

Beyond the grave

With cemeteries almost at capacity, Karen Glaser reports on how a London practice has designed a burial ground that doubles up as a city park

When you make your final exit, how and where would you like to be laid to rest? For a fixed period of time in a local and familiar setting where your loved ones can visit easily, or for an eternity on the ring road? It's a stark question, but an imperative one. For Britain's cemeteries are full to overflowing; we are running out of space to bury the dead.

In London's inner boroughs the situation is particularly critical. Cemeteries there will be completely full in seven years, and Hackney and Tower Hamlets in east London have already run out of space. But the crisis is national and will ultimately only be solved through legislation that overrides the 1857 Burial Act and breaks one of this country's last

great taboos – allowing the exhumation of the dead and the re-use of their graves.

Until then (and the signs are that it will be a long wait – the government having backtracked several times on proposals to legalise grave redigging) a London practice has come up with an ingenious, and for many more palatable, interim solution.

Alex Ely and Michael Howe of Mae have designed a graveyard that will provide twice the burial space of a traditional lawn cemetery and which also doubles up as a city park. Their scheme alternates sunken courtyards with strips of raised lawn under which coffins are stacked three-high in concrete chambers, allowing funerals to take place on the lawn

above, around an open grave in the traditional manner. Headstones will be visible from their position at the end of coffins in the memorial courtyard, keeping the grassed-over landscape free of gravestones. The only objects to punctuate the park will be memorial benches and shrubs bordering the raised areas.

This deliberately quiet design – there's room for loved ones to personalise the space with individual plaques in the grid formed by the openings of individual burial chambers – is a serious attempt to address the complex nexus of aesthetic, emotional and environmental issues surrounding burial grounds. It's a subject that has not been properly reassessed since the Victorian

age, the period that saw the construction of Britain's large city cemeteries, but also vast suburban ones such as the Brookwood Cemetery (London Necropolis). Set in 120ha of Surrey countryside, it was a response, like others of that era, to a rapidly expanding metropolis that had rendered the churchyard overcrowded and unsanitary.

Since then, cemeteries have been in continuous retreat to the suburbs. It is Mae's plan to halt that shift and integrate them into the urban landscape which is so appealing and, frankly, self-evident. "Lack of space means that we can't afford to be singular about cemeteries' use," says Ely. "They should be socially acceptable places that provide recre-



Mae's proposal for a burial ground in which coffins are stacked three high.

ational as well as burial space."

The system would, of course, require something of a volte-face in Britain's traditional attitude to death which has historically had a rather detached relationship with the departed – unlike most of mainland Catholic Europe with its history of the communal mausoleum from which this scheme clearly takes its design cues.

But for many of Britain's minority groups, it will not be difficult to accept a burial ground that invites a more intimate relationship with death. This is especially pertinent since cremation is not tolerable for many ethnic and religious groups, even though it is often seen as the solution for our over-burdened

cemeteries – despite its adverse environmental side-effects.

Mae rather touchingly envisages a situation in which its proposed scheme becomes a "loved and cared for local place with activities such as the Chinese practice of families gathering to share a meal at the graveside of loved relatives."

That might strike many as somewhat fanciful, but Mae's central argument is surely right: "The manner in which people dispose of their dead represents one of the highest aspirations of any society. So let's not race down the motorway after the undertaker's hearse to get to a plot of land with which we and our dead friend has no connection."

**BUILDING
DESIGN**