

resuscitating dead space

Shelley Egoz comments on a student's major design project which focuses on the revitalisation of the Symonds Street Cemetery

Open green spaces in an urban environment are a precious commodity and are essential in maintaining an acceptable quality of life in the city. Central Auckland includes six major green spaces and two urban plazas encompassing sports grounds and passive recreational areas. The success of these spaces in terms of patronage stems from human interaction and/or intentional activities, the more patronized areas giving an incentive to visit and reason to stay. As Auckland's inner city diurnal and residential uses increase, additional pressure is placed upon the inner city green space network.

It is therefore essential that all reserves be used to their full potential. One Auckland green open space which is currently under-utilised is Symonds Street Cemetery. The Cemetery, a place which holds significant cultural historical value is located 500m from the economic centre of New Zealand and yet there are very few visitors to the site. It is situated on the southern edge of Auckland's Central Business District (CBD), surrounded by busy inner city arterial routes and the Spaghetti Junction motorway system. The road networks dissect the Cemetery into three sections, physically separating it from the outer suburbs and making access through and into the site difficult.

The existing site fabric consists of deciduous woodland, Auckland CBD's last remaining forest remnant, and scattered remaining graves. Due to the relatively short period of interment, the memorial and woodland landscape is largely representative of the Victorian era. The Cemetery is unique in that it has not been continually added to like many of its contemporaries. The founding families of Auckland are represented in rows of stelae, obelisks and spires evoking reflection on the fundamental values and social conditions of early Auckland. Currently the Cemetery is known as a haunt for the city's vagrants. The site is considered unsafe and suffers from major vandalism.

Leigh Wilson's design project takes advantage of the unique cultural and physical site characteristic to reclaim and resuscitate the dead space. The CBD itself contains many institutions associated with learning and consequently it is alive with the

enthusiasm that the youth have for life. Wilson identifies this enthusiasm to be a powerful resource with the potential to resuscitate the cemetery by causing a shift in perception and bringing the space back to life whilst playing on the tensions that exist between the living and non-living.

Wilson's proposal aims to resuscitate the Cemetery whilst addressing the need for additional multimedia teaching infrastructure at Auckland University. As a result, the brief includes building on site a multimedia centre, a genealogy department and an outdoor amphitheatre to be used for night concerts. The plan is that these activities will assign use and act as the catalysts to bring the Cemetery back to life, giving reason to visit and incentive to stay.

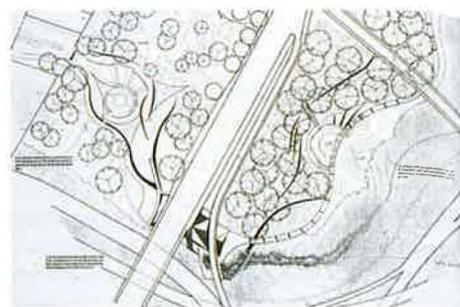
DESIGN THEME

Conceptually, every aspect of the design is centered on ideals of separation. The historical separation of cemeteries from the living, separation of different user groups within the Cemetery and separation of useable space from 'living' Cemetery space in recognition of spiritual sanctity. This type of separation is important in the sense that the site needed to be made spiritually safe in a multi-cultural respect, acknowledging the diverse cultural attitudes to death which exist within Auckland.

A tangible expression of the concept of separation is Wilson's articulation of scale and use of platforms and screens throughout the site. An emphasis on verticality of form introduces a dimension of elegance and instills a sense of awe in site users, while responding to the historical Neo-Gothic design language of the cemetery site. A further subtle layer of the separation theme is brought in via a grid of laser lights. The lights, activated at night only, divide the space while conveying references to the grid form of the graves as well as that of the city.

The steepness of the site provides an opportunity to install the amphitheatre and elegant hanging bridges and walkways which facilitate a unique experience of drama and awe while moving through the cemetery on separated levels.

The indigenous vegetation remnants are



reinforced by a proposal for revegetation, highlighting the ecology of the city. This tension is inspired by Spirm's argument that "Design that juxtaposes nature's order and human order prompts the contemplation of what it means to be human" (1988). A cemetery environment is a place of emotion that elicits philosophical thoughts of life and death and our relationship with nature and Wilson's powerful design aims to further evoke these emotions.

The design syntax focuses on moving from a relatively quiet space toward the vibrancy of life associated with the multimedia centre and amphitheatre when in use. The objective is to contrast life and death, while in the process questioning the status quo of separation.

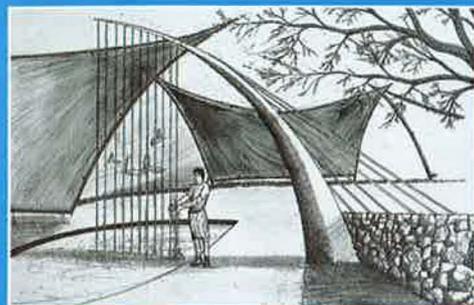
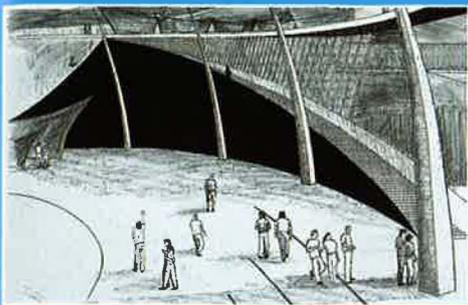
The embellishment of the site's unique characteristics facilitates our vulnerability and prevailing fear of death and its association with memorialisation. By delineating between the visible and invisible, highlighting the control, separation and protection associated with interment Wilson's design provides an unprecedented experience and poses a challenge to the historical canons of memorialisation. In addition, it answers the need to utilise neglected green open space in the heart of the city. ■■

REFERENCES

Spirm, A. (1988). *The Poetics of City and Nature: Towards a New Aesthetic for Urban Design*. *Landscape Journal* 7(2):108-126.

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Site plan (above): The existing topography was articulated to create an amphitheatre. A walkway throughout the cemetery connects the different areas while enabling separation of levels. The multimedia center and genealogy department building are located underneath the highway.



Above; left to right: Entrance to the multimedia center - mesh screens separate the pedestrian path from the cemetery. View looking southwest from beside amphitheatre to upper platform. Entrance detail - a curtain of running water is positioned to enable symbolic purification and separation.

Below: Model of the congregational area. This is a place for reflection and contemplation. Screens, walls, overhead mesh and retaining walls are used to divide spiritually safe useable space from the rest of the cemetery. Strategic positioning of these elements in space creates viewpoints and facilitates tensions between the living and non-living.

