectural firm Lees + Associates, turned the windows into an evocative statement on how society treated the Woodlands residents, placing a replica of a window on a fragment of wall over a reflecting pool at the entrance to the grounds of the former cemetery.

The sculpture -- designed as the exact size and with the same number of small black square panes as those in Woodlands -- is too high to look through. Visitors to the site can gaze into the pool and contemplate how those with disabilities were treated. Looking into it, "we can see the window too high and we can see our own reflection," Mr. Lees said. The experience is intended to suggest that "but for the grace of God go any one of us," he said.

Ms. Anthony said the memorial is also important as a teaching site, "to remind us of the history so we do not go back to where we were."

The cemetery is at the northwest corner of the former Woodlands site in the Vancouver suburb of New Westminster. The rest of the Woodlands property has been turned over for new townhouses and residential high-rises in a community called Victoria Hill.

The \$600,000 project was to have been completed last fall. Then the families were told the work would be finished in late spring of 2006. Last week, the target was the end of November, with an official ceremony to be held possibly in the spring of 2007.

No one was working on the restoration one sunny afternoon late last week. So far, dozens of grave markers have been attached to walls erected on the site. Dozens more are spread out on the ground, waiting to be incorporated into the memorial.

Mr. Lees said only 700 of the more than 3,000 head stones have been recovered. The stones were found in various places, including on the floor of a patio used by Woodlands staff, in a retaining wall in a ravine and stacked in a long-forgotten shed.

The people buried in the cemetery were never disinterred. However, the headstones will not be repatriated to the graves. They are to be displayed in a communal way, on walls erected on top of the place where the people were buried.

It's impossible to put the markers back exactly where they belong, Mr. Lees said.

"If we could not be precise, we did not want to do it at all. We did not want to place them in an incorrect location; we did not want to place one person's head stone on another person's grave," he said.

The innovative project has been seven years in the making. The impetus for the innovative work stemmed from an oral history project after Woodlands was closed down in 1996, called *From the Inside Out*. Former Woodlands residents mentioned the cemetery while talking about life at the institution, but it wasn't clear exactly what they were talking about.

Pat Feindel, who was then working for the B.C. Association for Community Living, said she was among those who went looking for the cemetery. They wandered onto the park and found dips in the land, about the size of graves.

"I got a chill," she recalled in an interview. "I thought, we're standing on the cemetery."

After further searching, they discovered a few gravestones in inconspicuous spots under some trees. The discovery sparked more research, which led to a government commitment to restore the cemetery. The dismantling of the graveyard was indicative of the attitude to the people who lived at Woodlands, she said.

"No one batted an eye when the graveyard was taken apart," she said. "Most people now who hear about this are horrified by it."