

## The architecture of death

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### *Guy Marriage*

Guy is an architect at First Light Studio and a senior lecturer at Victoria University. Although he normally creates buildings and concentrates on the best in life, here Guy asks the tricky question of: 'If life is for living, then what is architecture for the dead?'

Humans are mortal – we are born, we live, we die and, in between, we celebrate what little time we have on earth. Once we're gone, then we're gone for good, only existing through other people's memories of us, growing murkier all the time. If only we could live longer, we cry! If only there was some form of permanent manifestation of our lives!

There is, of course, a solution that lives on where we stop short: architecture. A building can – and should – last much longer than a human life. It has, in effect, a life of its own, with its own conception (the idea springing into the mind of the architect), a fulsome creation (teams of builders bringing elements together and fixing them in place) and, with any luck, many varied lives (a shop, a home, a factory, a meeting place, a learning facility and so on). Eventually it too may face the final curtain and be returned, as we all are, back to dust once more.

There are special kinds of architecture that deal with death. Some deal with the living and the process of dying, like hospitals and hospices. Some deal with the aftermath of living, like the morgue and the crematorium. And then there are still other kinds of architecture which exist solely so that those who keep on living cannot ever forget: the architecture of memory. Memorials and mausoleums – memories writ large, in stone. Let's start there, right at the beginning.

Some of humankind's earliest funerary architecture is also the biggest. Sneferu. Khafre. Khufu. The pyramids at Giza are immense, older almost than civilisation itself. For reasons we still don't fully understand, a select few rulers of Egypt were buried in these immense stone assemblages, built on a scale that fully boggles the mind. As a resting place, it is certainly eternal; internally, it is very, very quiet. The only noise besides your own breath is the scrabbling footsteps of another tourist making the ascent up the exceedingly steep, long, narrow entry passage and the whistle of the 'air conditioning'. The original inhabitants were not meant to be breathing, of course, and nor could they, as their entrails sat in alabaster jars beside the mummy and their brain had been pulled out through their nose via a system of skewers and long skinny spoons. Mummification, despite what Hollywood may tell you, is not for the faint-hearted.

Closer to home, the funerary architecture of current day Aotearoa is a much smaller, calmer, quieter affair, although the embalming is no less brutal. What goes on behind the scenes? How much do you really know (or want to know?) about the buildings that support our journey from

flesh back to dust? Shall we delve a little further into the mechanics of what actually happens?

Traditionally, perhaps, our grandparents would have died at home in the same room where they had lived, with the cause of death listed only as 'old age'. It is quite likely they got taken to a church for one last service and were then buried six feet underground to spend eternity in the church graveyard below a hefty granite headstone. In some cases, if you were really rich, you could have your own mausoleum: a very small building, made to house the 'family tombs'. The greatest mausoleum of all, named after King Mausolus of Persia, was one of the original Seven Wonders of the world, and therefore, quite understandably, was probably rather magnificent. In the Karori Cemetery there are few mausolea, but there is a splendid example of a family tomb belonging, fittingly, to Mr Biggs and his family. A domed roof, supplanted by a cross, two inset panels of white marble and a rusty steel door seal off the very private space within. The architecture of mausolea is a study of sombre beauty and remembrance via the smallest of buildings – a miniature structure carved in stone for permanence.<sup>1</sup> Over a hundred years old and still looking solid and suitably sombre, inside this little temple sit the remains of many Biggs: gone, but not forgotten. But we're a little short on mausolea in New Zealand these days. Land is expensive and building even this very tiny house of memory is severely unaffordable. The mausoleum is a bygone concept, now reserved just for the ultra-rich.

Along with mausolea, we are leaving behind many other aspects of the more traditional European attitudes towards cemeteries and death. For instance, modern cemeteries no longer have a lychgate, although the Karori Cemetery does. It's the covered archway going into a cemetery, with seating either side, traditionally where the mourners could wait out of the rain and guard against body snatchers. Hopefully, there's not much need for that any more. We're also moving away from funeral services being held inside a church – indeed, we're abandoning the church in greater and greater numbers.

As you will read elsewhere in this volume, Māori attitudes towards death are very different from Pākehā. Ancestors are hugely important in Māori life and are immortalised in buildings by the carvings and building efforts of descendants – there is a direct translation of the dead body into the communal architecture itself. Whare whakairo, the carved meeting house, have the tāhuhu (central ridgebeam) as the backbone, the wide



A splendid example of a family tomb or mausoleum at Karori Cemetery.  
Image by Guy Marriage

carved or painted rafters as representing the heke (ribs) of the ancestors, and the outspread bargeboards over the roro (verandah) as being the welcoming maihi (arms) and raparapa (fingers) of the ancestor himself. The building will often be spoken of as if it were a still-living ancestor, with carved likenesses of face and body readily identifiable by the tattoos. There is deep mourning of loss at a tangi, but it seems unmistakably more enjoyable to go back to the marae and commune with your ancestors in the form of a building than it is to sit in an empty graveyard and talk to a weathered slab of stone. Polished granite is so permanent, so cold, so unemotional, in comparison to the warmth of the carved tōtara timber of the Māori tradition.

For the most part, however, cessation of life has been, until recently, associated with placing the remains of the body into a box and burying that box deep underground. With a casket being lowered into the grave,



A lychgate – the covered archway at the cemetery entrance – is where mourners could wait out of the rain and guard against body snatchers. Image by Guy Marriage.

the process is simple and honest: the body is going down and not coming back up. For most of Christianity, burial six feet under was seen as the only way to go – out of reach of earthworms and tree roots, perhaps in an ornate coffin plushly lined with silk, your body pumped full of embalming fluid, and with a good chance that your lonely, lovely bones would last forever. On a building site near where I worked in London, the lead-lined coffin of a 'Roman princess' was unearthed while excavating the site, and when opened, the skeleton was still complete, after around 2000 years. Her linen clothing had rotted away, but the gold thread laced through her toga remained, triumphantly tracing the outline of her body, confirming her regal status.

You and I will not last nearly so long.

Since the eighteenth century, when cremation was reinvented (and sanitised), it has become increasingly common to burn our dead instead of bury them. If you ignore several thousand years of open-air funeral

pyres from the Vikings, Hindus and others, cremation is comparatively very recent indeed: in 1769 the very first cremation was permitted in London, but the mass adoption of cremation is even newer than that. Alan Crawford highlights just how new:

Crematoria are very new . . . more than half of the crematoria in Britain were built between 1950 and 1970 . . . they are part of the proliferation of specialised building types . . . they are complex in their technology . . . they are secular . . . Death, on the other hand, is very old.<sup>2</sup>

Whole body burials are now far rarer than cremation, both in New Zealand and in most places around the world. Church farewells are increasingly less common, and family tombs and mausolea are hardly heard of. We are now more likely to spend our last days in a hospice and then, after a fierce bout of toe-curdling burning in a stainless-steel furnace, spend eternity in a jar on a granddaughter's mantelpiece, with the only sign of remembrance being a brass engraved plaque stuck somewhere on a wall in a bland municipal cemetery.

Why did we change? And what did we change to? Let's look closer.

In comparison with burial, the ritual nature of a cremation is a whole lot more complex. Instead of a gentle lowering and covering with dirt, an elaborate and frankly bizarre ritual has arisen for cremation. To the sound of ghostly music, through speakers hidden somewhere in the room, the casket moves off the catafalque (the temporary stand which holds the coffin) and nonchalantly rolls on, seemingly of its own accord, towards a small opening covered discretely by a curtain. As the slowly moving casket creeps towards its final denouement, the curtains miraculously part, the casket slides through and the curtain is firmly drawn on that scene. At this point, if you are of a squeamish persuasion, I advise you to go off and have a cup of tea and a cucumber sandwich, much as you would in real life. Apparently, very few people ask to see the other side of the curtain. No one really wants to witness their loved one descending into a fiery pit. The architecture of cremation is a brutal, intensely hot, industrialised process to reduce us back to nothing: dust to dust.

If you're willing to read on, on the other side of the curtain, metal handles and any contentious items are removed from the coffin, and so too with the body: no jewellery allowed, although your gold teeth stay in place. Pacemakers really are a strict no-no, as they will violently explode if





Inside the crematorium chapel. Image by Guy Marriage.

cooked. The incinerator itself (called the cremator), typically a stainless-steel box lined with ceramic fire-bricks, is opened to receive the coffin and its incumbent body. The insulated door is closed and clamped shut, while several jets of gas-propelled flames are automatically ignited in the oven, at well over 1000 degrees C, to reduce your dead body back into its residual atoms. To be bluntly honest, the moisture in your body, along with most of your flesh, evaporates as hot air up the chimney. If you were larger in life, your cooking will take a little longer. The body is incinerated for between ninety minutes and two hours, till all that remains are bones, any missing jewellery, hip implants and presumably the odd coffin handle. No one really wants to receive an urn filled with recognisable bones, so there is one final process still to come. The bones are put in a special industrial-strength blender known as a cremulator, where they are crushed into a semblance of dust: in truth, more like the crunchy remains at the bottom of a muesli packet, but just not as tasty. Too much information?

For all the required dispatching of dead bodies in New Zealand, as a country we have relatively few crematoria. There are just over fifty in total,

comprising fifteen municipal facilities, with the rest being privately run. In Auckland, there are three large council-run facilities: on the North Shore, Manukau and the biggest at Waikumete. In Porirua there is a delightful small facility at Whenua Tapu (architect: Fritz Eisenhoffer, 1975), with a spire that curls upwards as does the smoke and the escaping spirit. In Wellington we have New Zealand's oldest crematorium, opened in 1909 in Karori (architect: John Sydney Swan, a prolific designer of churches). Wellington thankfully escaped an 1888 proposal by the Harbour Board Engineer to cremate dead bodies at the city 'destructor', the incinerator at the town dump site near Courtenay Place. That would have been smelly and distasteful, offensive to both the living and the dead.

Despite what you may think of God, there is no doubt that the supreme being is typically worshipped from within better architecture than the crematorium. But that is not really a fair comparison – a church does not have the same design demands made of it. Hilary Grainger puts the design problem succinctly in her book *Death Redesigned*:

Crematoria have, from the outset, presented a series of challenges to the architect. They are essentially ambiguous and evasive buildings – their ambiguity born out of a lack of shared expectation of what is required by a crematorium. At once utilitarian and symbolic, religious and secular, crematoria have remained fraught with complexity. Architects are required to provide two very different spaces, the functional and the symbolic, linked by a transitional space . . . through which the coffin passes from the "chapel" or meeting hall, to the cremator. The utilitarian purpose – that of reducing a dead body at high temperature to vapour and ashes has remained unequivocal.<sup>3</sup>

There are practical considerations galore. Restrooms are a must, as emotions run high, mascara runs low and everyone runs for the bathroom. A porte-cochere at the front door is vital to shield the hearse and mourners from wind and rain, yet with a high soffit so as not to conflict with the flowers potentially piled onto the hearse. Discrete placement of the chimney is a must. Good car-parking is a standard requirement, as cemeteries and therefore also crematoria, are usually not urban, but suburban or rural.

The functional, pragmatic aspects of today's sanitised life have taken over much of our attitudes towards death. Our ancestors were far more in tune with the cycles of life and death on the farm or in the farmhouse than we



New Zealand's oldest crematorium opened in Karori in 1909. Image by Guy Marriage.

are now. In the days when you had to slaughter your own food for dinner and make sure the ram was tupping the ewe, there was a healthy, hearty connection with the facts of life. Animals died at our hands and appeared cooked on our plates soon after. Now we are one step – or several steps – removed. There are few of us that still hunt and kill our own food, but for the most part it now comes pre-packaged in cheerful, colourful plastic-wrapped packs, and the only hunting needed is for a bargain. Likewise, the hard facts of carrying a friend or relative's body down the aisle of a church and lowering it into a grave has been superseded by the relatively peaceful disposal of the coffin into a machine hiding behind a curtain. After a brief period of mourning, the return of the ashes in a neat and tidy funerary urn completes the circle of sanitation.

But are we not missing out on something else here as well? Let's talk about the greatest part of the architecture of death – over on the flip side – it is architecture that allows the celebration of life. Good religious architecture is great architecture – the soaring arches of the Gothic church drawing your eyes upwards to the heavens, the relatively simple spaces of the

Jewish synagogue creating room for the elaborate symbols and rituals, the intricate carvings of the Hindu temple entrancing you with their intricacy, or the intensely devout decoration of the mosque that reminds you incessantly that only God can make creatures and humans can only create geometry. Even in the small quiet space of the Futuna Chapel in Wellington, the quiet interplay of shafts of coloured light falling on the rough, rich-red altar stone provides a spiritual experience for all who enter. In all of the major religions, the place of worship is a space created by the people, for the people: after all, a congregation just means a group of people gathered together. People live and die, governments rise and fall, religions swell and fade away, yet in time it is only the architecture that can truly endure.

From the great perpendicular Gothic stone cathedrals of Europe to the less tall (but no less reverent) timber Gothic revival of New Zealand churches, the architecture of the church does an excellent job in raising voices, spirits and eyeballs heavenward, as we sing out lusty hymns to our recently departed. As we all know, the usefulness of a large old stone church for speaking clearly is often compromised (can anyone ever really hear the sermon?), but a church space is designed for and excels as a performance space for music and song. Hearing a good choir sing a *Stabat Mater* in an old church is truly a deeply moving experience, the harmonics of the space in deep agreement with the resonance of the space. I don't believe in any particular god, but I sure believe in the power of song and the power of good architecture!

For the most part, however, our modern architecture of death is just as uninspiring as our everyday architecture of living. In the same way that our suburban dross stretches for miles around every major city with little sign of intelligent design, so too do most of our facilities for the dead.<sup>4</sup> Trying hard not to be overly religious, the architecture of the funeral home instead mostly wavers around, meekly trying not to offend anyone and in the process offending nearly everyone. Does anyone really want to leave this world meekly and mildly, in a room with inoffensive decor and matching inoffensive wallpaper? Honestly, you could die of blandness. The new Arise Church in Petone, near Wellington, is as uninviting as a big red Warehouse. No one is getting a bargain here. Formerly, all the Arise congregation gathered in the hallowed halls of the Michael Fowler Centre in central Wellington, a masterpiece of modernism from the hand of Sir Miles Warren, lined in glorious native timbers and acoustically superb. Now, the new church for the Arise congregation from the Hutt

sits in a carpark next to a motorway, looking like nothing more than a large box, factory or warehouse. A factory for the efficient processing of souls perhaps? Outside: curtain wall façade and concrete panels; above: functional flat metal roof; below: efficient concrete slab. Inside: I'm not sure I really want to know.

There is something about the Michael Fowler Centre that speaks to me more than the concrete and glass box in Petone, and that is the warmth of wood. The fact that New Zealand has seized upon timber as its material of choice is not just luck, but is intrinsically linked to the severe seismic conditions of the land below us. Old St Paul's in Wellington (architect: Frederick Thatcher, 1866) has a welcoming, warm and friendly feel that comes from the materials used in its construction: rimu trusses, kauri planks as roof sarking, and no doubt tōtara window frames and piles. These same (now rare) timbers are also used sparingly in the Michael Fowler Centre, carefully veneered in far thinner slices than Thatcher used on Old St Paul's. The Christ Church Cathedral in Canterbury (the one that collapsed in Cathedral Square), was originally to have been timber too, but was changed to stone to reflect its importance and permanence. If it had been timber it may still have been with us today – indeed, the all-timber roof is still standing. But then again, the fate of old timber churches is that the arsonists put them to the torch. Ashes to ashes, indeed. Napier's fine, tall timber Catholic church burned to the ground in a matter of minutes back in 1981, the burning spire lighting a beacon over the small seaside city. Many other timber churches have followed suit.

Since the Canterbury quakes, there is not much call for buildings of stone anymore and a new, earthquake-resistant architecture is raising its head. The Knox Presbyterian Church in Christchurch (architect: Robert England, 1902), massively damaged in the 2011 quake, lost all its external stone cladding, but the timber roof structure remained intact, almost unharmed, floating above a pile of basalt rubble. A rebuild completely changed the appearance and stability of the church (architects: Wilkie and Bruce, 2014) with all new concrete walls, clad in copper externally, tying in well with the original timber ceiling above. I'm looking forward to seeing timber being used inventively for some of the big church rebuilds coming up: they're on the desks of architects right now, and hopefully will be on site within the next year or so. Not timbers like kauri, of course, but variations on pale coloured *pinus radiata*: sliced and diced, glued and screwed, bolted and earthquakes properly halted.

In other countries, they are not so restrained in colour and emotion. In South American countries, especially Mexico, the Day of the Dead is feted with skulls and gaily coloured corpse-like figurines, in a celebration of all things dead and dying (go see the film *Coco*). Those of the Catholic faith still prefer to bury their dead rather than cremate them; the Catholic world seems happier to face their mortality in the form of bones, rather than tidying any remains away.<sup>5</sup> For many others, bones are just too discomfiting. A *memento mori* if you will – a reminder that we are all mortal, that we come from nothing and will return to nothing. It is an open celebration of life's temporary nature, rather than an endless longing for immortality as evidenced by the Kardashiansque obsessive desire to live forever through plastic surgery. The architecture of the Mexican church is still staunchly Catholic, dripping with gold from the vanquished Montezuma. The architecture of the tomb and the family crypt is still richly decorated: remembrance is rarely tasteful, but is fervoured nonetheless. After all, remembering emotions is better than being forgotten.

We're often told we should follow the lead of Scandinavia, in matters such as education, policing and healthcare. We could add the architecture of the crematorium to that list as well, for the Woodland Chapel at the Skogskyrkogården cemetery near Stockholm (architect: Gunnar Asplund) is a master class in both tension, suspense and peaceful goodbyes. A path leads up a slight hill and across open green fields, then a giant wooden cross literally leads you up the garden path. The heavily wooded promontory contains the municipal cemetery, and the final destination is a building that also looks like a part of the woods as well: the columns of the building are simple and strong, as tree-like as the very forest surrounding it. Entering the simple building is not so much a religious experience but perhaps more like a return to the oldest religions of all, a homage to the very creatures of the forest and the trees themselves. Truly a back-to-nature experience to be enjoyed by all, no matter what species of divine being you worship. Asplund's work is Gothic in the true sense of the word: organic, bound to nature, inspiring of the wild and the untamed. Dark, moody interiors with minimal detailing, it looks to put you at ease as you farewell your loved ones, before they are consumed by the Viking fire of a funeral pyre. See it, if you can, before you die.

The closest we get to Asplund's work in New Zealand is perhaps the Harewood Memorial Gardens Crematorium in Christchurch (architect: Warren and Mahoney, 1963). Here, Miles Warren took the wall





Sir Miles Warren's Harewood Memorial Gardens Crematorium is a masterclass in divisional geometry. Image courtesy of Warren & Mahoney.

surrounding the cemetery and sat the crematorium chapel right on top. From outside, it appears that the wall travels right through, bifurcating the building with a giant butterfly roof, literally half in and half out, and makes you ask that age-old question of the dying – what's on the other side? As an exercise in divisional geometry, this building is a masterclass lesson in itself. The wall is used in characteristic Milesian fashion, as a base for corbels reaching out to support the intricate timbered roof structure above. As a user of the facilities (I've not yet been there to witness a 'final voyage' in the flesh, so to speak), if you want to go into the private garden, you enter through the wall via the privacy of the chapel itself. The chapel is a metaphor for the ultimate fork in the road: continuing along life's path or breaching death's final frontier.

The architecture of the hospital and the hospice is the architecture of the in-between: neither fully living, nor yet finally dead. Spaces within

are a mixture of gentle recuperation for those who recover, and efficient cleanliness for those who are in the process of dying. Architectural details are different: doors open wide for trolleys, hospital floors are vinyl-covered up the walls to avoid dust and spills of fluids, and shiny stainless-steel grab rails festoon the bathroom facilities. Easy-clean surfaces, wipe-down walls, sockets for plugging in every conceivable machine, and lockers full of medicines that will help you revive, survive, or just take the final exit. It's a pharmaceutical haven in there, tempered with a bit of fresh air and sunlight. Having spent a bit of time in hospitals and hospices lately, as old friends and family lives ebb away, what is really noticeable is the absence of loud noises or loud colours – peace and quiet is paramount, with none of the garish sound or sights of the modern city. Just as the body needs time for healing, so too the brain needs a chance to recover, or slowly fade away, and there is a healing power in views of nature and sounds of silence.

The hospital is ruthlessly efficient: sunlight, white surfaces, wipe-down everything, with little sign of emotion or devotion in the architecture. You're either in, or you're out. Don't muck about, we need your bed. The hospice, on the other hand, is a much warmer, friendlier environment. You know that your ticket is one-way only and there is a chance to relax, lie back, and think of Zealandia. The Mary Potter Hospice in Wellington's Newtown, just a short hop away from the main Wellington Hospital, permits signs of life to pervade the last few dying days: momentos, pictures, comfortable chairs for visiting relatives. A chance, perhaps, to prepare for the inevitable funeral just days away.

The truth of the matter, of course, is that funerals are not really important for the dead – they're really for the living. As Epicurus said, many years ago, 'Death is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, we do not exist.' In reality, this is what it is all about: the funeral is the opportunity for those still alive to mourn, to express their love, to remember, to honour, and no doubt (at times) to gloat, over the demise of the dearly departed. The exercising of the lungs, through ritual and song, is given creed by the singing of hymns, a welcome chance to stand and clear eyes, throats and minds, before listening to another grieving family member laud the one who has passed on. The architecture for this therefore needs that special space, and therein lies the rub: you can't sing a good hymn in a crematorium, and so the need for a space like a church comes around again. Not so much, perhaps, for the religious aspects, but because it looks good, it sounds good, and because, well, it just feels right. Death becomes us, eventually.

## Endnotes

1. Monica Gili (ed.), *La Ultima Casa – The Last House*, (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1991).
2. Alan Crawford, “Foreword,” in *Death Redefined: British Crematoria History, Architecture and Landscape*, Hilary J. Grainger (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 11.
3. Hilary J. Grainger, *Death Redefined: British Crematoria History, Architecture and Landscape*, (Reading: Spire Books, 2005).
4. Howard Colvin, *Architecture and the After-life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
5. Margot Schwass, ed. *Last Words: Approaches to Death in New Zealand's Cultures and Faith* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2005).

## A strange thing to do

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