Designing a place for goodbye: The architecture of crematoria in the Netherlands

Abstract
Crematoria may be considered cultural places of death and remembrance, as well as technical places of bodily disposal. Cultural meanings of such places are (re)produced and communicated through their architectural and interior design and landscaping. Consequently, they are interesting for cultural geographers, as it is different actors (architects, staff, users) that participate in the contestation of place meanings. The design influences user behaviour and emotions and can either amplify feelings of awe or anxiety, or assuage them. We discern four periods of crematorium architecture in the Netherlands: pre-modern, shake-hands modernist, sub-modernist, and post-modern. In particular the sub-modern designs have raised critiques of being blank, impersonal buildings, in which routing and efficiency principles dominate and suppress designs in which emotional support would be the leading principle. In post-modern times a limited number of crematorium designs seem to come forward to the need for a more personalised environment, which makes it possible to emotionally reflect upon the identity of the deceased in order to ‘celebrate’ his or her lived life.

6.1 Introduction
Crematoria may be considered cultural places of death and remembrance where cultural meanings are (re)produced and communicated through architecture, interior design and landscaping. These influence emotions, either intensifying feelings of awe or anxiety or assuage them. During most of the twentieth century, a Modernist design seemed a logical choice for crematoria, as it fitted with both modern societal ideas on coping with death through negation, as well as modern technology. In public discourse, however, modern crematoria were criticised for being impersonal and meaningless non-places. In post-modern times mourners allegedly prefer a more personalised environment that allows emotional

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reflections upon the identity of the deceased in order to ‘celebrate’ his or her lived life. This chapter discusses whether the architectural history of Dutch crematoria reflects these ideas.

6.2 The design problem of crematoria: Plurality, emotion and modernity
Since 2002 cremation has become the dominant form of bodily disposal in the Netherlands with some 57% of the dead cremated in 2009 (LVC, 2009). This relative importance of cremation would suggest that the architectural field would have reached some level of convergence in the discussion on the architecture of crematoria. However, the discussion about best practices in crematorium design is still underdeveloped. There is little literature, let alone a monograph on the architectural history of crematoria in the Netherlands. The exceptions are Cappers (1999) with the history of the organisation that built the first crematorium, and Hulsman and Hulsman (2008, 2010), who are working on a series of books on funerary architecture in the Netherlands in general. Consequently, it is not possible to retrieve the names of the architects of the current 68 Dutch crematoria without delving into archival material. Perhaps potential architectural historians have been deterred by the – unjustified- assumption that buildings relating to death would not make comfortable reading for the general public, because of carrying too many negative emotional connotations? One might also argue that very few architects have been able to develop accumulated expertise given the relatively recent introduction of the building type as well as its enduring marginal status. Indeed, few architects having designed more than one crematorium, with one exception being the Povšė architectural office and partners with four.

A consequence of the rise of the cremation movement in the 1870s was the creation of a new landscape of mourning and remembrance (Jupp & Grainger, 2002). There was no architectural precedent; therefore a new building type had to be designed. And after that it remained consigned to the margins of the architectural discipline (Grainger, 2005), mainly as a consequence of the marginalisation of death itself. The idea is that, in Modernity, (spatial) exclusion of the processes of death and dying has been used as a rational coping strategy for this most irrational transition in life. Places of death and dying were literally kept out of sight and as far as possible drained of emotions and meaning. By the 1950s, at the zenith of Modernity, the denial of death had become the reigning orientation (Ariès, 1977). If modern society is defined as a society based on rationalization, predictability, calculability, and control (Ritzer, 2004), this is not surprising. Modernity had fundamental problems in dealing with death, which is by definition irrational, unpredictable, non-calculable and uncontrollable. Baudrillard (1976, p. 126) supplied the most influential expression of such processes of spatial separation of the places of the living and the dead:
There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist. They are thrown out of the group’s symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living. In the domestic intimacy of the cemetery, the first grouping remains in the heart of the village or town, … but are thrown further and further from the centre towards the periphery, finally having nowhere to go at all, as in the new town or the contemporary metropolis, where there are no longer provisions for the dead, either in mental or physical space.

In fact, cremation itself may be seen as one of Modernity’s strategies of dealing with death. Cremation was explicitly promoted as the most rationalized and ‘clean’ (hygienic, but also spiritually pure) way of dealing with a dead body, and as such with death itself. P. J. R. Bucknill’s article illustrates this, published in The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health in 1915 it was entitled, “Cremation: The only Rational Means of the Disposal of the Dead” (Bucknill, 1915). More recently, Pursell (2003) has described the delicate relations between cremation, modernity and architecture in the case of Hagen crematorium, Germany.

The crematoria resulting from this strategy of concealing death from social life have been criticized. A target of criticism was their functional rather than ritual character (Walter, 1990). It proved logically difficult for architects to combine spaces for an almost sacred ritual with those for the utilitarian process of burning a corpse. A result of the utilitarian character of modernist crematoria was that visitors perceived a sense of being processed (Davies, 1995). This was aggravated by the compelling presence of efficient routing through the building, which was a dominant feature of crematorium design to speed up the flow of congregations (Davies, 1996). The results were described as self-effacing anonymous, discrete and modest buildings (Grainger, 2005) that failed to fulfil basic human requirements (Hellman, 1982). Because of the ‘one door in and one door out’ routing, the mourners had to exit the building through a different door in order to make way for the next group (Davies, 1996). In the Netherlands, the presence of coffee-rooms adds an extra element since the time spent in the coffee room is not easily controllable by crematorium staff and means that an efficient Dutch crematorium requires two coffee rooms if two consecutive groups are to be kept apart. The routine of services generates a constant tension between the tight schedule and the emotions of the bereaved. This is not only because time is money, but also because the mourners’ perception of a unique service as a singular event is under threat (Heessels, forthcoming).
Although routing is a focal point in critiques on crematorium design, it is at the same time an unresolved puzzle for the architects. Not only does the public follow a route through the different areas of the crematorium, but the corpse does as well. Normally, both routes converge in the auditorium but, when the service is ended, the timing and spacing of the consequent divergence becomes problematic. Should the coffin be moved out of the auditorium before the audience, or later? And if it is moved out first, should it then be moved horizontally or vertically? For a long time, the proponents of cremation were ideologically driven to choose horizontal movement of the coffin in order, explicitly, to oppose cremation to burial. Although the purpose of a crematorium is to reduce a corpse to ashes, the act of cremation normally takes place behind the scenes with the entry of the coffin into the cremator being physically and emotionally detached from the mourners, who remain passive observers rather than active participants within this final act (Davies, 2002). That act of cremation is, itself, implicitly rather than explicitly acknowledged; even the smoke and the smell of burning are avoided as far as it is technically possible (Davies, 1996). This can lead to an increased emotional disconnection and lack of finality in the cremation service.

As there is a lack of shared expectations of what is required, crematoria are essentially ambiguous buildings, in which functionality and emotionality somehow must be merged (Davies, 1996; Grainger, 2005), with architecture becoming the main medium supposed to achieve this. Grainger (2005, p. 210) recalls Bond (1970): “Architectural language, Bond believed, could serve to deepen the significance of the emotional experience for mourners.” It “must speak to the soul, offering an uplifting and memorable architectural experience symbolic of the intense personal and psychological experience of the transition from life to death” (Grainger, 2005, p. 43). The meaningful relations between the place and the human being deriving meaning from it, and at the same time allocating meaning to it, is the sense of place (Ashworth & Graham, 2005). Although sense of place is always pluralistic and contested (Ashworth et al., 2007), this is more of a problem in crematoria due to the deep felt emotionality of the place-experience.

To summarize: the ambiguous nature of this type of building is rooted in the plurality of its functions and logistics with the building needing to be, concurrently, a place suitable for the processing of corpses and for bereaved people. It must have unobtrusive but efficient routes for the family, other mourners, and the body, for here we are faced with a location where the logistics of body and audience, of functional place and symbolic place, meet in inescapable emotional encounters.

Modernity obviously did not like such ambiguity, but times may have changed, probably associated with a shift from modernity to post-modernity, not least with regards to dealing with death. Indeed, shifts in commemorative culture have also been suggested for the
Netherlands (Altena, 2009; Klaassens et al., 2009; Venbrux et al., 2009; Walter, 2005), and there are signals that this shift in mortuary rites is reflected in the architecture, interior design and layout of Netherlands crematoria (Cappers, 1999, 2002; Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008, 2010).

In this chapter we want to discuss these issues from a long term perspective and, to this end, we have constructed a database containing architectural information of all the crematoria that have been built or are currently planned in the Netherlands. It contains information regarding year of opening, architects, location, photographs and floor plans. Additional information was obtained from visits to crematoria, interviews with staff, a number of crematorium architects (Jemima de Brauwere, crematorium Appingedam; Herman Zeinstra, Haarlem; Arnold Sikkel, Leusden; and Martijn de Gier, Zoetermeer) and interior designers (Marie-Jose and Jan van Hekke, Concepts & Images). We chose in this stage not to contact users of the crematoria, in order to remain unobtrusive in the process of bereavement (Kellehear, 1993).

6.3 The Netherlands: Slow development
In the Netherlands, proponents of cremation formalized their organisation in 1874, with the establishment of what came to be known as The (Royal) Dutch Cremation Society, or the Facultatieve (Cappers, 1999; Davies & Mates, 2005, p. 326). The society was deliberately not linked to a specific political party. As in other countries, its founders were mainly progressive liberals; they included a considerable number of Freemasons. In this respect, the Netherlands followed the pattern known from several other countries, in particular Italy (Davies & Mates, 2005, p. 113). Subsequent development, however, slow with the first crematorium opened only in 1914, in Velsen-Driehuis, 30 kilometres West of Amsterdam, on the grounds a Westerveld-cemetery. By then cremation still was illegal, but it could not be sanctioned by the government because of inadequacies in the Burial law of 1869 (Davies & Mates, 2005, p. 216). Only in 1955 was cremation formally legalized and it was not until 1991 that it finally established legal parity with burial. The legal confusion, in part at least, explains the further standstill in crematorium building until after the Second World War. In fact, again it took exactly forty years before a crematorium was opened: Dieren in 1954. It was, then, not until the 1970s that crematorium building took-off in the Netherlands (Figure 1). A steady growth in numbers then followed with a slight flattening off after the turn of the millennium. Here, we compare these numbers with those of the U.K., which emerged as the first Western industrial society to popularize cremation (Jupp, 1997).
When the Netherlands and the U.K. are compared, two differences are clear, viz., in timing (1878 and 1914, respectively) and in levels. Then, in the U.K., fast growth took place between 1930 and 1970, interrupted only by the Second World War. Then, from the 1970s onward, it flattened off. The result was a difference in levels: in 1954, when the second Dutch crematorium was opened, the U.K. already had 72. In 2005, the figures were 61 and 252. Still, in the Netherlands, cremation has become the dominant way of bodily disposal since 2002 (LVC, 2009).

The unclear legal framework surrounding cremation has already been mentioned as an explanation for this slow development in the Netherlands. Another explanation, however, might be that of dominant Calvinist attitudes yet the role of Protestantism is not entirely clear. While the idea of resurrection plays a central role in Protestant doctrines, as it does in Roman Catholicism, it is not unthinkable that the strong opposition against cremation in the Catholic Church, may have created a contradictory view in Protestant circles, much in the same way as Freemasonry and Catholicism sparked opposite points of view in Italy (Davies & Mates, 2005). Bearing all these preceding points on crematorium building and architecture in the Netherlands in mind, this chapter will now suggest a four-phase model of development, with turning points centred around 1930, 1970 and 2000. Determined by
dominant design choices these lead to phases described as ‘pre-modern’, ‘shake hands modernist’, ‘sub-modernist’, and ‘post-modern.’

6.4 Phase 1: Pre- or ‘un’-modernist
Before the first Dutch crematorium was opened in 1914, many plans and ideas concerning the design and layout had already been developed. The Facultatieve was explicit about the unsuitable styles for crematoria as a new building type: it was not to be in Neo-Gothic style, as often applied in the U.K. and the U.S., nor in any other style that would be reminiscent of religious buildings. Reminders of traditional burial practices and rituals did not fit with the movement’s progressive ideology. Similarly, the Facultatieve explicitly rejected cemeteries as the location for a crematorium (Cappers, 1999). Still, early plans, as well as the first crematorium to be realized were monumental, possessing a solemn atmosphere. Early plans for a crematorium in Hilversum were based on a full repertory of shapes and styles, such as a Roman theatre, early Christian basilica, Greek temple and Egyptian pyramid. In 1894 architect Salm designed a building in oriental style with a large dome, in which he cleverly hid the flue (Kuyt et al., 1997). However, Hilversum crematorium was never built because of shortage of money and differences of opinion within the Facultatieve.

The first Dutch crematorium that was built, in Driehuis-Velsen, also has a dome as its dominant feature (Figure 2). Other features also reflect solemnity: its location on the top of a dune in a large cemetery, its stained glass windows overlooking a sober interior, pews and the presence of an organ. Its relatively unknown architect, Marius Poel, has no other design to be found in any handbook on Netherlands’ architecture, and seems to have been appointed thanks to his active presence in the pro-cremationist network, probably linked to Freemasonic or other spiritual circles. His design of the crematorium in some respects reflects the intriguing alliance of future oriented, progressive ideas (cremation as clean and purifying) and an apparent need for symbolism, sacrality and ritualism. Poel’s relation with leading figures in the Facultatieve deteriorated gradually, however, due to his lack of organisational ambition, and flaws in the engineering calculations (Cappers, 1999).

The concluding assessment of this period now becomes clear with architects struggling with the proper design for this new building type but deliberately choosing not to use a modernist style. This seems surprising, but is also known from other countries, such as the U.K. and Germany: “This persistent denial of Modernism has baffled those who have identified a credible link between the process of cremation … and the philosophy behind Modernism” (Grainger, 2005, p. 131). “While cremationists espoused a potentially radical form of burial, they were not willing to embrace radical architecture, even when such an architect (as in the case of Behrens) supported their cause. Hagen’s crematorium project
became an uneasy alliance of future-oriented forces: architectural modernism and cremationism” (Pursell, 2003, pp. 234-235).

Figure 2. Driehuis-Velsen Crematorium (1914)

Photo: Peter Groote

6.5 Phase 2: Shake-hands modernism
In the second phase, from around 1930 to 1970, a dozen crematoria were designed with most of them also built and now, most of the chosen architects did select a modernist architectural language, albeit in a kind of softened version: functionalism with room for aesthetics. This was a familiar style in architecture in the Netherlands in this period and is often labelled shake-hands modernism (Colenbrander, 1993). It resembles in many respects Scandinavian modernism as visible, for example in Gunnar Asplund’s Woodland crematorium and cemetery in Stockholm. In his seminal book Last Landscapes Ken Worpole has convincingly shown why the softened version Modernism was the logical choice for modernist architects in this period: “Death ... appears at times so meaningless, ... even the most hardened rationalist cannot avoid ameliorating the impact of death with comforting ... vocabularies: the ‘words against death’…” (Worpole, 2003, p. 195). Arguably, one such shake-hands modernist architect was W. J. M. Dudok, the only Dutch architect that has a separate entry in the Encyclopaedia of Cremation (Davies & Mates, 2005), although he never actually built a crematorium. He had, however, been involved in the design of crematorium Zwolle (1941), though that was not actually built, and in several extensions, including columbaria, at Velsen-Driehuis crematorium: he also designed a specific type of urn for Velsen-Driehuis.
One group of architects that sought to promote the ideology behind shake-hands was the so-called *Groep 32* (Bock et al., 1982). A member of this group was H. C. P. Nuyten, who became the architect of the second Dutch crematorium, at Dieren (1954). Nuyten is a relatively unknown architect, he was a personal friend of A. H. Wegerif, a board-member of the *Facultatieve* which commissioned the crematorium. The third crematorium (Groningen 1962) was designed by Wegerif himself (Figure 3). It is also built in shake-hands modernist style. Wegerif deliberately tried to link the inside and the outside of the building, just as Gunnar Asplund had done at Woodland. This meant that there was an open view from the coffee room to the front garden and lake. Later it was thought that this would allow sight of the next group to enter the building, so around 1985 an extra wall was placed to close the coffee room. Around 2005 the wall was removed again, in order to restore contact between the inside of building and the landscaped garden (source: interview with the manager).

Figure 3. Groningen Crematorium (1962)

Another friend of Wegerif was Jan Wils. They cooperated in the Masonic architectural advisory board, *vereniging tempelbouw*. In contrast to Nuyten and Wegerif, Wils is a well-known architect, who was, e.g., responsible for the stadium for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. Wils designed Ockenburg crematorium in The Hague (1968), situated in a woody area, reflecting an open style with a great deal of glass that allows nature to become – symbolically speaking – part of the ceremony as people are given a view of the surrounding trees; a view thought to offer a calming and comforting experience (Bergeijk & Wagenaar,
This role of nature is important in crematoria design with large windows in the auditorium; frequently providing a view on a garden, fountain, or pond. Nature has a symbolic significance as it exercises a compulsive hold on human emotions and invites a depth of human attachment (Grainger, 2005). The sight of nature can provide a calm and serene feeling, which is often described in the literature of healing gardens. The idea that the physical environment influences human activity and behaviour is very much supported by designers of hospitals who believe that aspects of the environment can influence health outcomes (Hamilton, 2006; Jencks, 2006; Worpole, 2009). The concept of a healing environment is often used in reference to stress reduction and the overcoming of undesirable conditions as, for example, in illness but perhaps also with grief.

While almost all crematoria built in this period were designed in the same style they were, surprisingly perhaps, built by relatively unknown architects. Some more illustrious and more robust modernist architects were interested in the building type but were not commissioned. The best examples are Gerrit Rietveld, prominent member of the De Stijl-movement, and Mart and Lotte Stam. They participated in a design contest for a crematorium in The Hague organised by the Facultatieve to promote cremation but neither was awarded a prize by the jury that included Wegerif. Obviously, commissioners of crematorium buildings in this period, prominent among them board members of the Facultatieve, still kept to the ideology that cremation was part of the modernist movement in society, but without the brutality that postwar modernist architecture could sometimes exhibit. Buildings should be both expressive and impressive, in order to make the act of cremation a memorable event with room for emotional meaning-giving by the bereaved.

6.6 Phase 3: ‘Sub’-modernism
During the 1970s, cremation really took off in the Netherlands, with a fast increase in the number of cremations and with a corresponding increase in crematorium building. There was, however, a corresponding tendency to decrease the scale of new crematoria that possessed a smaller as they served local or regional communities instead of the whole country (Driehuis-Velsen), or large areas (Dieren, Groningen, The Hague). If we compare cremations for each crematorium in 2004 (data from LVC, dated 24-01-2006), we find some 1,900 for the crematoria opened in the period 1914-1970, and some 1,200 for the ones opened after 1970.

This decrease in scale is reflected in the building design. The new design choices were already visible in Rotterdam crematorium (1970), although this was in fact one of the larger crematoria of the Netherlands, with almost 4,000 cremations annually in the 1980s. Its main architect, Dick Apon, was a member of the Forum-group around Aldo van Eyck and
Herman Hertzberger. Forum’s ideology was that architecture should move back from large-scale, production-oriented and technological designs, to the human scale and social goals (Groenendijk & Vollaard, 1998). Worpole perfectly phrases Forum’s ideology in his criticism of hard-line modernism: “The human scale of design – and its attentiveness to the cycles and rituals of human life and vulnerability – has been squeezed into the edges” (Worpole, 2003). Unfortunately, in reality it did not always work out as the architects had planned. Often, the architecture was so downgraded that it resulted in the creation of places without any symbolic value or meaning, or any sense of place. Crematoria turned out to be anonymous suburban non-places, to use the label proposed by Augé (1995). They were almost indistinguishable from other utilitarian building types: “… it would be perfectly possible to describe crematoria in terms of … ‘non-places.’ Non-places are locations of transitions – places that people pass through but which carry no personal significance for those individuals” (Hockey, 2007). Common examples are airport waiting lounges and suburban railway stations. In the *Natural Death Handbook* (Wienrich & Speyer, 2003, p. 153) British crematoria are described as just that: “Who wants rushed funeral services in buildings which have been described as looking like waiting rooms in airports?” And in a review of Worpole’s *Last Landscapes*, Curl does the same “… British crematoria are designed to pretend to be anything but what they are, … entire ensembles are feebly suburban and meaningless” (Curl, 2004). The same criticisms have also been levied against Dutch crematoria (Duijnhoven, 2002; Hekkema, 2002) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Stadskanaal Crematorium (1998)

Photo: Peter Groote
It is striking that the worn out version of modernism, which we label here as ‘sub-modernism’, with its low quality, indistinctive and unemotional buildings, has probably been a more effective negation of death than hard-line modernism, which would at least have created notable buildings!

6.7 And now the 4th phase: Post-modernism?
If it is true, as stated earlier, that times may have changed and that post-modern architecture may be a suitable means to give room to new (post-modern?) mourning rituals (Venbrux et al., 2009), this should by now be visible in crematorium design. Indeed, some crematoria that are clearly ‘different’ in some elementary respects have been built more recently with the best examples being those of Haarlem (2002, by architect Herman Zeinstra), Leusden (2003, by architect Arnold Sikkel) and Zoetermeer (by architect Martijn de Gier of MYJ, now KBNG) architectural office). All incorporated the idea of sense of place in their building program. There is, quite literally, room available for individual ritual experience. The design should allow emotions to flow freely, in order to ease the bereavement process. The incinerator is an integral part of building that is open to the public. This provides a solution for the open end problem of the cremation ritual. It allows a more personal and direct (ritual) interaction between the bereaved and the deceased. If new developments in the scattering of ashes (Heessels, 2008) are linked to this, a new finalisation or culmination of the cremation ritual may finally have been achieved.

Haarlem’s architect, Herman Zeinstra, designed a crematorium that most deliberately broke all design principles of modern crematoria (Groenendijk & Vollaard, 2004, p. 59). It was opened in 2002 and won several prizes. Its basic ideas were the total absence of a routing system and a reversed relation between the outside and the inside. Zeinstra used the floor plan of a cloister with an open auditorium at the centre of an arcade yard that serves as an ambulatory. The central auditorium is made almost completely of glass, its views from the inside to the outside during a service allows mourners’ minds to open up, come into contact with nature and the weather, and emotions to be expressed (Figure 5).
It also offers an alternative view during the ceremony and takes away the obligation to focus on the coffin (Klaassens & Groote, 2009). This is reminiscent of England’s Telford crematorium by Haverstock Associates (Grainger, 2005, pp. 337-338). At the same time, the glass auditorium allows views from the courtyard to the inside and it is possible that strangers may be present in the courtyard, but only those that have gained access to the inside columbarium. In modernist times this would be seen as an infringement of the privacy of the
bereaved but Zeinstra wondered why it was such a bad thing to see other groups of mourners, just as that happens at burials at a cemetery.

Figure 5. The auditorium surrounded by the arcaded courtyard of Haarlem Crematorium (2002)

Zeinstra’s ideas on routing are intriguing. The different events that constitute the cremation process take place in different buildings arranged around the inner courtyard. This stands in contrast with most existing Dutch crematoria in which farewell ceremonies proceed within one building as smoothly as possible. Zeinstra’s idea is to allow walking between these events as part of the mourning ceremony. The act of passage itself provides time and distance to comfort people. It helps to recall the farewell ceremony, which is, according to Zeinstra, the central function of the ceremony, as with a traditional burial. Although the sequence of events and the passages between them are fundamental, they are not necessarily the same for all individuals. The ground plan of a courtyard with different surrounding buildings allows mourners to make their individual choices of where to go to at which moment in time. People can make positive choices on their specific (ritual) passages instead of feeling pushed through the process as a flock of passive sheep. Again, we have echoes of Telford crematorium: “The intention at Telford was to create an open yet private landscape that will enable uninhibited movement around its spaces” (Grainger, 2005, p. 338, original quotation from Moore, 2000).

Then, in Zoetermeer crematorium, we encounter an extraordinary building thanks to its outer design and texture. Its main visible feature is a large ‘second skin’ in rusty Corten steel curving around the auditorium as a protective shell (Figure 6). Architectural office MYJ
(now KBNG) found this symbolic for a crematorium; these architects see the gradual corrosion of the untreated sheets exemplifying the transitoriness of life. A bridge connecting the building and the adjacent cemetery (Figure 7), and a balcony are also made from Corten steel plates. The idea is that the remarkable shape and texture of the steel façade turns the crematorium into a conspicuous landmark and a natural component of the landscape at the same time.

Figure 6. Façade of Zoetermeer Crematorium (2006)

As for the commissioners of Leusden crematorium, they wanted to design a multicultural and multifunctional crematorium that would fit the needs of diverse cultural and religious groups. Architect Arnold Sikkel worked together with representatives of these different groups, to discuss their needs and expectations. Consequently, the crematory, which is partly designed as a public space, is separated by a courtyard from the rest of the building making the auditorium suitable for burial services by Dutch Reformed people who oppose cremation. For Hindus it is possible to walk around the crematory as they traditionally walk around the pile with the body to perform religious rites in the open air at the courtyard (Source: interviews with architect and manager).

From the outside these post-modern crematoria moved away from the standardized ‘non-places’ towards unique buildings. A German example is the Treptow crematorium in Berlin, designed by Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank. However, the question remains whether consumers choose between crematoria as if these were consumption goods? Will post-modern crematoria become more ‘popular’ than sub-modern crematoria? Thus far, the indications are that ‘clients’ seem rather conservative and that they choose for crematoria that
are near their place of residence, or the crematorium where a deceased loved one has been cremated. Despite the critiques that crematoria received because of their efficient routing, it could arguably provide a sense of calmness as well, as people know where they have to go instead. Maybe what mourners need is the possibility to switch off their minds from making ‘consumptive’ choices at times of great emotional stress, so they can focus on the farewell service. People can at least pretend to themselves that at that very emotional moment the whole crematorium revolves around the farewell ceremony of their loved one, which seems to fit with contemporary death rites that remember and celebrate the identity of a deceased

Figure 7. Zoetermeer Crematorium, view from the side (2006)

Photo: Pieter Kers

6.8 Conclusion
While this chapter has demonstrated how the Netherlands has shown a distinct momentum of its own in the development of crematoria and their building styles it has also indicated some resemblance in chronology with the attitude towards creating a specific sense of place with other European countries, for example the U.K. and Germany. The direction of an intended sense of place has developed from the sacred and solemn through a softened version of Modernism (called shake-hands modernism in the Netherlands) and suburban negation of death, to wider post-modern experiments. This resemblance seems to have been caused mainly by general societal developments in attitudes towards death as architects struggled in the same way as any ordinary citizen with the irrationality and incomprehensibility of death. The question stands as how best to create a sense of place for something so senseless? Here, the latest experimental developments that we have cautiously labelled post-modern look
promising as sincere attempts at creating meaningful places where there is room for emotions. While it is difficult to know how to accomplish this in precise terms, having that goal as central to the building programs seems essential. The success of these attempts remains to be seen, but crematoria have clearly appeared on the list of challenges for ambitious architects, and that is, definitely, good news.

References


