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FROM ASHES TO GARDENS

THE REBIRTH OF A CEMETERY

Recipient of Canadian Society of Landscape Architects CSLA Regional Merit Award 2009

Project Title: Mountain View Cemetery Redevelopment

Project Location: Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Project Type: Cemetery Planning and Design



The redevelopment of the historic Masonic Area of Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver, BC, Canada was based on respecting its original spatial relationships while investing the site with a bold and contemporary aesthetic. Natural stone, wood and metals were used to create simple forms that provide capacity for the interment of over 2,500 cremated remains. The area has become the site of new community memorial celebrations, returning the cemetery to its role as a vital part of the city's public realm.

LEES+Associates is a landscape architecture and planning firm specializing in cemetery design, planning, feasibility studies and research. Extensive work has been undertaken in the area of cultural shifts in burial practices worldwide and ways in which cemeteries can become

more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. In 2004 LEES+Associates collaborated with Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg another award winning landscape architecture firm in Vancouver in response to a request for consulting services from the City of Vancouver.

True to its name - Mountain View - Vancouver's only cemetery stretches over 106 acres set against a backdrop of the majestic Coast Range Mountains. In 1986, after one hundred years and 150,000 burials but suffering from debt and neglect, the cemetery was declared full and closed to new interments. Following the preparation of a master plan in 2000, the City of Vancouver commissioned a team led by LEES+Associates to implement the design and construction of a plan to revive the Masonic Area, one of the oldest sections of the cemetery.



With the local cremation rate at over 75%, the consultant, in collaboration with the client, determined that the cemetery could serve the needs of the growing city and restore this historic area with revenue generated from new interment space for cremated remains. From early conceptual design through construction, the landscape architects focused on integrating the heritage of the Masonic Area with new elements. Thoughtful combinations of materials and finishes link the new interventions with the existing, creating a dynamic civic space for the public to honor both the dead and the living.

The project's primary innovation was to intensify the use of an existing but non-functional space to permit the reopening of the cemetery as an active and ultimately self-sustaining community resource. Locally-quarried granite ele-

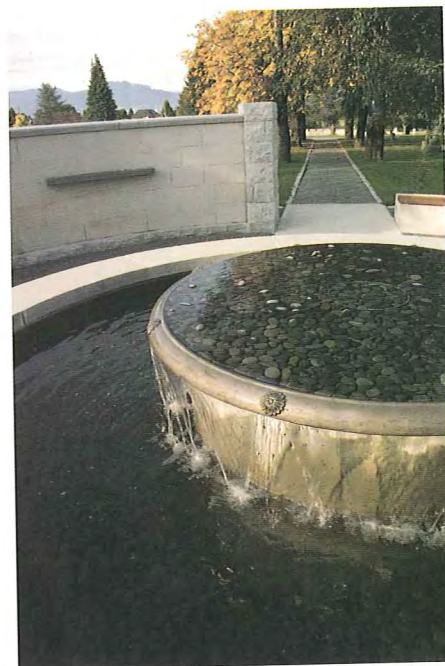
ments originally used throughout the area inspired much of the design. The overall structure of the site was re-established by revealing sunken granite curbs and markers that once bordered the cemetery's oldest graves. Rejuvenated, this heritage stone has now found its way into new thresholds, altars and flower repositories—key elements that invite the public to engage with the site.

The area's original footpaths were lined with new columbaria walls and resurfaced with permeable gravel. An innovative design in themselves, the columbaria were constructed with local granite and placed to define axes that terminate in mountain views and ceremonial gathering areas. Windows within the walls frame historic gravesites, further restoring the original geometry of the area and strengthening the connections between the site and its larger con-

text. Andesite, another locally-quarried building stone, was used throughout the project, notably as smoothly-finished columbaria shutters that link the interment area with the cemetery's new, stone-clad administration building.

FACING PAGE | Addressing the need for small scale flower cutting, disposal and garbage receptacles is an ongoing issue in cemeteries. This flower station includes the same controlled palette of materials found in the cremation garden: basalt, granite and bronze. A timed device ensures water is not wasted. Photo Credit: Amanda Bullick.

THIS PAGE | ABOVE This watercolour site plan depicts the inclusion of the in-fill process on roads that are now redundant, following the advent of cremation. Close vehicle access to traditional casket burial sites is no longer required, creating opportunities to create above ground, intensive interment options for cremated remains. Rendering: Leila Zepelin - LEES + Associates.



ABOVE | LEFT TO RIGHT

An original cast iron fountain bowl dating back more than 80 years was restored and reinstalled as the central water feature in one of two ceremonial gathering areas. The curved walls were carved from solid stone andesite—the same material that was used in some of Vancouver’s most significant historic buildings. The curved memorial wall will be used to commemorate Vancouver’s heroes in the years to come. Photo Credit: Amanda Bullick.

View east from the west ceremonial gathering area, along the Chestnut Walk. Columbaria placed between the trees are arranged in a composition with large family urns – vessels used for the interment of co-mingled ashes or nested individual urns. Photo Credit: Scott Massey

The central ceremonial area where two of the columbaria walkways intersect. The geometry is patterned after an adjacent mosaic originally built by the Masons before they moved their cemetery to a different part of the city. Photo Credit: Amanda Bullick.

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A bronze, steel and polished basalt “spring” and rill at the east ceremonial area offer a contemporary counterpoint to the historic cast iron water feature. A sequence of 7 basalt and andesite stone slabs symbolize the 7 stages of life. Photo Credit: Scott Massey

Water features were incorporated into the design to elicit the spectrum of emotions associated with death and bereavement. As a rain-fed water feature spilling over a basalt plinth or mirror-like in a reflecting pool, water was visually, functionally and symbolically integrated into the plan. Water enriches and animates the ceremonial and gathering spaces, evoking a sense of intimacy and inspiring contemplation.

Columbaria are above ground structures that include a series of niches that are typically approximately 300mm in width, depth and height. This size of space is sufficient to accommodate at least one and often two urns full of cremated remains. The design challenge inherent in these structures is their “shoe box” like proportions, often resulting in a series of artifacts rather than beautiful walls. The re-development of Mountain View Cemetery provided an opportunity to address both the form, materials and functions of columbaria. One of the columbaria innovations developed by the landscape architects was the offset of the niche shutters so that their joints resembled that of a carefully crafted garden stone walls, with an elegant reliquary ledge upon which mementoes could be placed. The offset shutter system, combined with the reliquary ledges meant that the holding devices could be integrated within the ledge profiles for ease of access by cemetery staff. As well the niche shutters can be inscribed directly by the cemetery, avoiding the need for costly and inconsistent bronze lettering.





The introduction of spring flowering crocus, daffodils and grape hyacinth provides 3 months of changing landscape cover and colour as well as reducing the need for intensive grass cutting in the re-developed cremation garden. Photo Credit: Erik Lees

Client: City of Vancouver (Glen Hodges, Manager)
Landscape Architects: LEES+Associates and Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg
Consulting Architects: Birmingham and Wood, Architects and Planners
Consulting Engineer: Rodney Blackwell Consulting Engineer
General Contractor: Smith Brothers and Wilson
Columbaria Supplier: Sunset Memorial and Stone

Images and rendering courtesy the author

The design retained most of the project's existing trees, including an allee of horse chestnuts (*Aesculus x carnea 'Briotti'*), which required careful design and construction to install monumental structures between large trees and existing graves. As a gesture of respect, the oldest graves were over-planted with spring-flowering bulbs intended to naturalize over time under a new, more infrequent, mowing regime. The counterpoint of restored curbs bounding small meadows of daffodils and crocus reflects the design's characteristic melding of old and new, rustic and refined.

Since the completion of the first phase of the design in 2008, the reopening of Mountain View Cemetery has become a catalyst for art, culture and historic tours in Vancouver. Not only has it become a rich resource for those seeking to learn about local history, it has become a place for community events. In the fall of 2008, over one thousand people attended a *Night for All Souls* – an evening event that commemorates the dead, and recently departed. Aglow with thousands of candles, the Masonic Area was the centre of the celebration, with music, artists' shrines and family mementos adorning its architecture.

The Masonic Area Redevelopment has been welcomed by the community at this time of growing interest in local heritage and identity. The project has not only realized its design objective, providing a range of attractive new interment options, it has also created a distinctive and meaningful public space for citizens to honor the dead, contemplate the greater landscape and celebrate life.

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