

In Defiance of a Stylistic Stereotype: British Crematoria, Architecture, Design & Landscape

Hilary J. Grainger

When awarding Telford Crematorium a West Midlands Regional Award in 2000 the R.I.B.A judges observed that

A crematorium is a meeting point for complex human and cultural issues whose resolution into a successful building is potentially very difficult.

Cremation was revived in the late nineteenth century as an alternative to burial, but did not claim widespread support until the second half of the twentieth century. It is therefore remarkable that it should have attained so rapidly cultural normality, indeed ritual dominance. By late 1990 the ratio of cremation to burial in Britain stood at 70% to 30%.

Although one might not choose a crematorium as an architectural icon of modernity as one might a skyscraper, Britain's 251 crematoria are essentially modern and they carry upon them the marks of modernity. They are modern in terms of the complexity of their technology, much of which can seem secretive. Cremation called for a new building type – one without architectural precedent and the crematorium was in that sense analogous to the early nineteenth century railway station.

Although the first opened in 1889, at Woking, Surrey – the crematorium as a building type belongs more to the twentieth century. As cremation slowly gained acceptance in Britain, this progress was reflected in its architectural expression and each crematorium can be seen as a 'symbol of social change'.

Paradoxically, despite the growing popularity of cremation, those using crematoria often find them unsatisfactory, their design uninspiring, banal and inconsequential. Concerns abide over form, ritual and symbolism.

To date, architectural commentators have found little to recommend. In 1980 James Stevens Curl contended that

Most crematoria . . . are distressingly banal and poorly designed, and are composed of disparate elements that are uncomfortably unresolved . . .

By 1968 the Modernist architect Edwin Maxwell maintained that

There are crematoria of various kinds, which in one way or another, emphatically, demonstrably, anciently and modernly, simply and often dully, convey some part of the emotions they were built to evoke. But too many of the British examples gave me the impression of insufficiency, of a ritual becoming truncated, of work done to a formula, down to a cost, with materials of poor quality, as though crematoria could be as much run of the mill design as any other buildings valued beneath town halls.

In 1982 Louis Hallman regretted that there was something 'bland, rootless, functional, hygienic' about crematoria and that they somehow fell short of 'fulfilling human requirements' and by 2000, Edwin Heathcote concluded that the design of crematoria was 'largely a field of wasted opportunities'.

So what led to such excoriating criticisms?

Crematoria present a series of challenges to the architect. The lack of a shared expectation of what is required in a crematorium has inhibited the formulation of a conceptual basis, giving rise to architectural ambiguity and evasion. At once utilitarian and symbolic, religious and secular, crematoria remain fraught with complexity. Two very distinct spaces are required: the functional and the symbolic, linked by a transitional space through which the coffin passes from the

chapel or meeting hall to the cremator. While the utilitarian purpose – that of reducing a dead body at high temperature to vapour and ashes has remained unequivocal - the search for symbolic architectural forms remains problematical. Ruskin's contention that 'architecture proposes an effect on the human mind, not merely a service to the human frame', is particularly apposite in the case of the crematorium since it ought to provide a medium for the communication between spatial arrangement and an inner condition in order to assuage grief. But as Alan Crawford points out in the Foreword to my book *Death Redesigned: British Crematoria, History, Architecture and Landscape*, (2005)

Christian burial is a hard act to follow. And in that sense it makes the design of a successful crematorium impossible. How, without a framework of belief and shared meanings, can the design of a building reach out to the hearts of mourners, the people who have lost someone in death? It is hard enough for a person to do this, but a building? It is as if modern secularism and relativism ties the hand of the crematorium architect, makes her work only with the quietest, blankest, and sometimes blandest, of forms. If there is an emptiness in an atmosphere of some crematoria, it is because we live in a society which cannot frame the passage from life to death.

John Moore, architect of Telford Crematorium, does not believe that the crematorium poses major technical design problems, as the brief is relatively straightforward. After all, certain practical elements are common to all crematoria: a porte-cochere, a waiting room or vestibule, toilet facilities, a vestry, chapel, condolence area, cloistered wreath court, crematory, service areas, administrative offices and, particularly from the 1930s, vehicular access. The real problem maintains Moore, *is to create something special, appropriate to its purpose and with a sense of place over and above the ordinary. That's the challenge.*

Cost and planning permission emerge as perennial constraints. Crematoria must conform to the 1902 Act – they must therefore be 200 yards from the nearest

dwelling and 50 yards from any public highway. This radius clause, based on the Cemetery Clauses Act of 1847, was to restrict crematorium planning in the first half of the twentieth century. As a result, they require a disproportionately large site, which explains their often being confined to the margins of towns and cities, assisted by the dual carriageways necessitated in the new town planning for an age of mass ownership.

But it is the challenge of accommodating both the religious and the secular that lies at the heart of the design process. For many people cremation is a religious act. For those individuals the principle determining the arrangement of a building used in any religious service needs to be the physical expression of a religious rite, whether this for example be Christian or Hindu. The building must therefore embody its ritualistic purpose in a coherent and recognisable architectural form. For those not belonging to the dominant religious groups, their spiritual and emotional needs must also be accommodated in a sensitive and meaningful.

A crematorium as a religious space, deriving directly from liturgical imperatives, the accepted norm in ecclesiastic architecture, is problematic because there is no liturgy for cremation in Europe, no agreed order of service. It is instead a somewhat uneasy adaptation of the traditional burial service. Stripped of any ritual and ceremony, any depth of spiritual meaning, cremation becomes merely a modern method of burning the dead – an impersonal, unimpassioned and emotionally detached ‘process’, undertaken in a ‘facility’.

Uncertainty of purpose is most clearly felt in crematorium chapels. The word ‘chapel’ is applied gingerly, especially in the light of the changing patterns of religious belief, which unfolded during the twentieth century. For theologian Geoffrey Rowell ‘the character of crematoria, both architecturally and symbolically’ has been determined outside a Christian frame of reference’. These are ‘churches which are not churches, often having altars which are never used as Christian altars’. It comes as a surprise to many however, that crematoria are not, in fact, consecrated buildings. This lack of religious certainty is often revealed in the decoration, but most tellingly in the indecision surrounding the

positioning of the catafalque in relation to the altar, if indeed any altar has been provided.

Some consider that the catafalque ought to be placed centrally, raised and lit from above or the side to establish it as the centre of attention in accordance with traditional funeral services. Others prefer it to be 'off-centre' in a recess or projecting from either the side-wall or the facing wall beside the altar in order to emphasise the distinction between cremation and burial.

The means by which the coffin moves at the point of committal has varied from the outset. There are generally three ways in which this occurs. First, the coffin resting on the catafalque is passed mechanically and slowly through an aperture in the wall to the committal chamber. Second, the coffin again resting on the catafalque, slowly descends to a lower level or the coffin resting on the paving of the chancel descends similarly. Third, the coffin resting on the catafalque or draped trolley is placed in a recess and either a curtain or gates are slowly drawn across at the point of committal and the coffin is removed after the mourners have left. Alternatively, the coffin remains *in situ* until mourners leave the chapel.

The point of committal, which ought to be the emotional climax, the moment of departure and final separation, is often one at which the greatest uncertainty arises. The mourners watch from a distance as the coffin is removed and remain passive observers rather than active participants. While there may be something theatrical about the event, there is more disturbingly something mechanical and sometimes even comical about it. The curtains are often closed by remote control. It is at this point that the lack of ceremony becomes most marked.

Fragmentation, disassociation and depersonalisation compound to leave many mourners feeling 'emotionally cheated', dissatisfied and uncertain at the point of committal. Moreover, there is evasion. While mourners acknowledge tacitly the coffin for cremation, there still remains a great deal of ignorance, perhaps calculated, about the ensuing process. The most certain way of facing finality is to witness the cremation. Although it is a legal right to view the event and despite

exhortations from the architect Peter Bond in 1967, very few choose to do so, other than for religious reasons.

So what then is an appropriate architectural style for a crematorium? Hugh Thomas, architect of Sittingbourne Crematorium (2003), summed it up when he asked

Where do I start? Unlike housing, factories, schools etc. there are not many crematorium projects to provide an everyday vocabulary of design, and one has virtually to start from scratch. Not necessarily a bad thing?

The earliest examples were designed to look like churches, often Gothic in style and intended to offer reassurance to the sceptical and respectability to cremation through a visual connection with the church and its tradition of burial. Since many were built either in existing cemeteries or on land adjacent, there was also the matter of 'architectural good manners'.

Examples include Woking (1884) – the first in England; Glasgow, Maryhill (1895) – the first to be built in Scotland; Liverpool (1896); Hull, the first municipal crematorium (1901) and Leicester (1902). The early exception was Manchester, Britain's second crematorium built in 1892 – designed in Lombard Romanesque, with Byzantine influence.

The opening of Golders Green in 1902 marked a key moment in the architectural expression of cremation in Britain. It was important in four significant ways. First, it witnessed the involvement in crematorium design of an architect of national standing, Ernest George, who, the London Cremation Company believed would 'command the confidence of the public'. Second, it occupied a new metropolitan location within easy reach of central London and was the first crematorium to be built on a new site independent of a cemetery. Third, the collaboration between Ernest George and his friend, the landscape gardener and horticulturalist,

William Robinson, resulted in a new landscape for mourning, to which we will return.

But fourth and most significantly, Golders Green created a precedent in terms of architectural style, planning and landscaping which was to exert a profound influence on subsequent British crematoria. George introduced a series of important innovations: an alternative style, Lombard Romanesque, which was appealing in that it retained ecclesiastical overtones, but, significantly, was a move away from Gothic; the porte-cochère as a distinctive feature; the cloisters; the design of separate columbaria (structures based on Italian precedents designed to house urns containing ashes) and finally, the positioning of the catafalque. But most importantly perhaps was the circulation of mourners who initiated an alternative ritual by entering through one door and leaving by another into the gardens, as if to indicate the crossing of an emotional threshold, a change of state. The significance of this plan would not be appreciated fully until the 1930s when the number of cremations increased, making it necessary to keep groups of mourners apart. What is remarkable is that George identified these features as early as 1902, when cremation was in its infancy.

During the 1920s only six crematoria opened, five were conversions of Gothic chapels and the sixth, the only new crematorium to be built in the 1920s was Ipswich but it too was Gothic in style. Although the pace of building quickened slightly during the 1930s there was no consensus on style. There was no espousal of European Modernism, but rather contemporary interpretations of traditional vocabularies; Gothic at Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1934) - Italianate at St Marylebone (1937) - Romanesque at Mortlake (1939) and Neoclassical at London, Kensal Green (1939). Edinburgh, Seafield (1939) was the exception. The second to be opened in the city, it adopted a contemporary Art Deco style.

Not the least difficulty facing architects was the necessary chimney. This did not sit happily either with Greek temples, Renaissance domes or Gothic chapels. In the majority of cases it was clear that it had been concealed within a bell-tower -

a course hardly to be recommended on the grounds of truth, as here at Headingley, Leeds in 1904. As James Stevens Curl remarked, 'The louvres that should have emitted joyful peals often belched smoke'. In his 1939 Neo-Renaissance design for Northampton, J.P. Chaplin contrived to disguise the chimney in the dome. At Honor Oak, London dating from 1939, Borough Engineer William Bell and consulting architect Maurice E. Webb referenced the Campanile in Piazza San Marco, Venice as a means of disguise.

By 1939 the cremation rate had risen to 3.5% and fifty-four crematoria had been built, the majority council-owned. Cremation had 'come of age', but it would have been impossible for architects and planners to anticipate either the scale of post-war developments, or the alacrity with which they would take place. By 1945 cremationists had recognised the importance of brokering a position in the post war nexus of town and country planning, architecture and social purpose. Progress between 1950 and 1970 was breathtaking and three-fifths of Britain's total provision date from this period. Almost all were by local authorities where, by 1955, nearly half of Britain's practising architects were employed. Conversions were a favoured option since they kept costs down at a time of material and labour shortages, they required little in the way of landscaping and they facilitated planning permission. But many were highly insensitive and the cause of many of the criticisms cited earlier.

It was Harold Orr's 1939 design for Oxford that signalled the future in terms of design, standing alone in the 1930s as the only design to show any influence of modern developments abroad. Orr, one of the few architects to design more than one crematorium, argued for a move away from historical styles, in favour of a mode of building that was in his words neither 'sentimental' nor 'sensationalist', but rather 'honest' and 'spiritual' which created a 'sense of place', designed for contemplation. Architecture

expressed in unsectarian terms harmonising with the ideals of cremation in its common appeal to nearly every creed and denomination.

Post-war crematoria settled on a contemporary style perceived as being a more humane and flexible form of Modernism and one which drew heavily on the architecture of the Scandinavian Welfare State. It showed a readiness to use traditional materials. Dubbed 'The New Humanism' it offered a practical vernacular modernist aesthetic, which some British architects, like Orr, had begun to pursue before the war. The new crematoria also showed a consensus in terms of planning and layout. At best the new crematoria were 'solemn, sentimental and modestly pious' on the one hand and 'jaunty, efficient, hygienic and civic-minded on the other', taking their place in the 'ambitious venture' of post-war planning and public building. At worst they represented the formulaic dreariness of much municipal architecture and were not always to the public eye – humane. The Cinderellas of local authority provision, they were almost invariably denied the architectural embellishment reserved for prestigious civic buildings.

Although some mediocrity cannot be denied, many crematoria achieve successfully a sense of place, and whether by association with nature or with history, or by means of their landscaping, provide a feeling of continuity and sureness. Durham (1960) was clearly influenced by the octagonal Norman keep of the nearby castle and the Norman columns of the cathedral were referenced in the chevron patterns carved into the pews, the catafalque and the Book of Remembrance stand.

Gateshead (1966) was a dramatic modern, but classically inspired design, sited high up on a wooded slope on the boundary of Victorian Saltwell Park. Careful thought was given to the processional approach, the road winding up through mature trees, bordered with small cypresses, before turning into the narthex. Nearby Mountsett, in County Durham (1966) occupies a very different kind of site, open rather than enclosed. It too had a carefully controlled approach, designed to take full advantage of its magnificent position. Here the original

moorland character of the site was retained and the grounds planted with gorse and heather and small copses of evergreens.

Arguably the most important contribution made by crematoria and their Gardens of Rest and Remembrance, was the offer of a new landscape for mourning – one freed from the outset from the jostling ranks of competitive memorials in Victorian cemeteries – one which offered a more collective response to the shared human emotions of loss and memory. Golders Green had been the first.

Although many are by definition suburban, others have come to occupy some sites of stunning beauty and share a reflexive relationship with the landscape - Mid Warwickshire, Leamington Spa, (1971) stands as a notable example. Here the integrity of the building owes a great deal to its settings and its conscious link with nature places it in the tradition of Asplund, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Not all architects took an undemonstrative approach to design. The award-winning Blackley, Manchester showed the City Architect, Leonard Howlitt taking the lead in 1957 in suggesting a bolder architectural statement about the modernity of cremation. In 1970 E.G.Chandler's design for City of London, Manor Park, marked a bold departure from its London counterparts, being low-lying and dramatic in its use of modern building materials and structural methods.

Margam in Mid-Glamorgan, by F. G. Williamson & Associates' 1969 was quite unprecedented in its frank expression of Modernist forms, and is arguably the most dramatic crematorium design in Britain. The chimney was conceived as the focal point and emphasised its function in a refreshingly uncompromising way.

Basil Spence's Edinburgh, Mortonhall 1967, with its 'calmly expressionist forms' recalled the best traditions of European Modernism. In placing a freestanding cross in the grounds of Mortonhall, he paid homage to Gunner Aspund's iconic Woodland Crematorium, Stockholm, designed in 1935-40. Here modernism and tradition combined effortlessly to resonate with cultural, religious and mythical references. It was widely admired for its utter simplicity and the way in which it collaborated with its surroundings.

Maxwell Fry's Coychurch crematorium, Bridgend emerges as one of the finest crematoria in Britain. Designed in 1969-70, it allowed Fry, who had addressed the Cremation Society on the subject of crematorium architecture in 1964, the opportunity to make the leap from theory into practice. Fry questioned the part that crematoria played in the structure of modern society. He had been much moved by a funeral he had attended in Chandigarh, India, in particular by the immediacy of the event and by the active involvement of mourners in the ceremony. This combined with the emotional emptiness that he experienced at his mother's cremation in London, had prompted his interest.

At Coychurch Fry's considerable debt to Le Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamps in the Vosges, 1950-55 is clearly apparent in the cove surrounding the cross, which has now been removed, in the overhanging roofs and the simplicity of the interiors. Here Fry achieved

First purity and clarity in the functions of the what was to take place, and secondly, the need everywhere for what would comfort and console, in large elements and small. And hovering over these the need to connect it all with history, to embed it into the region as part of the language and the story of it.

He called for the reinstatement of procession and ritual, believing that the procession of mourners through the grounds and the crematorium could in itself offer spiritual significance. This was expressed architecturally by the privileging of two elements – time and distance and these underscored the design and planning. Fry hoped to both enrich the ceremony 'so that both it and our own lives thereby become significant'. In doing so Fry was invoking sociologist Geoffrey Gorer, who was the first to suggest in his book *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965) that those who experience a more ritualistic form of mourning seemed able to adapt more readily to life after the funeral.

The entrance to the crematorium is marked by a tall stone pylon, which sounds the emotional note. Mourners experience a change of state as they move from the busy road into the tranquil confines of the crematorium. Fry, in common with Le Corbusier, recognised the importance of the processional approach to a building. Fry explained that by planting

First to conceal and then to reveal, reflected in a small lake, the forms of the crematorium itself – a climax is announced to which everything else will contribute up to the final moments of dispersal and return.

The emotional resonance of procession is enhanced by the positioning of the Chapel of Remembrance, designed to announce

The slow rhythm of the stone drums that terminate in the circular vestry and mark, with the window in the chapel, the turn to the last few steps to the catafalque, playing a part in emphasising and prolonging the ceremony that ends with the committal.

Increasingly, secularisation renders the crematorium a highly significant public building, perhaps replacing the church, as the main focus for the important function of saying farewell to loved ones. Thirty years ago the crematorium was a place for cremation and a brief committal ceremony. Now the ritual, the function and the remembrance are centred on the crematorium and setting. This change in social pattern must be acknowledged in the quality and integrity of the buildings.

The challenges for architects - increasing secularisation, individualism and the ever-pressing environmental issues that surround cremation, conspire to make the task as taxing as ever. We remain a society that cannot frame with certainty or consensus, the passage from life to death. Given the lack of a clear conceptual basis for crematoria; there are no easy solutions, but in the words of Alan Crawford

In another sense, and mercifully, it is not necessary for the design of a crematorium to carry all this heavy burden of relieving pain, or giving meaning. It is the mourners who do the work, who bring such meaning as they can muster with them. Seen in this way, the design of the building is on the same footing as the undertaker's lowered tones, the well-kept lawns, the transitory flowers, friends in unfamiliar outfits, the hint of suburbia in the background: all nothing in themselves, hopeless in the face of what has happened, but ready to be invested with meaning by the mourners.