Postmodern crematoria in the Netherlands: a search for a final sense of place

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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 personalised death rites, many crematoria have been criticised for being technical ‘non-places’ rather than symbolic ones permitting emotional fulfilment. We selected recently-built crematoria in Haarlem, Leusden and Zoetermeer to examine whether they display new postmodern design principles. Although the architects of these crematoria had to incorporate modern principles, in particular for the functional aspects of the buildings, they clearly also invested in their symbolic function. The crematoria are designed as uplifting places to celebrate the life lived in a meaningful and bright environment, and to finalise the ritual procession in the crematory area.

KEYWORDS: crematoria; architecture; landscape; ritual; death

1. Introduction

1.1. Crematoria as a new and ambiguous building type

By 2012, almost 60% of deceased people in the Netherlands were cremated (LVC, 2013), with 72 crematoria in operation (Figure 1). There are serious plans to build more in the next few years. As the first crematorium in the Netherlands was only opened in 1914, this indicates that cremation has become the dominant method of bodily disposal in less than a century. This means that in the past hundred years architects have had to create a new landscape for mourning and remembrance, as there was no architectural precedent to the crematorium (Jupp & Grainger, 2002).

That architects struggled to find the right design for crematoria resulted not only from it being a new building type, but also because of its essentially ambiguous character (Grainger, 2005). The ambiguity derives from the two basic purposes of a crematorium: (1) The rather technical function of bodily disposal, which was contrasted deliberately with and in direct competition to...
manual burial; and (2) The more symbolic function of providing a meaningful place for the farewell ceremony for bereaved people.

In an earlier publication we described Dutch architects’ struggle to create a suitable design for crematoria, and the consequent development of crematorium architecture in the Netherlands (Klaassens & Groote, 2012). There we suggested a four-phase model of development, with turning points centred around 1930, 1970 and 2000. The differences between the phases lie in a different interpretation of modernist design principles and the ideology of Modernism in general. We do not want to repeat the discussion here, but instead would like to offer in the next section a brief summary of the development of crematorium design and its relationship with modernist ideologies, and then to focus on recent efforts to overcome its limitations.

The focus in this paper is on the fourth phase, the postmodern one. We will use three examples of recent crematoria to discuss whether these can be labelled as postmodern, and whether they represent crematoria that fundamentally differ from earlier ones in their design and functioning.

2. Modernist designs

From the outset, architects have sought and discussed the appropriate style for crematoria. Unfortunately, little has been published in academia about the architecture of crematoria, in particular in the Netherlands. As Grainger stated, crematoria ‘have become the invisible buildings of the twentieth 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 the modernist world, the main way to deal with death is its denial (Baudrillard, 1976). Death was confined to medical and scientific discourse and anything beyond these fields was viewed as taboo or ‘pornographic’ (Gorer, 1965), or as hidden (Aries, 1974). Funerals and funerary rituals became standardised 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, cremation as a form of bodily disposal lent itself well to modernism, with its focus on technology, scientific efficiency and non-sentimental functionalism (Hellman, 1982). Cremation is essentially a modernist, industrial way of dealing with the disposal of dead bodies: efficient, clean and orderly (Davies & Guest, 1999; Grainger, 2005; Pursell, 2003).

During the modernist era, meaning in the built environment was defined in utilitarian terms, resulting in a functional and uniform aesthetic.

In the first phase of crematorium architecture in the Netherlands, ideology was firmly rooted in modernist thought, stressing its rationality and purity. However, architects still tried to find a suitable design for the accompanying processes of mourning and remembrance, and used a diverse palette of traditional or exotic shapes for this. In the second phase (1930–1970), the main idiom for the limited number of new crematoria became a softened form of modernist design that is labelled ‘shake-hands modernism’. In the third phase, the cremation rate rose quickly, thanks in particular to very rapid secularisation, but also to the lifting of the Roman Catholic ban on cremation. A large number of smaller crematoria were built all over the Netherlands. Less attention was paid to architecture, landscape design and location, and the dominant form became a rather dull and weak extract from modernist principles that we labelled ‘sub-Modernist’. Crematoria from this period came under particular criticism as buildings unfit for the purpose of meaningful mourning (Heesels, 2012; Sax, Visser, & Boer, 1991). They have been described as blank, discrete and modest buildings that can hardly be distinguished from other building types (Duinhoven, 2002; Hekkema, 2002). They were seen as uninviting, enclosed buildings with austere interiors (Cappers, 2002; Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008, 2010). Consequently, crematoria were regarded as uniform buildings without a sense of place and identity, rendering them ‘non-places’: places that are regarded as meaningless (Augé, 1995). Such criticisms seem, have to gained momentum in the lay and public discourse from the 1970s onwards, and in expert discourse from the 1990s on (Enklaar 1995, Cappers 2002, 2012; Sax et al., 1991).

The focus on efficiency is visible from the main determinant of the layout of modernist crematoria: the routing systems through the building for bereaved people, the secondary mourners and the body (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). 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. The family and other mourners meet again for conversation and condolences in the coffee rooms. The floor plans of almost all modernist

Figure 2. Floor plan of Heerlen Crematorium Heerlen.
Source: Floor plan of Heerlen Crematorium based on floor plans provided by F.G.M. Deams
Legend for all floor plans in this article: 1 Entrance; 2 Waiting room; 3 Family room; 4 Cloakroom; 5 Main hall; 6 Committal room; 7 Crematory/technical space; 8 Coffee/condolence rooms; 9 Toilets; 10 Kitchen; 11 Office; 12 Columbarium; 13 Bridge; 14 Gallery; 15 Patio; and 16 Exit.
crematoria are based on a ‘one door in and another door out’ routing, to ensure privacy as well as efficiency (Grainger, 2005; Heesels, 2012). 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 (Figure 2). This is why crematoria were compared by their critics to conveyor belts. Along with the impersonal design, this caused mourners to feel ‘processed’ in a rather mechanical way (Davies, 1995, 1996).

This applies particularly to the Netherlands, as both the farewell ceremony and the condolence reception are normally held inside the crematorium building itself, in the auditorium and the reception room, respectively (Heesels, 2012). The crematory 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.

3. The postmodern reaction

In the fourth phase of crematorium design in the Netherlands (from 2000), we suggest that architects have tried to overcome the limitations of modernism and to respond to increasing criticism of the sub-modernist designs of the previous period by creating places for new mourning rituals and a more open expression of death and remembrance. We termed this postmodernism. In this, we follow Walter (1996), who compares and contrasts modern death and postmodern death.

In postmodernity, 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, Visser, & Boer, 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. Modernity’s strategies to isolate and conceal death socially and spatially from everyday life seemed to gradually give way to the reappearance of death as a ritualised and almost openly ‘performed’ life event (Howarth, 2007; Walter, 1996; Winkel, 2001). Walter (1994) argues that the expression of feelings is a coping strategy for death in postmodern societies. In the last 20 years, the quest for new mortuary rituals has resulted in more personalised and informal ones (Wouters, 2002). Farewell ceremonies tend to embody and celebrate the life lived (Laderman, 2003) and personal rituals that reflect the lifestyle of deceased and bereaved people 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 for emotional fulfilment (Grainger, 2005). If the postmodern project is one of re-enchantment, including 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 in symbolic investment. While the early days of modernism saw a struggle to empty and purify space, postmodernity has a corresponding struggle to fill space with meaningful references (Ley, 1989), crematoria even more than other buildings. In the Netherlands, this struggle is rooted in the rapid secularisation of the 1960s (Wojtkowiak, 2011).

Accordingly, the challenge for architects was to design a crematorium that contains room for both functional and symbolic spaces (Davies, 1996). As early as 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, including crematoria (Bond, 1967). Architecture is a medium for communication between a series of spatial arrangements and the inner human condition. 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 after a death (Bond 1967 cited in Grainger, 2005, p. 207). Indeed, architect Zeinstra – who designed the postmodern crematorium in Haarlem that opened 35 years after Bond’s publication – used Bond’s work as explicit inspiration.

In this paper, three postmodern crematoria in the Netherlands are analysed as case studies. We do not aim to provide comprehensive analyses of the crematoria, but to identify possible changes within crematorium design representative of responses to societies’ changing needs. We describe the architecture and the layout of these crematoria in search of a meaningful sense of place. Then the paper examines the buildings as ritual and functional buildings. Finally, we discuss whether postmodern crematoria provide ritual buildings that fit contemporary mourners’ needs.

4. Methodology

This paper analyses crematoria in Haarlem (opened 2002), Leusden (opened 2003) and Zoetermeer (opened 2006). In these crematoria, the architects would appear to have broken with modernist traditions (Klaassens & Groote, in press, 2012). Architect Herman Zeinstra designed the Haarlem Crematorium to 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 plethora 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.
Crematoria Zoetermeer belongs to an independent cremation company called Monuta, whereas Crematorium Leusden is owned by the municipality of Amersfoort. Crematorium Haarlem is jointly owned by the cremation company Yarden and the municipality. Unlike the situation in the UK (Grainger, 2005), there is no fundamental difference between privately built and operated crematoria, government owned ones and public-private partnerships. A chief reason is the strict Dutch planning system, with local government always playing a major role in location decisions and the design of specific buildings. However, another reason seems to be that local government tends to use the profits from crematorium exploitation to cross-subsidise cemeteries (Perrée, 2009; Van Steen & Pellenbarg, 2006).

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 architects’ design principles were regarded as controversial and progressive, it was important to link the architects’ aspirations with the daily functioning of the crematoria. Therefore, complementary perspectives on the cases were found through interviews and informal conversations with crematoria staff and location managers. All the 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.

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. 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 3). The auditorium is formed 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 the auditorium was not heated. The architect’s starting point was that people should remember the farewell service to give it meaning, and both the look and feel of the building, and the physical experience of the external elements (e.g. heat or cold, according to the weather) would help make the ceremony memorable.
Leusden Crematorium also has a serene and subdued sense of place, with its white plastered concrete façade. This is complemented and contrasted with wooden doors and frames. The façade is composed of straight lines, whereas the auditorium is curved (Figure 4). The serene ambiance is continued in the interior. The municipal cemetery is located beside the crematorium. 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) differs from 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. Of the ten nominations, the public choose the crematorium as the winning design (Amersfoortse Courant, 2003).

Zoetermeer Crematorium’s façade immediately catches the viewer’s attention. It consists of high, untreated sheets of Corten steel which are gradually corroding (Figure 5a). To the architect, this symbolises the transitory nature of life. ‘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, n.d.). 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 design a two-story building, with the services conducted on the top floor. The ground floor is used for technical equipment and an indoor columbarium (Figure 5b). The architect provided two reasons for the two-story crematorium. First, the ceremonial and functional parts of the crematorium are separated. Bereaved people are able to accompany the casket to the crematory. A lift is used to lower the bier (for practical reasons, not to make reference to the practice of burial), whereas bereaved people use the stairs to reach the ground floor. Second, the first floor permits views over the surrounding natural landscape, which is higher than the ground floor.

From the outside, these three crematoria exemplify a shift from modern crematoria towards postmodern places of cremation that reflect a society in which death is more openly discussed. Architect De Gier (Zoetermeer): ‘Of course [the crematorium building] should be seen!’ Hannema (n.d.), 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 the 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 of Telford crematorium (UK), noted in an interview 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 met 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. That this special function is directly related to death and disposal is, however, not explicitly made clear. The architects, for example, state that a clearly visible chimney is undesirable, as it would create associations with 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 postmodern notion of death as an openly performed life event.

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
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 observed (Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008). Our case studies show how 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 ensure security from the outside world, protecting mourners from being confronted with 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 onto a courtyard (Figure 4). In the auditorium, natural light plays a central role in the creation of atmosphere. 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 surroundings in every part 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 to create a sense of security and warmth as the building encloses and binds the group. According to leading
British crematorium architect Sir Maxwell 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 to shaping the grievers’ emotional responses 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 well-being (Hamilton, 2006). This idea is embraced by designers of health institutions such as hospitals (Wagenaar, 2006) and hospices (Worpole, 2003, 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 Appingedam Crematorium, 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 cosy and have atmospheric lights and a music installation similar to the ones you have at home. People have to realise 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, views of nature serve as a point of distraction, a way to let thoughts wander and to keep people calm and settled. This is preferred by architect Sikkel over the use of symbols. He explains: ‘Because the main hall has to be used by so many different groups, you can’t work with a cross […] , that symbol can’t be used in the main hall’.

The postmodern crematoria described here differ fundamentally from the heavily criticised, enclosed, dark and stuffy ones of the sub-modern era. However, the shake-hands modernist crematoria, built from the 1930s to around 1970, did have a deliberate relationship with the surrounding landscape. A shake-hands modernist crematorium, such as Groningen (opened in 1962) for example, offers pleasant 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 postmodern ones with views from the auditorium over the surrounding landscape, which may afford peace of mind or necessary distraction.

7. Ritual processions

Architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) states that a cremation ceremony, unlike a burial, fails to provide mourners with 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 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 distances – 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 more memorable. Fry (1964) 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 a single building. According to Zeinstra, a ceremony intended to shield the bereaved from external influences and 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 them 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 emphasised 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, architect De Gier explains that in Zoetermeer Crematorium the users physically experience the procession as they first walk up as ‘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.

8. Committal as part of the service

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 finalises 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, taking place behind the scenes. It is implicitly rather than explicitly acknowledged (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 loading 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). All three architects stress that bereaved people, or the deceased person before dying, are free to shape their own rituals, including the routings of bereaved people in relation to the coffin, and active participation in the committal. The modernist approach in treating bereaved people as passive observers, and death as hidden, made it difficult for them to come to terms with reality (Sax et al., 1989).

In all three postmodern crematoria studied here, mourners are able to witness the incineration, and the cremator is explicitly included in the ceremonial procession as a public space. The committal room is designed as a ritual space rather than a functional space. In Haarlem, the room is made out of marble and lighted by natural daylight from a roof light positioned in front of the cremator. In Leusden, the wall in which the cremator is located is painted red and a poem is painted on the wall. The location manager explains that the colour is similar to the colour of the robes that are worn by the Hindu community during the service. Here the committal room and crematory are separated from the main building by a patio. Instead of walking round an open fire, Hindus can walk around the committal room and the patio can be used by Hindus to perform their last rites. The family can help load the casket into the crematory and can start the cremation process by pushing a button. In Zoetermeer, the routes the family and the casket take are separated, because the casket is brought down using a lift, whereas the family uses a stairway. Once downstairs, they can accompany the casket from the lift to the incineration space.

Although the majority of people still do not accompany the coffin to the incineration space, the number of bereaved who do attend the incineration is increasing. The staff of Haarlem Crematorium explains that some groups of mourners say goodbye in the committal room without watching the incineration. This is often expected to be a frightening experience, and consequently the final farewell takes place in the gallery outside.

However, the incineration of the body is, of course, not the true end of the ritual procession, nor sufficient in itself. Cremation calls for a later and complementary rite, namely the collection and preservation or disposal of the ashes.
Bereaved people have to decide what to do with the remains (Hertz, 1960). In the Netherlands, the remains are collected 30 days after cremation. The architects of the three crematoria have only included space for a columbarium in their sketches, but not a specific place for the collection of the remains.

The staff of Haarlem Crematorium has added place for a flower plateau to the ritual procession. This is not a tradition in the Netherlands. They place the flowers with the name of the deceased person outside the building en route to the parking place. Staff explained that this is a personal tribute to the deceased person and people often come the next day to take pictures of the flowers. This idea was picked up during a trip to English crematoria.

9. What about routing?

Architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) abandoned the routing principle in his basic design. He believed that a forced routing would disorientate people. In contrast, he felt that it was necessary that mourners were aware of the building’s layout and the events occurring there for the ceremony to be meaningful. Mourners should be able to wander freely around the courtyard in any order they choose. To prevent bereaved people from becoming disoriented, he argued for entry and exit through the same door. Zeinstra thus attempted to enable informal and unstructured movement of people to create a more individualised landscape of mourning. The staff at Haarlem Crematorium explained that this initial idea was never adopted. Instead, a linear route was implemented: people enter the building at the front and leave at the rear, to prevent different groups seeing each other (Figure 6). For his part, Zeinstra wondered why this was considered a bad thing.

The other case studies also shared this modernist crematorium planning principle: the architects of Leusden and Zoetermeer stuck to efficient one-way routing for mourners designed to keep consecutive groups separated. Leusden and Zoetermeer follow the standard U-shaped route, entering and leaving at the front, but through different doors (see Figure 7). 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 make a U-turn to return to your car. It is as simple as that’. He added that it is important in U-shaped routes to clarify which of the doors is the entrance. If this is not done, people will wander about and could disturb other groups.

In 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 be confused and feel processed through a conveyor-belt-like production line. Architect Zeinstra (Haarlem) abhorred the ‘puppetry’ of moving coats from entrance to exit. To prevent bereaved people 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 not adopted either, as it would have limited the number of services per day (people would have to return to the entrance and could run into the next
group). Wheeled coat racks could not be used in Haarlem as the auditorium is made of glass and is fully open, so mourners would be able to see staff moving coat racks. Consequently, mourners now have to take their coats with them into the auditorium and the condolence area. Once everyone is in the condolence room, the doors that open to the courtyard are closed. Staff members do not want people wandering around while they prepare for the next ceremony. A staff member stated: ‘Sometimes people walk back, and then we just tell them that the exit is the other way’. All this is in plain contrast to Zeinstra’s intentions, which allowed or even encouraged movement around the courtyard.

The principal of separating different groups of mourners is maintained as a key element in the functioning of the three crematoria. 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 speaks of ‘the fear of coming across each other’: ‘You should not try to squeeze everyone into one space; if you see them walking somewhere, there is nothing wrong with that’.

The purpose of routing is not only to avoid different groups from encountering each other, but also to separate the technical from the symbolic areas of the building. The working spaces need their own entrance and routing to permit staff to do their work behind the scenes. The courtyard at 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 in working efficiently and without being seen due to the transparency of the 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.

Despite all the criticism, we can observe that the movement of bereaved people through the building does not differ much from that in modernist crematoria. However, the architects have tried to make it feel more natural and logical, rather than induced by the logistics of the process and driven by staff. The ultimate question is, of course, whether an efficient routing is really a bad thing. Architect Sikkel (Leusden) compares routing in a crematorium with routings in other public buildings such as hospitals. ‘Everything revolves around the organisation of these routings. Therefore, I think the challenge, when you know the routing plays a role, is to choose it as well as possible’. 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. 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 would appear to fit with contemporary death rites which focus on remembering and celebrating the identity of the deceased individual.

10. Conclusion

Modernist crematoria were criticised for being uniform and standardised buildings that tried to conceal their primary function. This fitted the ideology of modernity that approaches death in a mechanical, non-sentimental and rational way. However, things may have changed in contemporary postmodern
society, where death is a more openly performed life event demanding new, personal death rites to make it more meaningful. Consequently, we examined the postmodern crematoria in 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 postmodern crematoria have moved away from the standardised ‘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, though they still hardly refer to their functional purpose, that is bodily disposal.

The postmodern crematoria discussed here are light and airy places with views of the surrounding natural landscape to enable the celebration of the life lived. They do not resemble the enclosed and dark sub-modernist ones, but create an atmosphere of calm. The architects have definitely tried to incorporate the surrounding landscape into the layout of their crematoria. More emphasis is placed on the ceremonial processions. What is new in the layout of these crematoria is the explicit inclusion of the crematory space as a public area. It is not just a technical area that has been opened to visitors, but is included in the ritual procession. This creates a meaningful climax to the cremation service.

Although in our case studies, a modernist system of routing for groups of mourners remains in use, the architects of Leusden and Zoetermeer attempted to make this movement feel natural and logical, rather than a movement induced by the logistics of the process. In Haarlem, architect Zeinstra tried to abandon the routing principle altogether, but staff re-implemented it to aid the daily operation of the crematorium.

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 from previous ideas. Clearly, architect Zeinstra has gone the furthest in this development by offering the most ‘postmodern-like’ crematorium in the Netherlands.

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