

A View of the Future of Cremation Gardens

Something new is happening in one of British Columbia's oldest cemeteries: an innovative approach to cremation gardens.

By Andrew Robertson

Mountain View Cemetery is the only cemetery in Vancouver, B.C., and at 106 acres in size, it is one of the city's largest and most-important public open spaces. Since 1887, it has been the final resting place for Vancouverites, with 145,000 individuals now interred there.

Like many public cemeteries in North America, burial plots were historically sold at below market value, resulting in revenues falling below operating costs. By the time the cemetery was closed in 1986, the operation was heavily subsidized by city taxpayers. The cost of simply keeping the lawns mowed and the office open rose to \$750,000 per year. Only a few hundred unused casket plots remained, along with a small inventory of cremation plots along the edges of roadways and the perimeter of the site.

"While there were still opportunities for path and road infill, the cemetery's financial prospects looked bleak," says Glen Hodges, the cemetery's current manager.

In 1996, the city considered an offer to sell Mountain View to private interests for a nominal price in order to stop the drain on public coffers.

Mountain View's new lease on life began with a 1998 vision plan that outlined how the cemetery could reopen, become financially self-supporting and possibly even profitable long term. A master plan, commissioned in 1998, identified 12 distinct cemetery neighborhoods that could be redeveloped and revitalized over the next 100 years. With cremation accounting for 67 percent of local dispositions, and 79 percent for the province (one of the highest rates in North America), the plan to provide more than 100,000 spaces for interment of cremated remains sounded promising.

Glen approached the Vancouver City Council with an ambitious business plan to reopen the cemetery—and a request for a loan to fund the design and construction of improvements.

The Future is Density

Mountain View Cemetery is committed to optimizing interment density. Besides density advantages, columbaria also provide one of the highest potentials for revenue generation. The chal-



A columbaria unit expects path surfacing.

lenge was to provide a columbaria product and an environment that would capture the cremation market at the rate proposed by the business model.

Vancouver's death rate is approximately 3,700 per year within the city and approximately 10,000 in the Greater Vancouver area. Based on attracting approximately 25 percent of the city's cremation interments (and 6 percent of the region's), Mountain View Cemetery's plan is to provide interment capacity for cremated remains for at least the next 30 years.

The Future is Infill

The city decided to focus initial redevelopment in the historic Masonic Area of the cemetery. It fulfilled the selection criteria generated by the design consultants and cemetery staff and is one of the historically richest and most-attractive sections of the site. Planning work focused on the infilling of four interior roadways since road infill offered one of the few options for larger-scale development in the cemetery.

In 2002, LEES + Associates Landscape Architects and Planners of Vancouver were hired by the city to develop plans for the new



New columbaria walls are placed next to historic monuments.

Masonic Area. The approved design called for the introduction of 2,200 niches in 42 columbaria units, along with 26 family vessels, a community memorial wall and new, in-ground cremation plots. Related amenities included water feature plazas, flower arranging stations, seat walls, benches, signage, stone paving, curbing and planting. Remarkably, all the work was set within a closely delineated space surrounded by existing burial plots that were strictly outside the work limits.

The Future is Innovation

From the beginning, the city was clear in wanting to create a cremation garden in the Masonic Area that would not only respect the historic nature of the site, but also be innovative in style and appeal to contemporary tastes. This called for a great deal of design originality.

Holistic Design

Despite its scope and scale, the design of the cremation garden is conceived as a single entity. Even the columbaria, with their variety of types and sizes (ranging from eight-niche family units up to a wall with 204 niches), are designed to be a part of the whole. This was achieved through the use of a consistent, carefully selected palette of natural stone and architectural concrete and a range of subtle variations on the stylistic form.

The garden builds on the existing historic forms, materials, patterns and layouts found in the Masonic Area. Grey granite found throughout the site is featured in new columbaria bases and end walls, as well as in path curbing. Andesite, a heritage stone building material in Vancouver, was selected for use as niche shutters and pathway thresholds. Locally known as Haddington Island stone, Andesite is well-suited to a variety of applications and treatments due to its fine grain and neutral tones. Historic paths that run across the site run through the new development. A checkered paving pattern that appears in front of an adjacent mausoleum is repeated at a new path intersection.

The development in the Masonic Area also blends with the adjacent new cemetery administration buildings from the shared use of materials (stone, concrete and aluminum) and forms (strong horizontal and vertical planes). The result is a composition of structures and spaces that respect the historic context, but also offer a dynamic, new design direction for Mountain View.

Garden Walls

The columbaria function as a series of garden walls that delineate the cremation garden edges. Three sides of a central lawn frame the columbaria where 50,000 bulbs will emerge in a dramatic spring floral display. The walls function to define the space and create a sense of shelter and intimacy within the largely open character of the cemetery.

Longer columbaria units materialize through niches and cast glass shutters. The elements break up the mass of the units and enable visitors to view cemetery lands and monuments beyond. Portals and windows are aligned with significant historic monuments, strengthening the link between old and new.

Columbaria Shelves

The columbaria are designed with aluminum shelves located below each row of niches. The shelves give the columbaria a distinct appearance and cast changing shadows throughout the day, as well as provide a space for flowers and small mementos at the niche. Shelves offer vertical separation among the rows of niches, making it easier for visitors to locate a niche and providing semi-private memorial spaces.

Rosette-Less System

The stone niche fronts are designed to be installed and removed without the use of anchoring rosettes. Shutters, covering one, two or three niches, rest on aluminum ledges and can, with appropriate equipment, be easily slid up and out of the ledge for interments. The system provides a clean, uncluttered surface, allows the removal of single shutters rather than whole panels, and eliminates the challenge of aligning conventional panels. An



A set font style and size of sandblasted inscriptions on columbaria niche shutters creates consistency among interments units.



Mountain View's community columbaria unit design (cremation vessel and path surfacing to be installed) offers a clean, uncluttered surface.

the view to the future is now looking very promising indeed.

Andrew Robertson is a Landscape Architect, CSLA, ASLA, with LEES + Associates and contract administrator for the Masonic Area cremation garden project.

Project Credits:

Client: City of Vancouver

Landscape Architecture: LEES + Associates (with Phillips, Farevaag, Smallenberg), Vancouver, B.C.

Architecture: Birmingham & Wood, Vancouver, B.C.

General Contractor: Smith Brothers & Wilson, Vancouver, B.C.

Columbaria Supply/Install: Sunset Memorial & Stone, Calgary, Alberta

aluminum security door behind each shutter provides an additional level of protection for each set of cremated remains.

Inscriptions

To achieve a clean, contemporary look, inscriptions are to be sandblasted onto the columbaria shutters and the surface of the cremation vessels. Sandblasted inscription in a set font style and size allows consistently amid the interment units, helping to tie in the various elements.

A Promising Future

The redevelopment of the Masonic Area began in the summer of 2006, with a slated completion date of January 2008 as of print time. The total projected cost of the work is approximately \$4 million. Coinciding with this project is the installation of three new cemetery administration buildings (Operations Centre, Customer Service Centre and Celebration Hall) at a combined expected cost in excess of \$9 million. This work constitutes one of the larger cemetery redevelopment projects currently being undertaken in North America.

In March 2008, Mountain View Cemetery is scheduled to reopen with the sale of a range of innovative interment options.


“With so much pent-up demand, there is already a waiting list of more than 400 names,” says Glen. “We expect sales to be brisk.”

Revenue from the new cremation garden is projected to cover the costs of construction, plus a large part of the cost of the new administration buildings within several years. Phase II of the Masonic Area redevelopment is already planned. With Mountain View Cemetery's distinctive new cremation garden poised to open,

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