

‘More trouble than Coventry Cathedral’: The architectural identity of Mortonhall Crematorium, Edinburgh 1961-67.

In March 1962, architect Sir Basil Spence wrote a confidential letter born out of complete frustration to Sir John Greig Dunbar, then Lord Provost of Edinburgh, *‘I am prevailing on our long friendship to open my heart to you about the Crematorium’ . . . concluding . . . ‘So sorry to worry you, but this job is giving me more trouble than Coventry Cathedral.’*

This paper, drawing on documentation in the Basil Spence Archive at the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Edinburgh, seeks to explore the vexed relationship between Spence and the City of Edinburgh that stood behind the architect’s efforts - in his words - ‘to get the best crematorium in Britain’.

An understanding of the historical relationship between Edinburgh and Glasgow is critical if the significance of Mortonhall Crematorium is to be appreciated fully. Scotland’s first crematorium, Maryhill, built in 1895, was not in the capital, but in Glasgow by a little known architect James Chalmers. Edinburgh would have to wait until 1929 for its first crematorium (Scotland’s second) at Warriston. In commissioning Scotland’s leading architect Sir Robert Lorimer, The Edinburgh Cremation Company not only acknowledged the important role that architecture played in the psyche of the city, but also showed that it was not prepared to underestimate the associative, symbolic and emotional value of architectural style and its role in the promotion of cremation. Warriston afforded the citizens of Edinburgh in death, something of the urbanity of the surroundings they had enjoyed in life.

The move towards the more overtly modern style, promoted at the Glasgow Exhibition in 1938, was writ large at Edinburgh’s second crematorium at Seafield. Commentators pointed to its ‘decorous jazz-modern’ subdued cinema style - the people of Leith undoubtedly ‘went out’ with a touch of contemporary style.

On another level, Seafield's Art Deco Moderne style anticipated the postwar architectural climate in Scotland, one in which Modernist architecture became inextricably linked with ambitious utopian visions representing a new social order based on equality and improvement, whether for the living or the dead. The Department for Health for Scotland had adopted as one of its avowed principles, the provision of crematoria to cover the most populous areas between the Clyde and the Forth and to keep within the national Welfare Services budget for Scotland. Once again it was Glasgow that led progressive crematorium design during the 1960s – indeed its record was remarkable – all three of the city's post-war crematoria were completed by 1962 – Daldowie, the first local authority crematorium in Scotland dates from 1956; Craigton from 1957 and The Linn from 1962.

But it was The Linn that set the bar high in terms of design. By Glasgow architect Thomas Cordiner, and completed in the same year as Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral, The Linn, on its elevated site, made a bold statement about the modernity of cremation in defiance of the traditional views held in Scotland. Its overall symmetry was underlined by the stepping of the dramatic cantilevered canopies of the long covered walks leading down to the south of the site which return to enclose the rear courtyards. Cordiner looked beyond Scotland for an architectural expression of cremation in a powerful industrial city, and his quest clearly led him to Blackley Crematorium in Manchester, by progressive City Architect Leonard Howitt, opened in 1959, with which The Linn shares a number of features.

Mortonhall would be Scotland's seventeenth crematorium. Opened in 1967 it came towards the end of the 'heroic age' of local authority building in Scotland of the 1950s and 1960s. There was a great deal was at stake here. While architectural identity was of unquestionable importance, there must also have been the anxiety to match, if not surpass, Glasgow's achievements. This was surely a matter of pride.

The story of Mortonhall illustrates very eloquently the compromises over cost that architects had often to make to produce civic buildings of quality, as

opposed to municipal buildings of mediocrity – an all too familiar story. The principal players were Basil Spence (1907-76); his partner J. Hardie Glover; Alexander Steele (1906-1980), the City Architect of Edinburgh and his Deputy, Leslie Roland Penman (c1904-1998).

In October 1958 the Parks, Markets and Garden Sub-Committee instructed Steele to draw up plans for the proposed crematorium, but the Edinburgh Architects' Department, in common with its counterpart in Glasgow, was at the time dealing with large housing programmes. It was this issue of capacity that led Steele some eighteen months later to recommend to the Civic Amenities Committee the employment of an outside firm of architects.

In appointing Basil Spence in 1960, the year of his Knighthood, Edinburgh Corporation secured an architect of considerable *international* standing. Trained, coincidentally with Steele, at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1920s, Spence continued to live in Edinburgh, setting up his first practice there in 1946, before opening an office in London in 1952 and moving south in 1953. In the post-war years he designed large housing schemes and new university buildings for Glasgow, Edinburgh and Nottingham. In 1951 Spence won the competition to design the new Coventry Cathedral, destroyed in 1940 during an air raid - his design attracting a huge amount of attention.

The Mortonhall contract was on a fixed price basis for labour and materials. In accepting, Spence specified that his partners in Edinburgh would supervise work and attend meetings *'but I can undertake to design the building and supervise all the details. This, I think, is the vital part'*.

Penman, provided site plans and an outline brief in November 1960. *'The siting and boundaries of the area were to accord with the proposals in the 1957 Development Plan for the City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh and would cover an area of 28.928 acres in total'*. The Cemetery would occupy 13 acres to the west of the site, with the crematorium lying immediately to the east, just within undulating woodland. The main entrance to the cemetery and crematorium was to be from Howden Hall Road on the east, by way of the

original east carriage drive to Mortonhall. The brief included *'a chapel to seat 300; another to seat 50; a Chapel of Remembrance; vestry; rest rooms and toilets; large waiting room; 3 gas cremators, with space for a fourth; a freezing chamber to receive four coffins; office and a workers (staff) retiring room. The buildings were to be non-denominational in character and after committal the drawing of a curtain to conceal the bier is favoured. Circulation routes should ensure that groups of mourners and their respective cars are kept apart.'* In January 1961 the contract was extended to include staff cottages and a five-apartment dwelling.

However, the City considered progress slow and requested plans by March. Spence responding, *'The Parks Sub-Committee must realise that this represents a great opportunity for a fine piece of architecture and I must make a request for ample time to think the scheme out before I commit myself to sketch plans.'*

In April 1961 Hardie Glover sends Spence 'tracings of the Kirkcaldy Crematorium competition drawing that it might be of some help to you in your . . . planning'. This competition, held in 1954 had attracted some 237 entries. Its overtly Modernist design heralded Scotland's move away from stylistic historicism for crematorium design. Kirkcaldy finally opened in 1959. Interestingly there was also a suggestion that Committee members might visit 'crematoria in the Manchester area' which would have included Blackely Crematorium, already a source for the design of The Linn.

In April Penman was 'anxious to know how things were progressing', Glover reported that *'final sketch plans were unlikely for yet some considerable time, although a great deal of thought had already been given to the scheme'*. Spence wrote to Steele with frustration on hearing that the budget was £80,000, *'I am extremely concerned about the crippling restrictions it will impose on me. This operation will turn into one of economical planning rather than an attempt to get the best crematorium in Britain.'*

Of course, it is not my intention to waste money, but there is a certain standard of architecture this Crematorium will demand and with my experience of some eighteen churches and the Cathedral it would be impossible to work down to such a low figure.

I feel the three Chapels should be in stone with the catafalque of the lift type serving a subterranean passage which connects with the committal room. As far as I can see, this will have to be a utilitarian brick and harl job to get the accommodation you require and satisfy the budget'.

Steele responded 'I have however been doing some arithmetic and, having regard to the size of the project, think that you will find it more easy than you anticipated to provide a nice building'. Steele then suggests 'one or two things which might influence your thinking . . . There are only two chapels dealing with cremations, the third being a very small chapel of remembrance; The use of the lift type of catafalque has gone out of favour and many people prefer to see some visible evidence of committal (sic) preferably in the form of a curtain being drawn across a recess; Every effort must be made to provide a building which will be receptive to the congregation and my experience has been in spite of good heating there is a coldness in stone structures of limited size as one would envisage for this building; The location of this project in a heavily wooded area might make the stone exterior less attractive unless one was using an inherently light stone such as Portland.

Plans were finally submitted on 24 October 1961, but Steele's report to the Committee suggested that things had gone awry, many of the shortcomings of the present scheme resulting from a lack of discussion between Spence and the City. He indicated that *'it may be necessary to move the building to another position and so to adjust the floor levels that certain practical considerations can be satisfied. The positioning of certain of the rooms is unsatisfactory and it may be that when an amended design is prepared, the architect will approach the problem from quite a different point of view. There can be little doubt that the design submitted is stimulating but I would hope that in the final event there might be a re-assessment of the scale of the building where one cannot hope to attain the uplift and sense of exhilaration*

which can be created in religious structures of greater scale and similar shape.'

Steele's report quibbled about the costs, now based on a design developed to the completed sketch plan stage. The area had increased from 7,000 to 9,000 square feet and the pool proposed by Steele had been replaced, he maintained, by *'a much more elaborate and expensive type of development and the allowances for equipment are much higher'*. Steele concluded *'I would expect some reduction in these figures without affecting the quality of the building'*.

On 3 November Glover attended a *'rather awkward and infuriating meeting with Steele and Penman'* at the City Architect's Office to discuss the scheme, at which a litany of concerns about the circulation and planning were raised. Glover telling Spence, *'It would seem that an early future meeting between Steele and yourself looks like being inevitable, but I think he must be rapidly put in his place on this whole project. Unfortunately both he and Penman have, in the past separately designed Crematoria, and consider themselves complete experts in this matter.*

He is, as you are well aware, a very plausible person, and could cause havoc in the Committee during his personal meetings with them by further discussion of your scheme when we are, in fact, not in any way represented. I discovered also that Steele has been asked by the Committee to meet Ministers of the various denominations to discover their views regarding the Calvary which you have shown in your scheme . . . I feel personally that he is not in any way the person to carry this out on our behalf, since he is obviously biased regarding the whole scheme.

Spence was furious, *'It appears that his main idea is to put his great fist into the scheme and destroy it. I would rather resign than let this happen'*. In January 1962 Spence justified his choice of a descending catafalque, *'partly because the ground affords this possibility and partly because of the architectural treatment. The finish of this Chapel is simple and austere, the introduction of curtains would completely ruin the conception and go against what is the primary thought. I feel this very strongly. The interiors should be*

simple and austere. This is not a cosy suburban chapel but a dignified and austere crematorium chapel for the city of Edinburgh.'

In February 1962 the Committee agreed, but in March Penman wrote with further queries. This letter was clearly the final straw and Spence writes to the Lord Provost a week later, '*The nub of the matter is that Steele is behaving like a bloody fool, is unbearably autocratic, bossy, rude, tactless and is determined to foul up my design for your Crematorium . . . Glover has been on to me this morning to say that the cost will have to be cut drastically. As I made clear at the last meeting, I am not interested in doing an inferior article, which will certainly be the case if Steele has his way. I must say that I have refused many millions of work recently (including two entire new Universities) and with taxation as it is I am only interested in doing good work. With Steele behaving like a pompous ass this will be impossible and I may have to resign . . . this job is giving me more trouble than Coventry cathedral.'*

After looking into the matter, Dunbar suggests that Steele is under some pressure from the Civic Amenities Committee and the City Treasurer 'who are being most difficult'.

A meeting was arranged between Spence and the Lord Provost and relevant City representatives on 17 April 1962 and some six months later final requirements were agreed. These involved the positioning of a small office for the Superintendent, the waiting room and the Chapel of Remembrance, which was to be greatly reduced in size. Glover concluded '*In order to avoid having too many small elements dotted around, I thought it might be feasible to link the Waiting Space structure with the Remembrance Chapel and, at the same time, move the pond from the East to the West which, in turn, links it with the Garden of Rest in this area'. Spence agreed saying 'I think it may even be an improvement so I would crash ahead'.*

Construction began in September 1964 but cost continued to be a problem. Spence designing the stained glass himself as the Council could not afford an artist. In August 1966 agreement was reached over the shape of the concrete

cross, inspired by that at Gunnar Asplund's Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm 1935-40. In October Glover and Spence were exchanging notes about the candlesticks, the cross in the chapel and the design of the City Coat of Arms for the entrance gates, which Spence thought *'looked like a postage stamp on this great wall which is handsome in its appearance . . . So far as the cross is concerned, I think that this looks puny and apologetic. I would much prefer something let into the ground behind the catafalque, free standing and much bigger ... Do have a look at the interior of Ronchamps and you will see exactly what I mean. I am certain the cross on the wall will destroy the monumental character that we have now ... Forgive me for being so outspoken but I feel that the Crematorium should be one of the best buildings we have done recently.'*

Mortonhall finally opened on 7 February 1967 at a cost of £230,000. As described by Fenton and Walker, *'The crematorium is tucked into the side of a hill and the main approach skirts a tiny memorial chapel containing a book of remembrance, to reveal a small and a larger chapel in the woodland clearing, their southern walls rising in sharp profile like jagged masonry shards ... The combination of angled walls and narrow window apertures and the use of indirect lighting was something explored by Spence in a wide range of buildings in the 1960s, including the Chapel of Unity at Coventry.'* The pyramid roof of the large chapel acts as a vestigial spire and admits light into the interior over the catafalque, a Baroque conceit to create drama; a concrete cylinder performs the same role in the smaller chapel, reminiscent of Blackley, Manchester.

The building's international credentials were impeccable, Gunnar Asplund's Woodland Cemetery and Le Corbusier's pilgrimage Church at Ronchamps, eastern France of 1954. Spence argued,

If I can get quality . . . if I can get something in the building that helps to enrich people's lives – oh that sounds pompous . . . But one can give comfort to people, comfort against fears and frustration. I think that there is a great social need for good architecture.

In 1993 the Scottish National Working Party for the *Documentation and Conservation of Buildings and Sites of the Modern Movement* included Mortonhall in its register of sixty key monuments from 1945-70. Spence had a clear concept of the social purpose of the crematorium. He knew and loved Edinburgh and at Mortonhall he provided, against the odds, not only 'dignified and austere' ritual architectural spaces in which mourners might engage meaningfully with the drama of death, but also a building with a recognized architectural identity, acknowledged as one of the finest crematoria in Europe.

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