



Back to the earth: a resting place of dignity and ease

Elegant pavilions, a broad portico and thick walls of 'rammed earth' create a calm, unobtrusive £6m extension and 17,000 more burial spaces for the Jewish community of north-west London

Rowan Moore



Bushey Jewish Cemetery
Bushey, Hertfordshire

In a Wahaca restaurant in London's Covent Garden there stands, improbably, a wall in rammed earth, an ancient but now uncommon construction technique. It was here that Andrew Waugh, of the architects Waugh Thistleton, took representatives of the United Synagogue, to persuade them to use it on the extension he was designing for their cemetery in Bushey, Hertfordshire.

They liked it. "It's like the Wailing Wall," said one, also improbably. They stuck with the earth, even though it required importing a specialist from Western Australia to do the job, together with a shipping container full of

formwork and other aids. They persisted even after a trial wall collapsed.

This is just as well, as it is the rammed-earth construction - whereby mud scraped up in remodelling the surrounding landscape was mixed with sand and gravel and then compressed into walls half-a-metre thick to make the cemetery's ceremonial buildings - that gives it its character.

Waugh likes it for combining "British soil with Middle Eastern technology". "If you say so," says Melvyn Hartog, head of burial at the cemetery, a touch sceptically. He likes it for "being of the real world". Whatever. You could reflect on the

appropriateness of earth in a place of burial, or the timelessness of the technique, but the main thing is that it provides a pleasing, calming sense of substance. "You feel at ease," says Hartog.

It is elemental and familiar but also has a quality of otherness. If it looks at first like concrete, it turns out to have its own kind of liveliness, made regular by the oblong forms in which it was shaped, irregular through the natural variations of the material. All of which are good things to have if you want, as Waugh and his clients do, to create a dignified, not-mundane, not-oppressive setting, that unobtrusively assists the experiences of funerals.

The £6.12m extension has been built because the 43,000 grave spaces in the cemetery, which serves a sector of north-west London, are nearly full, and another 17,000 are thought necessary to provide for the next 50 years. This requires 16 acres of new land, laid out by the landscape architects J and L Gibbons, and two prayer halls, offices and mortuary. There are also separate rooms for the Cohanim, descendants of Moses's brother, Aaron, who have priestly duties and privileges. They are not permitted to be in the same space as the coffin but may view proceedings through glass walls.

The aim, says Waugh, is to structure

the buildings around the ceremonies of Orthodox Jewish burial practice. As he puts it, tradition doesn't prescribe the form of the buildings but it makes clear rules for what you do. Mourners, for example, must enter through a west-facing door, then process with the coffin through an eastward door to the burial, then return to the hall (Cohanim now included), again through the western door. A loose array of pavilions enable this, with an open space between the two halls to assemble on the way to the grave. A broad, high portico, made of pillars in English oak, links the pavilions and gives shelter for gathering.

There are other touches - the portals are made of Corten steel, whose rust colour goes nicely with the mud and wood, and the floor in the halls slopes gently downwards, which subtly adds to its charge. Daylight comes from above, as often in religious spaces, through large, high windows. The style is the plain, rectangular, a reprise of the suggestive muteness that architects have preferred for funerary buildings ever since convulsive, crocketed gothic went out of fashion.

There is a clear and acknowledged debt to the Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm, a composition of buildings and nature that was developed from 1915 to 1940 by the architects Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz. The juxtaposition of the closed forms of the halls and the openness of the portico is particularly

reminiscent of the crematorium that Asplund put at its centre. The Stockholm cemetery is a work of transcendent subtlety. It sets a bar that the Bushey complex inevitably doesn't reach. The relationships of the latter's parts are not as highly attuned as they are in the work of Asplund and Lewerentz. There's something a bit too ordinary, for example, about the oak lining covering those parts of the interiors that are not exposed earth.

Nor does it attain the quality of the greatest architect-designed cemeteries - by Aldo Rossi in Modena, Carlo Scarpa near Treviso or Enric Miralles and Carme Pinos at Igualada near Barcelona - which is to make a place that feels otherworldly but rooted in the location where it stands.

The Bushey project reverts a little too easily to the common tropes of serious modern design. But its combinations of mud, wood and steel, of raw and cooked materials, of open and closed structures work together to create, as intended, a supportive background to the rituals of loss.

It's well pitched between solemnity and comfort, and grandeur and human scale. It is designed to sit easily in the ground and, eventually, disappear: when all the graves are taken, there will be no need for the halls, which can be dismantled and the earth returned whence it came. This is green-belt land, on which it is as contentious to house the dead as it is the living.

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this thoughtful in their design, which is strange, as architecture has always had a debt to eternity, or at least mortality. Since buildings tend to outlive humans, they have a particular role in giving shape to the emotions of death. And since it is the longer-lasting buildings that make it into architectural histories, our view of what architecture should be it is tilted towards the commemorative - pyramids, tombs, temples, churches, cenotaphs.

The dead are not troublesome clients, so architects may play creatively with basic elements, such as walls, openings, roofs and the admission of light, and charge them with meaning. Yet, as most people who have to mourn find out, the physical environment of grief is often not equal to the occasion. If you are not a devout Anglican who has earned through decades of attendance your plot in a delightful country churchyard, you might find yourself on the fringes of a vast Victorian cemetery, the bit near the railway line, the best spots having long gone. Or else in a crematorium whose chimneys, whether euphemised as an Italianate campanile or modernist sculpture, cannot help looking industrial - a place where mourners gather beneath ceiling tiles befitting 1970s job centres, and where the coffin sets off on its final trundle through curtains you wouldn't be seen dead with.

It takes some work to find better alternatives. Bushey gives an example of what can be done.

'Shelter for gathering': the broad, high portico (main image) of the revamped Bushey Jewish Cemetery.

Left, from top: washing facilities in the portico; 16 acres of additional land laid out for burials; and the rammed-earth wall of one of the ceremonial rooms.

Photographs by Lewis Khan

FOUR DESIGNS FOR ETERNITY

Harmony in the afterlife: inspirations for modern cemeteries from around the world



WOODLAND CEMETERY, STOCKHOLM
by Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, 1915-40

Over 100 hectares of woodland, hills, chapels and memorials, brought into harmony with a beautiful

sense of the relationship of buildings and nature. The use of different architectural influences - classical, Nordic, modernist - is potentially jarring but in fact gives further opportunity to achieve unity out of diversity.



ORION CEMETERY, SAN VITO DI MATINO
Carlo Scarpa, 1969-77

Built for the family of Giuseppe Brion, a self-made electronics magnate, Scarpa "wanted to show some ways in which you could approach death in a

social and civic way" and so put the graves and memorial structures in an accessible L-shaped garden that wraps around an existing public cemetery. His idiosyncratic combinations of concrete, mosaic, vegetation and water make it a place like no other.



IGUALADA CEMETERY
Enric Miralles and Carme Pinos, 1984-94

Where much funerary architecture looks static and rectangular, Miralles and Pinos chose fluid,

dynamic forms that wrap themselves round the contours of a Catalan hillside. Which in no way diminishes the cemetery's power as a place for peace and reflection.



SAN CATALDO CEMETERY, MIRAFLORES
Aldo Rossi, 1971-6 and 1980-8

Designed while Rossi was recovering from a near-fatal car crash, San Cataldo

draws on the old idea that cemeteries are cities of the dead. It takes the familiar forms of urban buildings, and simplifies and repeats them to the point where they become hallucinatory and strange.