

Peaceful places

The serenity and reverential tone of a cemetery garden can be an inspiration to all gardeners

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Vancouver Sun

Friday, March 01, 2002

"We could have a conversation like this and not be overheard or interrupted for many, many hours and feel quite comfortable."

Standing in the middle of the south meadow at Capilano View Cemetery in West Vancouver on a clear, bright February morning, landscape architect Erik Lees is talking about the sacred beauty to be found in the stillness and silence of a "cemetery garden."

We are chatting about the English landscape school and the beauty of vast, open sweeping country scenes created by Lancelot "Capability" Brown at places like Stowe in Buckinghamshire, Blenheim in Oxfordshire and Chatsworth Derbyshire.

I tell Erik how amazed I was to discover, standing in the immense expanse of the 320-acre park landscape at Stowe and again at Chatsworth and Blenheim, a remarkable feeling of enclosure and privacy.

How was it possible to feel so safe and secure and have such a powerful sense of human connection while at the same time being completely dwarfed by the vastness of a massively cultivated landscape?

"Enclosure does not necessarily equal intimacy," Erik says. "Scale is the important thing. It doesn't matter if it is a huge acreage or a small backyard, when the scale is right, there is always a feeling of privacy and intimacy."

A specialist in cemetery design, Erik thinks home gardeners can learn from a visit to a "graveyard garden," especially one as beautiful and well-proportioned as Capilano View, which dates back to 1927.

"This is such a magical site, being south-facing and situated above the Capilano River. The light is remarkable and it has excellent 'prospect and refuge' which means you can see out and around but not be seen.

"This gives visitors a wonderful feeling of security while at the same time a sense of prominence over the surrounding land. If you look at any of the great sacred places in the world all of them have this quality. Capilano View has it in spades."

After studying landscape architecture at the University of B.C., Erik got into cemetery planning and management in the 1970s. He has worked on cemetery gardens in Nelson, Victoria and Abbotsford and for the past year he has been drawing up the master plan for a major renovation project to create more traditional in-ground burial spaces at Capilano View.



At rest: Erik Lees feels that the sacredness of a cemetery can translate to a regular garden

With a total of 43 acres to work with -- 18 acres of which are at present a dense woodland of alder, cedar and hemlock -- Erik says: "Few designers have this scale of canvas to work on. And while it is not quite the same as a garden, the same principles and practicalities apply."

At Capilano View, visitors move from the darkness of trees and shrubs at the main entrance into the light and openness of the expansive south meadow.

The planting in a cemetery garden needs to be respectful as well as appropriate, Erik says. At Capilano View, stately sequoias and soaring cedars provide cathedral-like serenity and stability while the expansive green of the gently undulating lawn areas have a soothing effect on the eyes.

"This isn't the place for a lot of hanging baskets and flowering petunias," Erik says. "The appropriate response here is to supplement the native plant palette. There are rhododendrons and azaleas that harmonize with the conifers. However, some of the trees such as the cherries and Leyland cypress are in decline and will eventually have to be replaced."

As with all good gardens, Erik believes cemeteries need to provide a special refuge for contemplation and meditation as well as a place to find tranquility.

This is achieved primarily by creating a calm, uncomplicated landscape where people can find stillness and silence. The contrast between the busy, bustling world outside and the church-like quietness and stillness in the cemetery is something gardeners should strive to achieve in their own private backyard landscape.

"You always find incredible layering of meaning, history and narrative in a cemetery. It is important for us to be able to connect with our past and in a cemetery garden we can remember our ancestors and their life stories."

At Capilano View, the landscape has been designed to meet the needs of people at various stages of grief, Erik says. "This is a place that people return to year after year after year. Over time, their sense of grief changes. It still exists, but it changes. For these people, the cemetery garden becomes a tranquil place of remembrance and contemplation."

Change at the cemetery is particularly evident in a shady grove of tall cedar trees where a columbarium has been built. Made of marble, these above-ground niches are for storing ashes.

Designed by Bill Pechet, the niches have trough-shaped "sky-bowls" with no specific purpose. They are used as receptacles for flowers or simply left to catch a shallow pool of rainwater that reflects the sky.

Since there has been a marked increase in cremations over the last 10 years, demand for columbariums has also grown. The trend towards cremations will produce an even greater need for reverent garden-settings, Erik says.

"The cemetery garden will always be a natural place for us to come to terms with the reality of our mortality. It doesn't have to be a morbid place. It should be a place to find meaning and purpose. And like all gardens, it should be a place to celebrate life and find renewal."



"All the world's great public places have a power and sacredness to them. All these things come together for us in a cemetery."

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The Vancouver Sun Friday, March 1, 2002
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