



in stone

A tour of three significant memorial sites in Europe and an investigation of the potency of place and space in memorial design

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Landscape's task as a witness of memory is a complex one, particularly when the role of design is considered. How does memory work? How does the designer create the setting for remembering? The universal and individual nature of memory is challenging, shuttling between the collective act of remembering and the introspective reflection of each person visiting a site.

Recent trends in memorial design have seen a reduction in the representational aspects of design, with abstract and 'open' designs allowing for a breadth of engagement. The turning point of memorial design was undoubtedly Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC, built in 1982, which references the broader setting of the place through the geometry of the gestures towards the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, but at the same time creates a space of emotion which the individual can occupy and become immersed in.

The three European memory sites explored here exemplify the potency of place and space as the fundamental components of memorial design. Each site embeds itself emphatically in place, tethered to the geographical ingredients that ground the general in the particular. All three sites were completed within the last two decades. The earliest is the extension to the Saint-Pancrace cemetery in Roquebrune-Cap Martin on the Cote d'Azur in France. The town is most well known as the site of Le Corbusier's cabanon - what we would call a bach - as well as his Unité de Camping and the neighbouring E-1027 house designed by Eileen Gray which was the magnet that drew le Corbusier to the site. The extension to



the cemetery, situated high above the town, is by Marc Barani, an architect born in nearby Menton and now practising in Nice. Work began on the extension in 1990 and is ongoing, with only the first two components of a final four axial structures completed to date.

The second site is in Portbou, just over the border from France into Spain. Portbou's most famous moment was the suicide of German Jewish refugee, the philosopher Walter Benjamin, in September 1940. His death was surrounded by controversy, and even today the exact location of his body remains unknown, but there is a representative tombstone within the village. In the early 1990s a memorial was designed by Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan for the area surrounding the cemetery, but the path to completion was far from smooth, and the Passages memorial was not completed until 1994.

The final site also extends an existing cemetery, the San Michele cemetery island in Venice. A competition was held in the late 1990s for an extension to the cemetery, which had long since run out of space. British architect David Chipperfield won the competition, proposing a phased expansion of the island, firstly as a kind of 'infill' of courtyard blocks based on the conventions of Venetian urban form, and ultimately an entirely new island annexe separated from the main island by a canal. The first of these components has very recently been completed, and is now in use.

Sense of place

The two dominant aspects of place that provide the foundation for sites of memory are earth and water. Water is a natural companion to memory. Instilling a sense of restfulness, reflection, and alive to the passing nuances of weather and light, water has a long association with sites of memory. While water is often designed into a memorial complex - as a reflecting pond or fountain for example - in these three sites the water is very much of the place and is drawn in as a vital dimension of the design.

Chipperfield's cemetery extension responds directly to its lagoon setting. His analysis of the existing cemetery island was that it is in denial of the very place it is located. From a distance, the island of San Michele is an evocative 'isle of the dead', a brick wall and line of cypress trees create a brooding Gothic scene, all surrounded by water. However, on passing through the shrouding layer of cypresses the interior of the existing San Michele cemetery is an anti-climax. It is interesting enough, as many cemeteries are in terms of their funerary monuments and intriguing inhabitants - the list of the famous residents at San Michele includes Igor Stravinsky and Ezra Pound. But beyond these details, it is a very ordinary cemetery, completely walled in and therefore totally dislocated from its watery setting. Chipperfield's proposed annexe island will open out onto the lagoon with a series of long steps leading directly down into the water.

The Mediterranean provides the water element for both the Saint-Pancrace cemetery extension and the Passages memorial, yet it is a very different sea which is invoked at each site. From high above the coastline at Roquebrune-Cap Martin, the view to the Mediterranean is distant and panoramic. There's a poignant connection between the original Saint-Pancrace cemetery and the sea beyond, as the most famous occupant of the cemetery is Le Corbusier, who drowned while swimming down in the bay. His grave is marked by a tombstone of his own design, already erected when his wife died seven years before; a piece of micro-architecture which connects to the sea beyond. Barani's extension is located above the original cemetery and is strongly axial, orientated down the slope into which it is dug, providing an inexorable trajectory leading the eye to the distant Mediterranean.

At Portbou, Karavan's design for the memorial to Walter Benjamin casts the sea in a very different role. Not a restful backdrop, but an element of turmoil which constantly agitates the otherwise weighty memorial. The axial shaft of the memorial focuses directly on the



PRECEDING PAGES: Part of David Chipperfield Architects reworking of San Michele cemetery island in Venice. TOP LEFT AND RIGHT: Sculptor Dani Karavan's Passages memorial in Portbou. LEFT: The Saint Pancras Cemetery at Roquebrune, Le Corbusier's final resting place.



whirlpools which swirl at the base of the cliff. Climbing up behind the cemetery a small rocky track leads to a hidden component of the memorial, a platform with a small steel cube in the centre - an invitation to look at the sea again, but here a distant and seemingly calmer sea, trapped behind the chainlink fence that contains the cemetery, imparting a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

All three sites locate themselves not only through water, but also in the topography that defines place. In Venice, earth as such is of little relevance, and the grounding comes instead through the very stuff of the city itself, a sculpted form made up of many voids hollowed out of a mass. These cavities take the form of canals, corridors, courtyards and squares. So while the existing cemetery is largely 'low density' in its layout - more like a suburb than a city of the dead - the additional Chipperfield elements are dense forms, compact, vertical and strongly orientated around this transposed vocabulary of Venetian urban form.

The cemetery extension at Roquebrune-Cap Martin is a tectonic extension of the topography. Dug into the rocky hillside, the levels step up the slope, creating cliffs and clefts that echo the landscape beyond. The white boxy forms are strongly shaped by the Mediterranean light, and provide a theatrical screen on which the shadows of the surrounding vegetation fall. The cliffy coast of Portbou also affords a dramatic relationship between memorial space and topography. Most dramatic is the steep stairway which descends the cliff through a Cor-Ten steel shaft, and is anchored back into the hill behind by a steel pathway which terminates in a stone wall built into the actual stone of the hillside. Slightly further up the hill, and closer to the cemetery, a second element negotiates the rugged topography as a set of small steps which gesture towards an olive tree whose gnarled form lends an ancient sense of time to the setting. Further still up the hill is the third element, forming a sense of repose where the topography levels out for a moment before continuing on its tumultuous relationship with the sea.

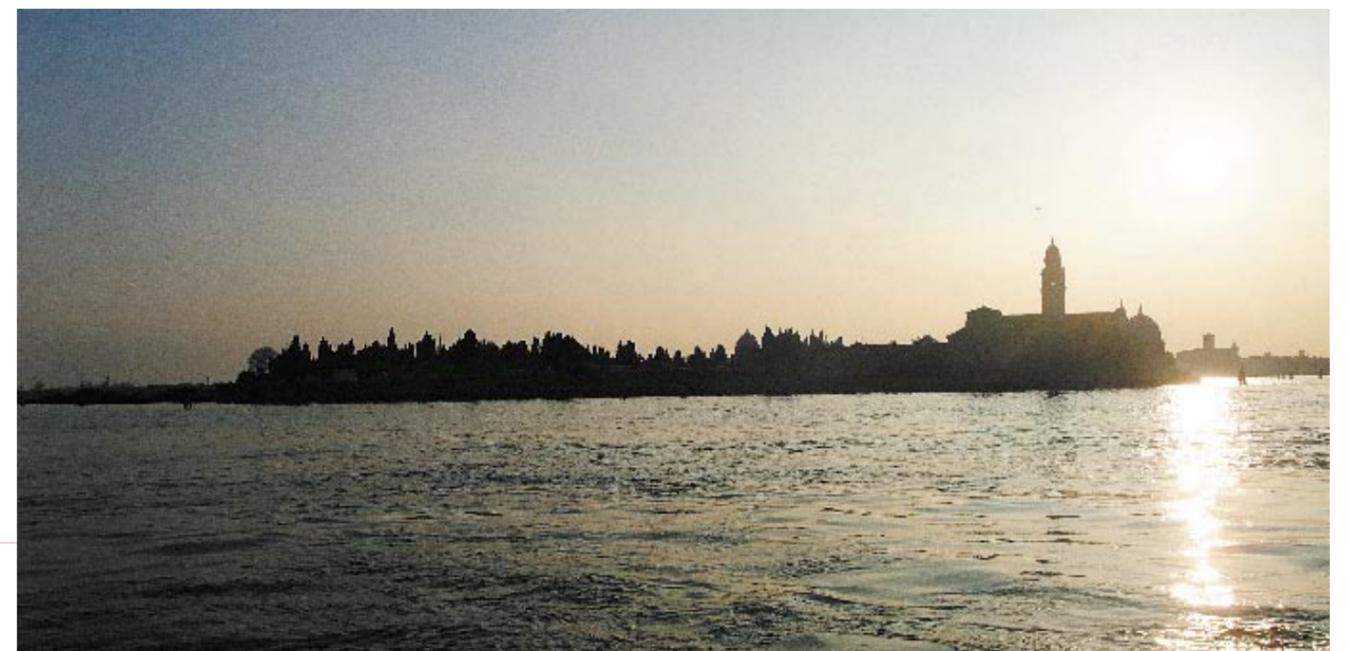
Sense of space

While the resonances with place tie these three sites to their setting, at the same time they create intense interior landscapes, spaces which heighten emotion. The designs sculpt the space and work with shadow, light, and materiality. The three sites differ from traditional cemetery and memorial forms which direct the beholder towards a language of symbolism. The conventional memorial language includes such elements as the obelisk and temple, as well as the funereal vocabulary of coded symbols like urns and angels, and plants such as yew and rosemary. Paring a design back to the bones, to the elemental forms, presents a challenge to those who visit a site, requiring their active participation, and offering no shield from the raw emotion of memory.

Both the San Michele and Saint-Pancrace cemetery extensions create strongly articulated voids within a massive and weighty mass. In contrast to the more pastoral quality of much of the original Venetian cemetery or the existing terraced graves of the Roquebrune-Cap Martin cemetery, the extensions intensify the spatial qualities.

The Passages memorial is also built up from a series of strong simple forms. The dark shaft plunges towards the sea and induces a feeling of vertigo. Descending down into the darkness, the clanging of feet upon the steel steps builds up the awareness of the self, stirring feelings of nervousness and anxiety. Only the panel of glass prevents you from tumbling down the cliff and into the sea beyond, should you slip.

All three sites evoke intense and memorable experiences, not because of their content or instructional capacity, but because they enlist the visitor in sensory ways. The body becomes embedded in place, in the musty lagoon, the fragrant hillside, and the salt spray ... in the stone and the steel ... in the light and shadow ... all of these things create experiential moments which are both universal and particular to the place, the core of memory itself. **LANZ**



TOP RIGHT: A hand-drawn sketch by David Chipperfield showing how he developed the idea of the courtyards of Venice to provide the form for the cemetery. OPPOSITE, TOP: Ossuary boxes at San Michele. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: San Michele from sea. Famous residents include Igor Stravinsky, Jean Schlumberger, Ezra Pound and Zoran Mušič.