

WOODLANDS MEMORIAL GARDEN

The Design Intentions

As landscape architects and cemetery planners, we often work within established cemeteries, where the memorials, monuments and landscape are well defined as places of burial. This was not the case at the Woodlands cemetery. A slightly sloping meadow surrounded on two sides by trees, the site was devoid of any sign of its being the final resting place of over 3,200 people. Its most notable feature was the collection of impressive trees that had presided over the site for almost a century.

The original concrete headstones, cast at the institution using wooden block letters, had been removed or buried over time. As it turned out, some of them had been stored in a shed not far from the cemetery; of these, about 500 stones were intact and in reasonably good condition.

Developing a meaningful way to display the headstones was crucial for all those involved in planning the Garden. Due to the lack of accurate records, it was not possible to repatriate headstones to their original grave sites. A series of 21 walls was therefore designed to hold the first set of 500 headstones. Headstones were arranged on these walls by date, from the earliest (1923) to the most recent (1957). As the project proceeded, 120 more headstones were found in a ravine to the east of the cemetery. These were installed in the long wall that borders the north side of the garden.

Since the majority of the headstones were never recovered, 34 black granite name panels were incorporated on the free-standing walls. The name of each individual noted in cemetery records is etched on

these panels, ensuring that everyone buried at the site is recognized in this memorial.

A perimeter path, “The Garden Stroll,” guides visitors from one “pod” of headstones to the next. It also provides an accessible loop for patients from neighbouring Queens Park Hospital. The Stroll encloses a central green that will become a common space for children and residents from the burgeoning Victoria Hill community.

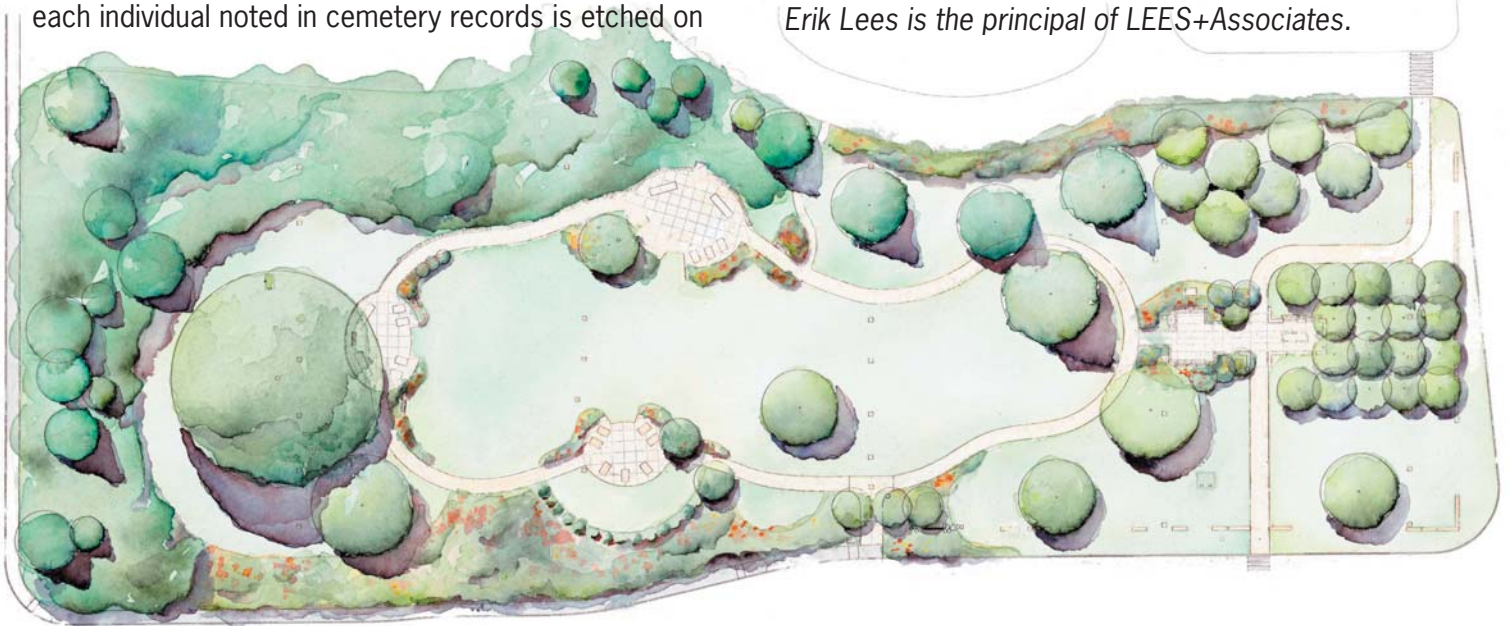
The sculptural element, “A Window Too High” frames the east end of the garden. This feature resonates for former residents, some of whom have memories of being unable to see out of the tall windows of the former institution. The adjacent reflecting pool holds a black granite model of the original cemetery layout.

A second water feature, “The Garden Spring” represents the new role of this site as a “headwaters” in the surrounding community. Its refreshing flow symbolizes hope for those who visit the garden to enjoy a moment’s rest on the benches nearby.

The “Respect Panel,” located in the Sequoia pod, is a simple slab of polished stone that rises from a bed of river stones and thyme. From this location, a view of the rest of the garden stretches south towards the old institutional grounds, now part of Victoria Hill, and the Fraser River beyond.

The Woodlands Memorial Garden was created as a tribute to all those buried here, with the hope that it will also become a place of reflection, contemplation and restoration in this new community.

Erik Lees is the principal of LEES+Associates.



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Historical Background

In 1996, families and self-advocates worked with the BC government to achieve a major long-term goal – closing Woodlands, the last and largest of BC's institutions for people with developmental disabilities, and supporting residents to move to homes in the community. Following this closure, the BC Self Advocacy Foundation (BCSAF) undertook an oral history project with former residents of Woodlands and other institutions (see *From the Inside/OUT!* video, from the BC Association for Community Living). In telling their stories, some former residents referred to a cemetery on the Woodlands grounds.

In 1998, researchers from the oral history project went to Woodlands in search of the cemetery and could find only a grassy park where it should have been. Hidden under trees or in obscure corners of the site were a few flat concrete gravestones, the only indicators of the site's earlier history. These stones became known as The Sentinels and they remain in place today.

We learned that the cemetery had been in use between 1920 and 1959, and over 3,000 individuals who had lived and died at Woodlands or Essondale (a psychiatric hospital in Coquitlam) had been buried there. In 1977, the cemetery was closed by a provincial Order in Council and the gravestones removed. Some were used to build an outdoor barbecue patio on the Woodlands grounds; others found their way into a retaining wall in the nearby ravine; still others were recycled in off-site construction projects.

BCSAF and the BC Association for Community Living (BCACL) approached the provincial government with a proposal to restore the cemetery and properly acknowledge and remember those who were buried there. That began the long collaboration that led to the Woodlands Memorial Garden you see today.

A Steering Committee made up of government representatives, family members, former Woodlands residents, a Douglas College instructor, BCACL and BCSAF, developed a plan for the site with the help of LEES+Associates. Volunteers worked tirelessly locating and restoring gravestones, documenting names, and researching the history of the site. Students from the Classroom and Community Support Program at Douglas College became actively involved in this work, and field trips to the Woodlands site became an annual part of their learning experience.

As the project moved forward, many relatives of former residents contacted BCACL in search of their family member's burial site and records. If you would like assistance, please contact BCACL at 604-875-1119 and/or see the BCACL website: www.bcacl.org. For information about the site design, contact LEES+Associates at 604-899-3806.

Pat Feindel, who served on the Steering Committee for BCACL, is now conducting research with relatives of those who were buried in the Woodlands cemetery to gather stories about this important period of BC's social history. If you would be willing to share your story to contribute to this research or would like further information, please contact her at pfeindel@sfu.ca; or 604-254-6264.

