Final places
Klaassens, Mirjam

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2011

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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7 | Post-modern crematoria in the Netherlands: A search for a final sense of place

Abstract
Since 2002, cremation has been the dominant form of bodily disposal in the Netherlands. Consequently, people are increasingly using crematoria as places to say farewell to their loved ones. However, in contemporary society, with its growing demand for more personalized death rites, many crematoria have been criticized for being technical ‘non-places’ rather than symbolic places permitting emotional fulfillment. We selected recently-built crematoria in Haarlem, Leusden and Zoetermeer to examine if they applied new (post-modern) design principles that fit contemporary needs. We found a strong trend towards unique and remarkable buildings. The light and bright buildings with views of nature create uplifting spaces. The architects included the incinerator area in the ritual procession to create a meaningful climax for the committal. However, this ritual procession still functions mainly as an efficient one-way route for mourners, to keep different groups apart. Strikingly, the crematoria still hardly refer to the act of cremation, and continue to apply semi-enclosed layouts. These design choices do not seem to fit the post-modern notion of death as an openly performed life event. The architects have made a move towards new funerary practices, but these are more adaptations than a hard break from previous ideas.

7.1 Introduction
In late 2010, 68 crematoria were in operation in the Netherlands and there are serious plans to build another 16 in the next few years (Klaassens & Groote, forthcoming). The first Dutch crematorium was built in 1914 in Velsen, located 30 kilometres west of Amsterdam. This was forty years after the establishment of the Royal Dutch Cremation Society, and it took another 40 years before a second crematorium was built in Dieren in 1954. At that time cremation was still an illegal act, but it was allowed by the government because of some incomplete sections in the Burial law of 1869 (Cappers, 2002). Only in 1955 was cremation formally legalized (Cappers, 2002). Cremation rates remained relatively low, rising from a mere four percent in 1960 to 14 percent in 1970. The rate then increased considerably to 35

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6 This chapter is reprinted from: Klaassens, M., & Groote, P. Post-modern crematoria in the Netherlands: A search for a new sense of place, and has been submitted to an international journal.
percent in 1980, 44 percent in 1990, and more than 50 percent in 2002. In 2009, 57 percent of
the dead were cremated (LVC, 2011).

A consequence of the increasing popularity of cremation was the establishment of a
new landscape for mourning and remembrance (Jupp & Grainger, 2002). As there was no
architectural precedent, a new building type had to be developed that was essentially
ambiguous (Grainger, 2005). The ambiguity derives from the two basic purposes of a
crematorium: (1) the rather technical function of the disposal of a dead body and (2) the more
symbolic function of providing a meaningful farewell ceremony for the bereaved. Emphasis
on the technical function has resulted in crematoria being the subjects of widespread
criticism in contemporary society. This paper starts by addressing this critique, followed by
an exploration of the post-modern reaction expressed in the intention that crematoria should
exceed utilitarian aims. Hence the design of the building must provide a suitable environment
for a meaningful farewell ceremony.

7.2 Modernist designs
From the outset, architects have sought and discussed the appropriate style for crematoria.
Unfortunately, little is published in the academic world about the architecture of crematoria,
in particular in the Netherlands. As Grainger stated, crematoria ‘have become the invisible
buildings of the 20th century. No one wants to talk about the architecture of death’ (BBC,
2006). This fits with the general idea that in the modern, or rather modernist world, the main
way of dealing with death is its denial (Baudrillard, 1976). Death was confined to medical
and scientific discourses, and anything outside these was viewed as taboo or ‘pornographic’
(Gorer, 1965). Funerals and funerary rituals became standardized and less meaningful. Most
people seemed to disappear quietly and unnoticed from our midst (Enklaar, 1995; Wouters,
2002).

Following Davies’ (1995) claim that the architectural forms of crematoria reflect
societies’ attitudes towards death, crematoria lent themselves well to modernism, with its
focus on technology, scientific efficiency and non-sentimental functionalism (Hellman,
1982). Cremation is essentially a modernist way of dealing with the disposal of dead bodies:
efficient, clean and orderly (Davies & Guest, 1999; Grainger, 2005; Pursell, 2007). During
the modernist era, meaning in the built environment was defined in utilitarian terms, resulting
in a functional and uniform aesthetic that expresses a machine-based mass society. The
modernist trend is explained as “a blueprint for placelessness, for anonymous, impersonal
spaces, massive structures, and automobile throughways” (Ley, 1989, p. 52).

Most of the Dutch crematoria built from the 1970s to around 2000 – which we
labelled as sub-modernist in an earlier study (Klaassens & Groote, forthcoming) – were
indeed described as blank, discrete and modest buildings that could hardly be distinguished from other building types (Duijnhoven, 2002; Hekkema, 2002). They were seen as uninviting, enclosed buildings with austere interiors (Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008). Consequently, crematoria were regarded as uniform buildings without a sense of place and identity, rendering them ‘non-places’: places that are regarded as rather meaningless (Augé, 1995). Obviously, this does not apply necessarily to all crematoria from the modernist era. The crematoria built from the 1930s to around 1970, which we labelled as shake-hands modernist (see Klaassens & Groote, forthcoming), such as Dieren, Groningen and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, or Gunnar Asplund’s archetype in Stockholm in Sweden, definitely tried to create a sense of place of their own. In numbers, however, these remained a minority. Moreover, they too were based on ideas of rationalization and efficiency.

This focus on efficiency is visible from the main determinant of the layout of modernist crematoria: the routing systems for the bereaved, the secondary mourners and the body through the building (Davies, 1995). Routing is a dominant feature of crematorium design, seeking to speed the flow of groups through the auditorium and the condolence area (Davies, 1996). This applies particularly to the Netherlands, as in Dutch crematoria both the farewell ceremony and the condolence reception are normally held inside the crematorium building itself, respectively in the auditorium and the reception room. The incinerator room, where the actual cremation takes place, was not included in the routing system for mourners in modernist crematoria, as it was regarded as exclusively part of the technical process. The floor plans of almost all modernist crematoria are based on a ‘one door in and another door out’ routing. “This arrangement was designed to ensure privacy as well as efficiency” (Grainger, 2005, p. 180). Mourners have to exit the building through a different door in order to make way for the next group of mourners in the waiting hall (Davies, 1996). This is why crematoria were compared to conveyor belts. Along with the impersonal design this caused mourners to feel ‘processed’ in a rather mechanical way (Davies, 1995).

7.3 The post-modern reaction
In post-modernity the exclusion of death from society is seen as one of the anomalies of modernism. There should be ample room for personal, expressive and flexible death rituals which are assumed to give new meanings to a fundamental human transformation (Sax et al., 1989). Death is a life event that needs marking and celebration at the right time and in the right place. A crematorium should be such a place. It seemed that modernity’s strategies to isolate and conceal death socially and spatially from everyday life had gradually given way to the re-appearance of death as a ritualized and almost openly ‘performed’ life event. Walter (1994) argues that the expression of feelings is a coping strategy of post-modern societies in
dealing with death. This resulted in a quest for new rituals (Wouters, 2002) as traditional religious rituals have fallen out of favour (Bernts et al., 2007). In the last twenty years, mortuary rituals have become more personalized and informal. Farewell ceremonies tend to embody and celebrate the life lived (Laderman, 2003). Personal rituals that reflect the lifestyle of the deceased and the bereaved are preferred (Sax et al., 1989). The rationale behind crematoria therefore exceeds the strictly utilitarian terms of the cremation of dead bodies. They are required to provide a physical context that also allows emotional fulfilment (Grainger, 2005). If the post-modern project is re-enchantment, also of the built environment, this can be achieved by the creation of places defined as space imbued with meaning. This involves investment in the physical alteration of the setting, but also symbolic investment. While in the early days of modernism, there was a struggle to empty out and purify space, in post-modern times there is a corresponding struggle to fill space with meaningful references (Ley, 1989). This would apply to crematoria even more than to other buildings.

Accordingly, the challenge for architects was to design a crematorium that contains room for both functional and symbolic spaces (Davies, 1996). Already in 1967, architect Bond stated that architects have a great responsibility to provide the context in which subtle human experiences can be expected to take place, also in crematoria (Bond 1967 in Grainger, 2005, p. 208). Architecture is a medium for the communication between a series of spatial arrangements and the inner condition of a human being. This process of communication “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). This should enable mourners to adapt more readily to life afterwards (Bond 1967 cited in Grainger, 2005, p. 207). Indeed, architect Zeinstra – who designed the post-modern crematorium in Haarlem, opened 35 years after Bond’s publication – used Bond’s work as an explicit inspiration.

In this paper three post-modern crematoria in the Netherlands are analyzed as case studies. It has not been the intention to provide comprehensive analyses of the crematoria, but to identify possible changes within post-modern crematorium design as a response to societies’ changing needs. We describe the architecture and the layout of these crematoria to examine the presence of a meaningful sense of place. Then the paper seeks to examine the buildings as ritual and functional buildings. Finally, we discuss whether post-modern crematoria provide ritual buildings that fit contemporary mourners’ needs.

7.4 Methodology
In this paper we analyse crematoria located in Haarlem (opened in 2002), Leusden (opened in 2003) and Zoetermeer (opened in 2006). In an earlier study, we labelled these crematoria
as post-modern (Klaassens & Groote, forthcoming). It seems that the architects have broken with modernist traditions with these crematoria. Architect Herman Zeinstra designed the Haarlem Crematorium to most deliberately abandon all the design principles of modern crematoria. Zeinstra’s basic idea was the total absence of the usual routing system for visitors through the building. The parties commissioning Leusden Crematorium aimed to have a multicultural and multifunctional crematorium built which would fit the needs of a diversity of cultural and religious groups. Consequently, architect Arnold Sikkel worked with representatives of different cultural and religious groups to discuss their needs and expectations. Zoetermeer Crematorium is extraordinary in its external design. Architect Martijn de Gier provided a dominantly visible ‘second skin’ of rusted Corten steel curving around the auditorium as a protective shell.

In order to determine the goals and inspirations behind the designs, we conducted in-depth interviews with the architects of these three crematoria: Herman Zeinstra (Haarlem), Arnold Sikkel (Leusden) and Martijn de Gier (Zoetermeer). The in-depth interviews were coherent, thoroughgoing and elicited a great deal of information. They lasted for about two hours on average. In addition, the architects provided several other sources of information, such as early sketches and ideas, information booklets, unpublished articles and pictures.

Because some of the design principles of the architects were regarded as contestable and progressive, it was important to link the architects’ aspirations with the daily functioning of the crematoria after opening. Therefore, complementary perspectives on the cases were found by interviewing and speaking informally with crematoria staff and location managers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken during tours and informal talks. The interviews were conducted in Dutch. The excerpts presented in this paper have been translated by the authors.

7.5 The buildings: Haarlem, Leusden and Zoetermeer

Both the architecture and the floor plan of Haarlem Crematorium are unique in the Dutch funerary landscape. It is laid out as an arcaded courtyard with an open roofed passage which connects all areas in the building to a ritual circular route (Figure 1a). From the outside, walls of natural stone, covered by soft wood and panels of glass reveal the top of the auditorium which is located in the centre of the courtyard (Figure 1b). The auditorium is made up of large glass panels. The plain materials contribute to the simplicity of the design and make it symbolically neutral (De Groot, 2002). Architect Zeinstra chose austere and raw materials deliberately, to create what he calls ‘a Spartan building.’ Initially, the crematorium was indeed physically experienced as such, as there was no heating installation in the auditorium. The architect’s starting point was that people should remember the farewell service in order
to give it meaning, and both the look and feel of the building, and the physical experience of external elements (e.g. heat or cold) would help recall the ceremony.

Figure 1a. The arcaded courtyard of Haarlem Crematorium

Figure 1b. The façade of Haarlem Crematorium with a view on the auditorium

![Photo: Jaap Lotstra](image1)

![Photo: Christien Jordaan](image2)

Leusden Crematorium also has a serene and sober sense of place, with its white plastered concrete façade. This is complemented and contrasted with wooden doors and frames. The façade has straight lines, whereas the auditorium is curved (Figures 2a and 2b).

Figure 2a. The façade of Leusden Crematorium

Figure 2b. The courtyard of Leusden Crematorium

![Photo: Martine Kater](image3)

![Photo: EGM Architecten](image4)

The sober ambiance is continued in the interior. Beside the crematorium, the municipality cemetery is located. The architect of the Leusden Crematorium also renovated the existing cemetery auditorium, returning it to its original state. This building was designed by C. B. van der Tak, who was a student of architect W. M. Dudok. The dark brick auditorium (1929) has a totally different character to the white crematorium, but the buildings are in total
harmony, according the jury who nominated Leusden Crematorium for the architecture prize of the city of Amersfoort in 2003. Out of the ten nominations, the public choose the crematorium as the winning design (Amersfoortse Courant, 2003).

In Zoetermeer Crematorium, the façade immediately catches the viewer’s attention. It consists of high, untreated sheets of Corten steel which are gradually corroding (Figure 3a). For the architect this symbolizes the transitory nature of life. This steel-sheeted wall forms a firm division between the surrounding recreational grounds and the existing cemetery. “The curved wall of gradually increasing height that curls around the auditorium … like a protective shell also guides visitors in the farewell process… From the auditorium, the wall first opens up to the surrounding water and then steps back towards the reception rooms in the brick section of the building” (Hannema, no date). The organic shape creates an enclosed feeling, a symbolic embrace. The site lies in a polder area and used to be about three metres lower than the neighbouring cemetery, as the ground level of cemeteries had to be raised above water level to permit the natural decay of the interred. The architects decided to raise the site of the crematorium as well, and to design a two-storied building, with the services being conducted at the top level. The ground floor is used for technical equipment and an indoor columbarium (Figure 3b).

From the outside, these three crematoria exemplify a shift from modern crematoria towards post-modern places of cremation that reflect a society in which death is more openly discussed. Architect De Gier (Zoetermeer): “Of course it should been seen!” Hannema (no date), discussing Zoetermeer crematorium, argues: “Thanks to the loose, flowing form and the weathered aspect of the steel façade, the crematorium is both a landmark in and a natural component of landscaped surroundings”. In Leusden, it was architect Sikkel’s intention to
design a building that would confirm its special and important function. This is in line with what John Moore, the architect responsible for Telford (UK) crematorium, noted as the real problem in crematorium design: “To create something special, appropriate to its purpose and with a sense of place over and above the ordinary. That’s the challenge” (see Grainger, 2005, p. 23). The architects of the crematoria in Haarlem, Leusden and Zoetermeer seem to have succeeded in taking up this challenge: they planned to design unique buildings that can be distinguished from other building types. They are no longer ‘non-places’, but instead notable buildings that communicate to the outside world that they perform a special and important function.

7.6 Interaction with the surrounding landscape
Through time, crematorium architects have never agreed on whether open or enclosed architecture should be used. In the 1970s and 1980s a preference for a relatively closed architecture became dominant in the Netherlands, even when the crematoria were located in natural landscapes. In the early twenty-first century a return to more open designs was noticed (Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008). In our case studies, the relationship between interior and exterior is negotiated through semi-enclosed architecture. Haarlem and Leusden have enclosed courtyards and patios, whereas in Zoetermeer the surrounding sheets of Corten steel assure security from the outside world, protecting mourners from confronting the activities in the neighbouring sports fields and the cemetery. Inside, however, the buildings retain an airy ambiance. In Haarlem, the auditorium at the centre of the courtyard is almost completely constructed of glass. Glass panels at the top of the outer wall provide views of the surrounding trees. Leusden’s auditorium also provides a view on a courtyard (Figure 2). In the auditorium, natural light plays a central role in the creation of its atmosphere (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Sky light in the auditorium of Leusden Crematorium

Photo: Pieter Kers
Architect Sikkel explains that the curved glass panels in the roof create different colours and shadow patterns on the white walls as the light changes from blue in the morning to red in the evening. It was architect De Gier’s (Zoetermeer) intention to have natural daylight and a view over the outside in every space of the building. A large window in the auditorium provides views over the water and the greenery of the neighbouring cemetery. The auditorium is circular in order to create a sense of security and warmth as the building encloses and binds the group. According to Fry (1973), curved lines are more beautiful and more comforting than the angular forms imposed by conventional modernist materials. Recent psychological research has indeed suggested that: “The morphology of the built environment has a non-negligible effect on human functioning, and therefore influences human well-being … [and] the architectural integration of … natural morphologies is shown to lead to an enrichment of the human relation toward the built environment on a creative, emotive, and epistemological level” (Joye, 2006, p. 239). Consequently, both the architectural and the landscape design of a crematorium can be of fundamental importance in influencing the emotional response of grievers to the cremation ceremony.

The cases demonstrate that views of nature play an important role in crematorium design, and are thought to create an uplifting feeling (Grainger, 2005). This seems based on the notion that the physical environment can influence human emotions and create feelings of wellbeing (Hamilton, 2006). This idea is embraced by designers of health institutions, such as hospitals (Wagenaar, 2006) and hospices (Worpole, 2009). Architects generally agree that in a crematorium there should not be too much distraction from the prime purpose of being there: to say your last farewells. De Brouwere, architect of crematorium Appingedam, explains: “Although death is part of our daily life, the auditorium should not be too normal, because it is all about the farewell. It should not be too cozy and have atmospheric lights and a music installation similar to the ones you have at home. People have to realize that they are doing something special”. At the same time, there should be a natural focal point within the auditorium, as people will not look at the casket continuously during the entire service. For those less close to the deceased it will serve as a point of distraction, a way to let thoughts wander and to keep people calm and settled.

The post-modern crematoria described here differ fundamentally from the heavily criticized, enclosed, dark and stuffy ones from the sub-modern era. However, the shake-hands modernist crematoria, crematoria built from the 1930s to around 1970, did have a deliberate relationship with the surrounding landscape. In a shake-hands modernist crematorium such as Groningen (opened in 1962), for example, there are nice views on the walk up to the building and from the waiting area, but none from the auditorium. This is how
these crematoria differ from the post-modern one that included views from the auditorium over the surrounding landscape, which may afford peace of mind or necessary distraction.

7.7 Ritual processions

Architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) states that a cremation ceremony, unlike a burial, fails to provide mourners something to hold on to or any sense of consolation. A traditional burial takes place in clearly defined stages: the visitor moves from the home to the church, on to the grave and finally to the condolence room or cafe. The routes between the different stages seem to be particularly memorable for the bereaved. Since Zeinstra strongly believes that a funeral can only be meaningful when it is remembered, his design for the Haarlem Crematorium is based on burial rituals. The premise of the design is ritual and procession, but with individual freedom in the timing and order of the constituent elements. As such, Haarlem Crematorium strongly resembles Telford (UK): “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 J. Moore, 2000).

The different events that constitute the procession take place within different buildings arranged around the inner courtyard. The act of passage provides time and distance – thereby creating ‘routes of comfort’ (Debets, 2002) – and offers a certain relief (Bond, 1967 cited in Grainger, 2005, pp. 208-209). The changes in atmosphere during the procession make it easier to recall the memory. Leading British crematorium architect Sir Maxwell Fry believes “that the act of passage through the grounds was also a symbolic movement and that the landscape itself could lend much to the spiritual and psychological significance of the procession” (Grainger, 2005, p. 345). This idea of positive spatial experiences stands in contrast with most existing Dutch crematoria in which farewell ceremonies proceed in the secluded interior of one building. According to Zeinstra, a ceremony that is intended to shield the bereaved from external influences and to coddle them, does not offer much comfort nor anything to hold on to. The building and the events should be indelibly imprinted in the memory of the mourners and help recall the ceremony.

In the Zoetermeer and Leusden crematoria, the different architectures and interior designs of the sequential spaces enable a progression of emotional experiences, creating a ceremonial procession. The move from the waiting area to the auditorium is emphasized in Leusden by large solid doors that mark a transition to a significant event: the farewell ceremony. The idea of a procession is strengthened by the heights of the various spaces, with the auditorium as the highest and brightest point in the building. An abundance of light welcomes the mourners as they walk towards the high and open auditoriums. Just as Zeinstra (Haarlem) wanted mourners to be physically aware of their surroundings, in Zoetermeer
Crematorium the users physically experience the procession as they first walk up a kind of crescendo from the parking space to the auditorium. There, the highest point is reached, which later contributes to a feeling of lightness when they return after the ceremony.

Zeinstra (Haarlem) states that the open-ended nature of a sub-modern cremation service causes a lack of ritual. While the lowering of the coffin into the grave finalizes a burial, at the end of a cremation service the coffin stays behind or slides away. Even when the purpose of a crematorium is to reduce a corpse to ashes, the act of cremation is seldom witnessed and takes place behind the scenes. It is implicitly rather than explicitly acknowledged: even the smoke and the smell of burning are avoided as far as technically possible (Davies, 1996). The entry of the coffin into the cremator is thus physically and emotionally separated from the mourners, who remain passive observers rather than active participants (Davies, 2002). This can lead to an emotional disconnection and a lack of finality in the cremation service. To witness the charging of the coffin into the cremator is the most certain way of confronting finality (Grainger, 2005). “This would be the meaningful climax of the committal” (Bond, 1967 cited in Grainger, 2005, p. 209). According to Bond, “mourners who were subjected to a more ritualistic form of mourning seemed to be able to adapt themselves more readily to life afterwards” (cited in Grainger, 2005, p. 207). An important aspect of bereavement is to be actively involved with the farewell ceremony, which may help the participant to understand what happened and forms the first steps in the process of bereavement (Klaassens & Groote, 2009). The modernist approach in treating the bereaved as passive observers and death as hidden, makes it difficult for the bereaved to come to terms with reality (Sax et al., 1989).

In all three post-modern crematoria studies here, mourners are able to witness the incineration, and the cremator is explicitly included in the ceremonial procession as a public space. Architect De Gier (Zoetermeer) states, however, that the majority of people still do not want to accompany the coffin to the incineration space. Nevertheless, the number of bereaved who attends the incineration is on the increase.

7.8 But what about routing?
Despite all existing criticism, our case studies still shared the consistent planning principle of modernist crematoria: an efficient one-way routing for mourners designed to keep consecutive groups separated. Architect Sikkel (Leusden), for example, compares routing in a crematorium with routings in other public buildings such as hospitals. “Everything revolves around the organization of these routings. Therefore, I think the challenge, when you know the routing plays a role, is to choose it as well as possible so that the staff can work
effectively.” A staff member from Haarlem explained routing positively, suggesting that routing provides a sense of calm in that people know where they are going next.

The routing in Dutch crematoria starts in the family room for close relatives, and in the entry hall for the other mourners. Both groups join in the auditorium, along with the coffin. All three crematoria offer the option for the family to accompany the coffin to the crematory after the ceremony. The family and other mourners meet again for conversation and condolences in the coffee rooms.

However, architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) tried to abandon the routing principle in his basic design. He believed that a forced routing would disorientate people. In contrast, he felt it was necessary that mourners were aware of the building layout and the events taking place there in order for the ceremony to be meaningful. Mourners should be able to wander freely around the courtyard, in any sequence they prefer. To prevent the bereaved from getting disoriented, he argued for entry and exit through the same door, just as in a church. The staff of Haarlem Crematorium explained that this initial idea was never adopted. Instead, a linear route was implemented in Haarlem: people enter the building at the front and leave at the back, to prevent different groups seeing each other. Zeinstra in turn wondered why it would be a bad thing to see other groups of mourners? This also happens during burials at a cemetery. Leusden and Zoetermeer follow the standard U-shaped route, entering and leaving at the front, but through different doors. Architect De Gier (Zoetermeer) explains his routing: “We have a turning point in the auditorium, which you can explain symbolically, but it is also part of the routing, as you have to take a U-turn in order to return to your car. It is as simple as that”. He added it is important to clarify with U-shaped routes which of the doors is the entrance. If this is not done, people will wander about and could disturb other groups.

With the system of movement of mourners through the building, the seemingly unimportant coat racks play a pivotal role. In modernist crematoria, wheeled coat racks were often used to move the coats from the entrance to the exit of the crematorium during the service. When mourners found their coats at the exit, rather than where they had left them, they were liable to being confused and having the feeling of being processed through a conveyor-belt-like assembly line. A less strict solution was the double entry cloakroom, which was implemented in Leusden. A different cloakroom was used for each group, which could be opened from the entrance side at the beginning of the service and from the exit side at the end.

Architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) abhorred the ‘puppetry’ of moving coats from entrance to exit. In order to prevent the bereaved from becoming disoriented, Zeinstra designed fixed coat hooks at the entrance, so that people would simply walk back after the ceremony. However, the staff at Haarlem crematorium explained that this idea was also never adopted.
because it would have limited the number of services a day as people would have had to go back to the entrance and could run into the following group. Wheeled coat racks could not be used in Haarlem as the auditorium is made of glass and the mourners would be distracted by staff rolling the racks to the exit area. Consequently, mourners now have to take their coats with them to the auditorium and the condolence area. When everyone is in the condolence area, the doors back to the courtyard are closed. The staff does not want people wandering about as they prepare for the next ceremony. All this is contrary to Zeinstra’s design, which allowed or even encouraged movement around the courtyard. A staff member said: “Sometimes people walk back, and then we just tell them that the exit is the other way”.

The principal of separating different groups of mourners is maintained as a key element in crematorium design. However, the rule of separating different groups of mourners is more strict on arrival than on departure. In Leusden the entrance contains low windows that show the legs of people inside so that those leaving can see the next group, but cannot be seen themselves. De Gier (Zoetermeer) argues: “We don’t mind if you see another person, but you don’t want that person to walk through your ceremony”. It seems that Zeinstra (Haarlem) has a slightly different view when he spoke of ‘the fear of coming across each other’: “You should not try to squeeze everyone into one space, and if you see them walking somewhere, there is nothing wrong with that”.

The purpose of routing is not only to avoid different groups from witnessing each others’ presence, but also to separate the technical from the symbolic side of the building. To keep the service separated from the technical side, the working spaces need their own entrance and routing to permit the staff to do their work behind the scenes. The courtyard of Leusden contains a double wall, so that the staff can move through the building without being visible. The courtyard in Haarlem does not have this feature and staff sometimes experience difficulties working efficiently in the transparent auditorium. Zoetermeer Crematorium contains two levels separating the technical areas from the services. Architect De Gier: “It is just like a theatre. You know that there is technology in use, but you must not see it. You should not know about the prompter, the director and lighting designer: all the people that are thanked afterwards.” The technical and symbolic spaces only come together in the crematory.

In sum, we can observe that although the movement of bereaved people through the building does not differ much from that in modernist crematoria, the architects have tried to make it feel natural and logical, rather than induced by the logistics of the process and driven by the staff. The ultimate question is, of course, whether an efficient routing really is a bad thing. People are freed from the responsibility of choosing where to go next, and can instead focus on the service. People can maintain the pretence that at that very emotional moment the
whole crematorium revolves around the service for their loved one. This still seems to fit with contemporary death rites which focus on remembering and celebrating the identity of the deceased individual.

7.9 Conclusion
Modernist crematoria were criticized for being uniform and standardized buildings that tried to conceal their primary function. This fitted the ideology of modernity that handles death in a mechanical, non-sentimental, rational way. However, in contemporary post-modern society, where death is a more openly performed life event demanding new, personal death rites to make it more meaningful, things may have changed. Consequently, we examined the post-modern crematoria at Haarlem, Leusden and Zoetermeer to see if these indicate changes in crematorium design that fit the needs of today’s mourners better than their modernist predecessors.

We found that post-modern crematoria have moved away from the standardized ‘sub-modern’ design towards unique buildings with a sense of place over and above the ordinary. They are no longer ‘non-places’, but are instead notable buildings that communicate to the outside world that they perform a special and important function. Nonetheless, although they are distinctive buildings, they still hardly refer to the functional purpose of cremation, i.e. bodily disposal. The architects interviewed believe that, for example, a clearly visible chimney is undesirable, as it would raise associations with the furnaces at the concentration camps of the Nazi regime. Architect De Gier (Zoetermeer): “Everybody knows it is a crematorium, but nobody wants to be reminded of it.” This does not seem to fit the post-modern notion of death as an openly performed life event.

The post-modern crematoria discussed here are light and airy places with views of the surrounding nature. They do not resemble the enclosed and dark modernist ones, but create an atmosphere of calm. The architects have definitely tried to incorporate the surrounding natural and cultural landscape in the layout of the crematoria, and use these to enhance the place meanings of the crematorium. More emphasis is placed on the ceremonial processions, which are created in various ways. What is new in the layout of these crematoria is the explicit inclusion of the incinerator space as a public space. It is not just a technical area that has been opened to visitors, but it is also explicitly included in the ritual procession. This creates a meaningful climax to the cremation service. In Haarlem and Leusden, this means an outdoor walk to the crematory, in Zoetermeer the descent down a grand stairway which provides the distance and time required to constitute a ceremonial act.

In spite of all the critiques, our case studies consistently shared one modernist planning principle: a system of routing for groups of mourners designed to keep groups apart.
However, the architects attempted to make this movement feel natural and logical, rather than a movement constrained by the logistics of the process. Architect Zeinstra tried to eliminate this planning principle from his design, and to introduce an informal and unstructured movement of people to create a more individualized landscape of mourning. Staff of the crematorium have, however, reintroduced the abandoned routing.

The final conclusion is that the architects have adapted to new ideas and the demands of contemporary mourners with regards to funerary practices. However, these are more adaptations than an abrupt break away from previous ideas. Clearly, architect Zeinstra has gone the furthest in this development by offering the most ‘post-modern-like’ crematorium in the Netherlands. Zoetermeer and Leusden have introduced new ideas in architecture and design, but remain closer to traditional crematoria.

References


