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The RIBA Journal

£8.95/€16/US\$18

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December 2017



Just fade away

Walters & Cohen reinvents the Doric column

32

Money talks

Fosters and Bloomberg go for legacy

24

President's Medals

Tools, homes and housing, and Ultra-modernism

38

Shipshape and Dundee fashion What drives Kengo Kuma?

62

By the book

Waugh Thistleton delves deep into Jewish ceremony to produce a cemetery extension steeped in symbolism

Words: Laura Mark Photographs: Lewis Khan

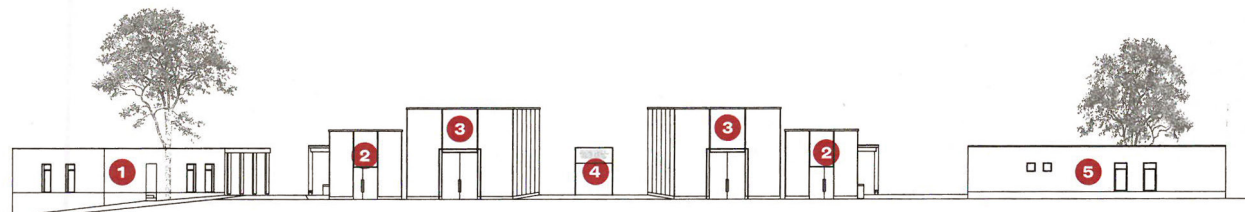


The Orthodox Jewish community has been burying its dead at Bushey Cemetery on the outskirts of London since 1947. Its new extension by Waugh Thistleton, which provides room for a further 8,000 burials, means it will be able to continue this tradition for years to come. Its official opening in May was a momentous occasion for the community, heralded by the chief Rabbi as a 'milestone'.

But how do you create a fitting place that

stands up to the traditions and values of the religious community? On this site the previous building was merely a place to shelter, resembling something more like a dilapidated community centre than a place where the deceased can be buried with dignity. Yet they are complex places, often holding deeply personal emotional significance for families and individuals while also having a specific place in the heart of the community.

North south elevation



- 1 Reception and meeting point
- 2 Cohanim room
- 3 Prayer halls
- 4 Prayer arch
- 5 Mortuary

0 5 10m

Right The rammed earth prayer halls lit by clerestory glazing which allows light to flood into the double-height space.

Left The new buildings sit within a landscaping scheme designed by J & L Gibbons.



The scheme was heavily influenced by the processional nature of Orthodox Jewish burial

Right The Cohanim rooms are separated from the prayer halls, which are seen here as standing taller.

Below A covered walkway built from larch glulam provides a processional route for the burial.



Left Looking through to contemplative views.

Below Oversized CorTen doors mark the points of entry and exit.



As Avriel Bar Levav, a professor at the Open University of Israel, comments: 'The cemetery is a meeting place not only for the dead and the living but also of ideas – of spiritual, emotional and aesthetic trends and conceptions.

'The outcome of this gathering is a whirlpool, the result of the combination of utterly different ideas stemming from diverse sources, yet influencing and shaping the visitor's world, who in each tour of the cemetery takes a trip to his or her future.'

Here, the cluster of six modest buildings – one of the first new interventions at the site in more than 50 years – marks a piece of history for this particular community.

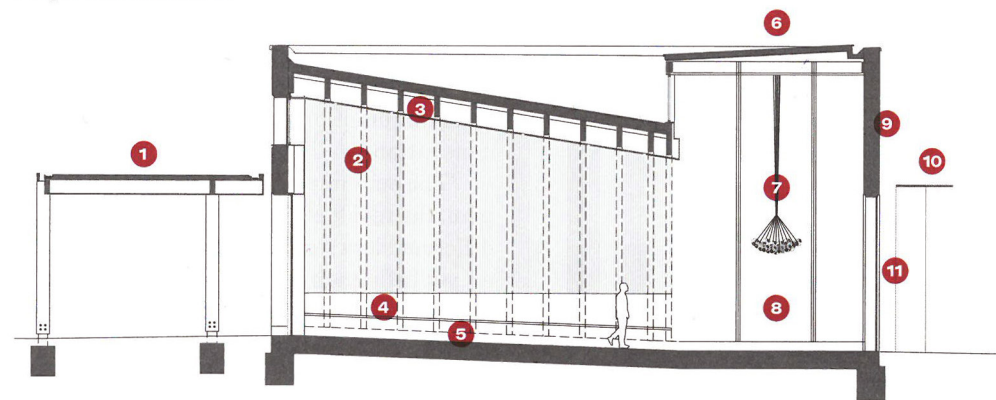
Waugh Thistleton's scheme, which includes ceremonial spaces and service buildings, has been heavily influenced by the processional nature of the Orthodox Jewish practice of burial. The buildings are laid out to facilitate the movement from arrival, to congregation, to prayer, procession to the graveside and then a return to pray. Each point of the process is mapped out and marked by contemplative views using the site's established trees as key markers.

Jewish law requires that whenever possible the burial must take place within 24 hours after the death. This process begins with the Taharah – a ritual cleansing during which members of the community, known as the Chevra Kadisha, wash and clean the body. This happens on site at the cemetery in its new mortuary where the white, clinical rooms look out to landscaped ponds behind the buildings.

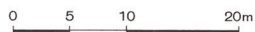
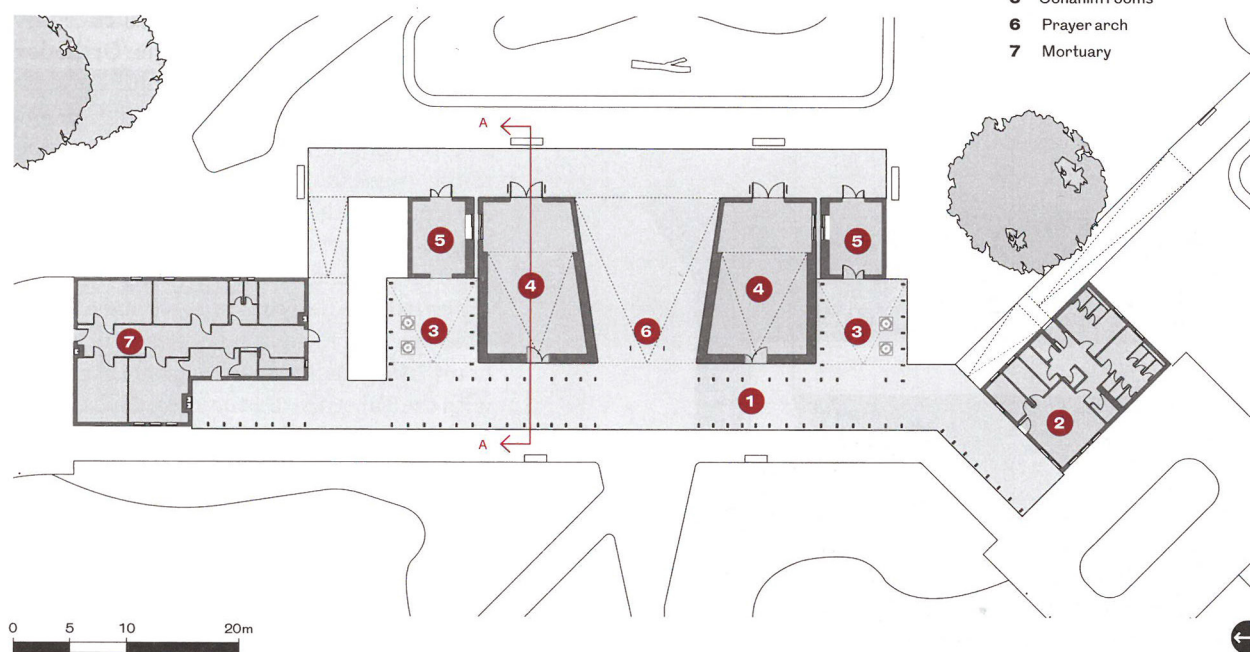
Then during the Levayah or funeral – friends and family accompany the body to its resting place in a show of respect. Mourners arrive at the site through a timber reception building which opens onto a timber colonnaded walkway, forming the processional route to the prayer halls. These are entered from the west and exited to the east before the mourners head between the buildings and on towards the graveside.

The two prayer halls, set within monolithic rammed earth blocks, are contemplative spaces. At 7m they are the tallest buildings on the site, made almost tomb-like by flat roofs, smooth earthen walls and oversized CorTen doors marked out by simple canopies. Inside, the floors ramp down towards where the body is placed, offering a feeling of procession and focus. Congregational areas of

Prayer hall section AA



Ground floor plan



Prayer hall section AA

- 1 Larch glulam canopy
- 2 Oak slats to walls and sloping ceiling
- 3 Glulam roof structure
- 4 Oak bench
- 5 Sloping floor paved in earth brown encaustic tiles
- 6 Zinc standing seam roof
- 7 Blown glass pendant light
- 8 Rammed earth walls exposed internally
- 9 400 mm thick rammed earth wall
- 10 CorTen steel canopy
- 11 CorTen steel doors

Ground floor plan

- 1 Meeting point and arrival area
- 2 Reception
- 3 Hand washing areas
- 4 Prayer rooms
- 5 Cohanim rooms
- 6 Prayer arch
- 7 Mortuary

IN NUMBERS

661 m²
gross internal floor area,
total

218 m²
gifa, mortuary

130 m²
gifa: reception office /
café / ancillary space

115 m²
gifa, prayer halls
(2 of each)

31 m²
gifa, cohanim rooms
(2 of each)

8.5 ha
landscaped site

Credits

Architect Waugh
Thistleton Architects
Client United Synagogues
Structural engineer
Elliot Wood
M&E consultant P3R
QS Deacon & Jones
Landscape consultant
J&L Gibbons
Project manager
Deacon & Jones
CDM co-ordinator
Vance Miller
Building inspector
Assent
Main contractor Buxton
CAD software
Vectorworks



Left In time the landscape in front of the building will change as it is used as a cemetery.



the prayer halls are lined with English oak; in contrast the rammed earth is left exposed in the ceremonial spaces.

Beside each prayer hall sits the Cohanim Room – a place specific to the traditions and rituals of Orthodox Judaism. Cohens, believed to be descendants of Aaron the High Priest, are not permitted to come into contact with a dead body, or to enter a building in which a dead body has lain at rest. Therefore, the Cohanim room, with its separate structure, offers Cohens a space where they can both see and hear the funeral without coming into contact with the body.

The use of rammed earth, itself not commonly used in the UK, is highly significant here as a means of symbolism. The earth was mixed with limestone, sand and a small quantity of cement and water to create what is better known as stabilised rammed earth. But essentially the walls have been formed from earth excavated to make way for the buildings. Jewish law, or halakhah, states that 'the body in its entirety is returned to the earth in a way that allows for natural decomposition to occur' and there is a deep connection with this process of natural life

Above Inside the prayer halls are lined with oak and feature oak benches for the congregation to sit.

Right Areas for the washing of hands are discretely placed within the building's external walls.

Rammed earth gives a sense of calm and a sombre, simple approach

cycles. Here, the building reflects this with a sense of passing from earth to building and then at the end of its life to the earth again. The material also gives a sense of calm and a sombre, simple approach. It possesses a beauty not unlike a poured concrete wall.

The connection to nature extends beyond the buildings. The site has been planned as a whole and the prayer halls and surrounding ancillary functions sit in the landscape as if it were a country park rather than a cemetery, almost hidden from view at its lowest point. Reed beds, ponds and swales provide natural water retention – essential for when grave stones cover the 6.5ha site. There is consideration for the future too. By placing the buildings at the far edge of the extended plot, any future need to extend can be done beyond the prayer halls and administrative buildings, making them then central in the plan.

This is one of the most significant Jewish burial sites in the UK, and what Waugh Thistleton has done is provide a building which with time will have significant cultural value. It doesn't shout 'wow' or 'look at me', but is a place of gravitas and tranquillity. It will go down as a new approach to this often-overlooked typology. ●

