

## CEMETERYSCAPE

Alex Ely/ Michael Howe

Local authority employees responsible for the maintenance of burial sites and representatives of the burial services industry are well aware of the situation highlighted in Ken Warpole's study "The Cemetery in the City", that "Many British cities are running out of burial space". Articles in national newspapers by journalists such as Oliver Burkman are beginning to bring this situation to the general public's attention.

At the present rate, inner London cemeteries will be full within seven years. In Hackney and Tower Hamlets the crisis is worse – both boroughs have already run out of space and The London Planning Advisory Committee has reported that half of all cemeteries in London are either full or have very limited space. The problem is not confined to London. The House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee reports that the situation has reached crisis point in urban areas across the country.

Until primary legislation is enacted the 1857 Burial Act will not allow for the re-use of existing graves. Cremation cannot come to our rescue, increased environmental awareness of pollution and the unsustainable nature of the process's energy requirements, plus the reluctance of some communities to employ this method of disposal on religious or cultural grounds, mean that the space put aside for burial will be at a greater premium in the foreseeable future.

The disposal, commemoration and situation of our ancestors does not seem to exercise our politicians in quite the manner many of us might wish. Promised Home Office proposals due for publication in 1999 have yet to materialize. The dead do not vote and we, as a culture, are so distanced from our dead that no great public pressure has built up to combat this lack of political will. How did we get into this pickle?

The 19th. Century in Britain saw a fundamental shift in attitudes to the geographic positioning of the necropolis in relation to the rapidly expanding, densely packed, manufacturing and trading metropolises of the mid-industrial revolution. Neglect, overcrowding and malpractice had rendered many of the traditional sites of burial, the local churchyard, unsightly, mellifluous and unsanitary.

Large suburban Victorian cemeteries, such as Brookwood London Necropolis, represent one of the better responses to this crisis of space. This example was opened some one hundred and forty years ago, set in three hundred acres of Surrey countryside, was connected to London by means of the South-Western Railway, with a dedicated funeral station located on Westminster Bridge road. A contemporary account in *The Spectator* described the

Necropolis in the following terms:

" The grounds of the London Necropolis are laid out with skill and taste, and present an aspect which will render it, like Père la Chaise of Paris, and some of the beautiful cemeteries in Germany, not only a sacred fane in the eyes of survivors, but an object of reverential interest to strangers and foreigners visiting the metropolis."

So long as room remained to bury people the economic structure of the joint stock ventures, that developed and ran these elevating sites of piety and genteel recreation, could survive. As they became full they were taken over by their local municipalities. Westminster Council's ill judged sale of some of it's cemeteries attests to our politicians wish to be rid of the expense of maintaining such places.

London architecture practice mæ believe that this retreat to the suburbs is at the root of many of our culture's problems with mortality. Out of site has tended to keep our relationship with our ancestors out of mind. Death is not seen as a part of the cycle of creation, offering a chance to re-evaluate human and social relationships, so much as an appalling interruption and final end of an individuals life.

The vandalised state of many of our cemeteries perhaps bears witness to the distance and fear experienced by many young people when confronting death. The working out of this fear manifesting itself in destructive desecration.

If one knew people who were buried in a local cemetery, if the cemetery could help to foster local identity, how different might our attitudes towards our and others mortality be. More burial sites, more local and intimate burial sites, in many ways imitating the small churchyard pre 19th. Century would seem to be a solution.

The American historian Lewis Mumford argued that the city of the dead actually predated the city of the living. As he wrote in *The City in History*: "The dead were the first to have permanent dwelling.....the city of the dead is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city." The idea "no cemetery - no city", could be expressed as:"no cemetery – no civilization".

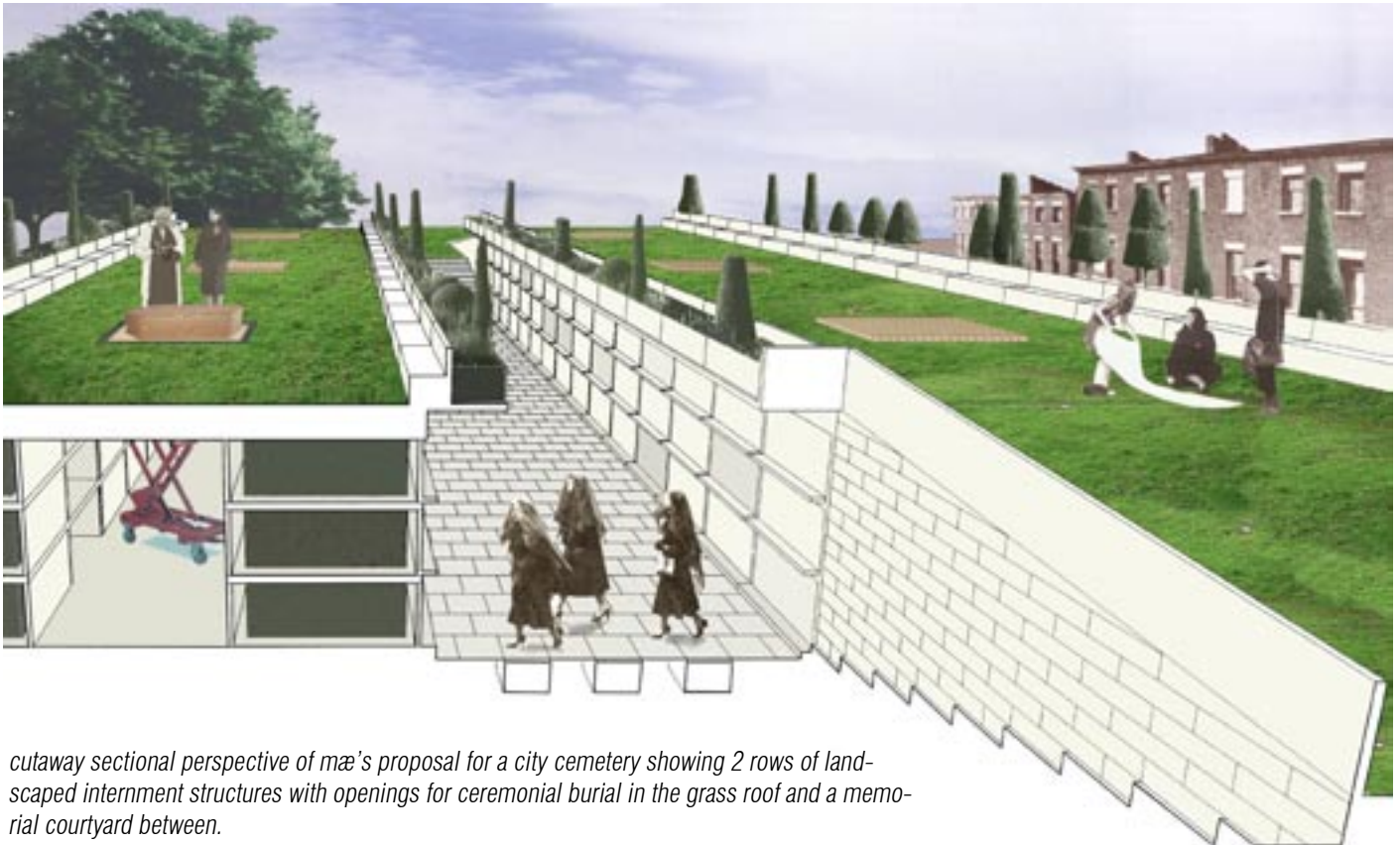
Throughout history the manner in which people dispose of their dead represents the highest ambition of any society. Let's not race down the motor way in pursuit of the undertaker's hearse after a funeral service. Just to get to a plot of land that we; and perhaps our dead friend has no connection with. Why can't we walk, or if not walk; at least have an idea were the cemetery might be located? Our involvement might then have a chance to

rise from that of spectator of the professional funeral director, to participant in an important social right of passage.

Slightly shorter periods of tenure for graves will help with lack of space and ensure that a person always has access to his or her local place of internment. As Sue Gill and John Fox of *The Dead Good Funerals Guide* put it: "Better a shorter period of time in a known and local setting, at the centre of the community, than an eternity on the ring road."

mæ's proposal takes some of its formal design cues from recent European cemetery buildings, which call upon the continent's history of the communal mausoleum. Projects such as David Chipperfield's work extending the burial island of San Michele in Venice and Enric Miralles's Igualada cemetery in Barcelona.

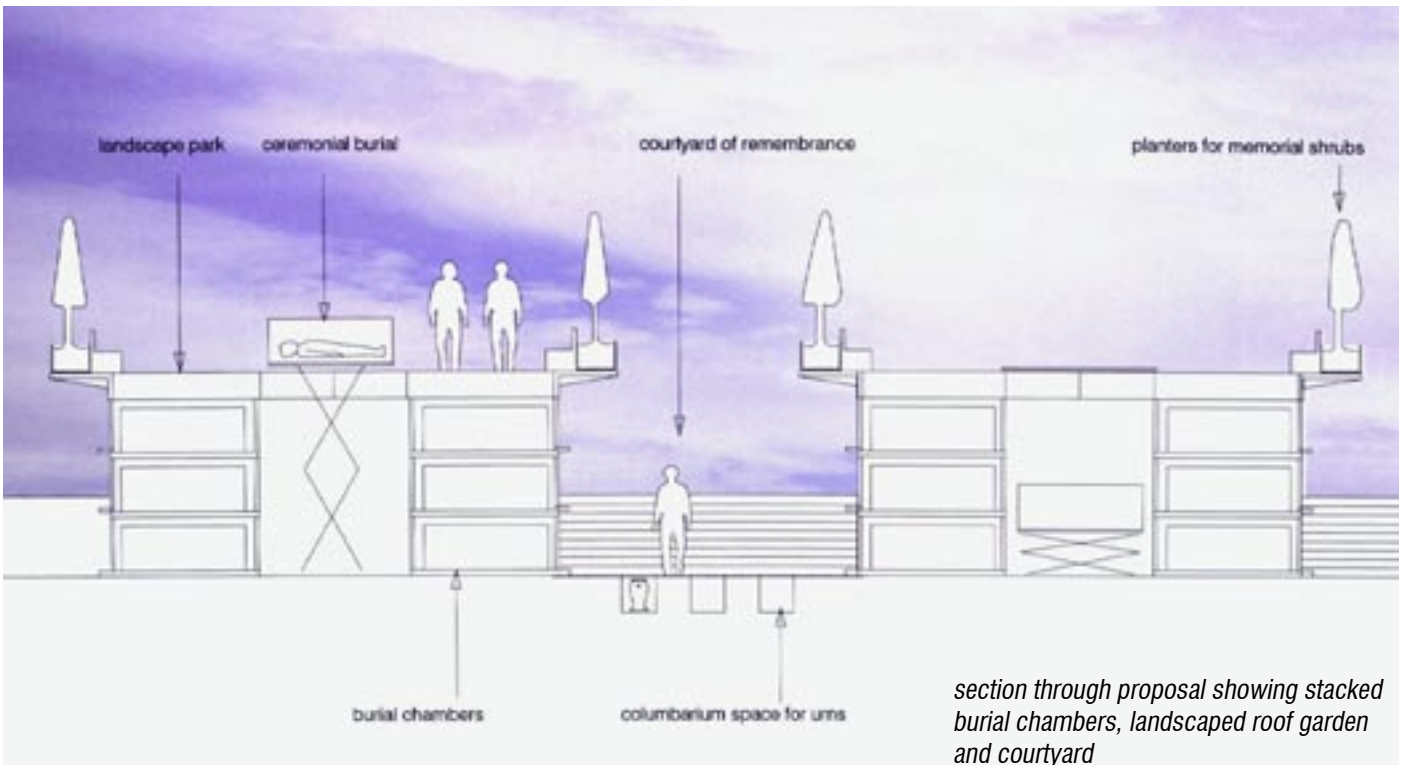
This essentially metropolitan form is tempered in mæ's proposal with the inclusion of a commemorative garden, which might form the site of rites of celebration and remembrance on the roof. This



*cutaway sectional perspective of mæ's proposal for a city cemetery showing 2 rows of landscaped internment structures with openings for ceremonial burial in the grass roof and a memorial courtyard between.*



*perspective view of courtyard showing individual headstones and overhanging planters for memorial bushes and small trees.*



landscape is joined to the surrounding landscape by a grassed ramp.

By the displacement of individual interment structures, garden walkways can be produced on small city sites, or gentle curves imitating ancient burial mounds or hofs in more open landscape settings.



Aerial view showing how mæ's proposal could work on an infill brown-field site at Earl's Court. The memorial courtyards are staggered between a continuous rolling landscape of interment structures.

By means of these structures small city sites such as railway verges or embankments, or perhaps the edges of golf courses in the suburbs might be transformed into important contemplative and recreational places.

The paved cuts between these gardens allow space for memorial plaques and a pavement level columbarium. These spaces are open to the sky but protected by over hanging planters for memorial bushes and small trees, it is envisaged that the strong grid formed by the openings of individual burial chambers will be enlivened by a great variation in individual plaques placed there. The choice of plants and freedom with the individual design of plaques and pavement memorials would; over time; start to re-enforce the local character of the structure and garden complex.

A loved and cared for local cemetery might start to foster charming activities such as the Chinese practice of gathering the family together to eat at and tend the grave site of a loved and honoured relative.

Once again the city of the dead can become a place of contemplation, remembrance, recreation and, hopefully, joy.

*mæ llp is a Chartered architecture practice formed in 2001 by Alex Ely and Michael Howe. Both partners graduated from the RCA and have worked prior to forming the partnership at a number of design led London architectural practices. The partners currently teach at Greenwich University, School of Architecture and Construction where they have run atelier design programmes concerned with the disposal and celebration of the dead.*