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What graves and tombs could look like in the future

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How a design competition inspired new ideas about monuments and mausolea



'Constellation Park', by DeathLab/Latents, features glowing shrines that illuminate the underside of city bridges

It was clear that something fantastic was about to happen to gravestones when Bompas & Parr — architectural jelly connoisseurs and purveyors of innovative culinary creations — announced in October that “tombs and mausolea are a neglected aspect of the architectural discipline but ripe for a revival”. Its “Monumental Masonry” competition, in collaboration with Sir John Soane’s Museum in London, invited architects and designers to submit entries for “epic monuments in a magnificent celebration of death to reignite interest in funerary architecture”.

There were more than 120 entries from across the world, with the shortlisted entries now on display at the museum. The winner, Sebastian Bergne, a British industrial designer, was announced last night at the launch, where 3D-printed models of the top three entries were auctioned with proceeds going to the museum and Maggie’s Centres, which aim to help anyone affected by cancer.

Cemeteries in cities today feel like stolen spaces: romantic, overgrown, tranquil; offering something quite different to a walk in the park. In London, the “extramural” cemeteries (those created after the city churchyards reached capacity) are known as the “magnificent seven” and were built by the Victorians in the then suburban areas of Highgate, Old Brompton, Kensal Green, West Norwood, Abney Park, Nunhead and Tower Hamlets.

During the Victorian era, these cemeteries were not only places of recreation and mourning but also of inspiration for the craft of sculpture, stone carving and architecture: a museum open to all.

In contrast to unsavoury churchyards, “extramural” cemeteries were designed for classically minded middle- and upper-class Victorians, with allusions to the Arcadian landscape, Elysian Fields embellished with monuments and a fashionable interplay of sepulchres, melancholy and ruins. Farther afield, recent designs for contemporary cemeteries inspire intrigue. In 2013 Italian architect Andrea Dragoni advanced the “recreational” use of cemeteries with his extension of the historic Gubbio necropolis in Umbria, which sees a master plan of monumental, monolithic and travertine structures interspersed with art sculptures and designed as a series of public spaces in which to reflect.

Earlier this year, Japanese architectural studio Furumori Koichi adopted a lighter touch with a serene structure to house crematorium urns in Fukuoka.



Highgate Cemetery, one of London’s ‘magnificent seven’ graveyards

Avoiding the use of artificial lighting, natural light filters through the beautiful timber latticed roof structure, urns are hidden in the niches of the perimeter concrete walls, and the centre of the space is left contemplatively empty except for an apparently random array of slender timber columns.

Bompas says much of its inspiration for “Monumental Masonry” came from the Victorians’ interest in death. They were comfortable with its certainty and the funeral process was very formalised. In an age of few photos or paintings by which to remember people, the idea of permanent memorialisation was vital.

The competition is, fittingly, linked to Sir John Soane (1753-1837), whose fascination with death can be seen in his museum. His collection, designs and models of mausolea serve as what the museum describes as “powerful, compelling gateways to other architectural ideas, essential tools in articulating architectural concepts”. Soane’s dedication to tomb design proved influential when, a century later, his designs for his family tomb helped to inspire Giles Gilbert Scott’s red telephone box.

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- Sebastian Bergne, competition winner

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Abraham Thomas, the museum’s director, is confident that Soane would have supported this latest initiative. “His original vision for his collection was to create an academy for creative practitioners, an incubation space for emerging ideas, and a site of provocative debate and discussion.”

The competition entries are extraordinarily diverse. Some are futuristic and vast, such as “Constellation Park”, by DeathLab/Latent, where glowing shrines illuminate the underside of city bridges, or Marc Benjamin Drewes’ “Celebration of Death”, which features a skyscraper-like “tower of remembrance” in Berlin. Some reject the bombardment of the digital world after death (Ben Allen’s “Memorial to Lost Concentration”), others embrace technology (Nathan Webb’s

“Immortality Mask”); and some show Soane’s influence, such as Tonkin Liu’s marble representation of Soane’s face, or “Monumentimals”, by DSDHA, which proposes animal mausolea, inspired by the Egyptian cat mummies in Soane’s collection. Bergne won the competition with his “Tomb of the Past”. He describes it as a threshold between past and future, in which the symbol of the column is transformed into a powerful arch. Representing our fragile present, it looks simultaneously forward and backward in a surreal transformation of a classical form: the column’s “capital” now its pedestal. “Life and death is not a subject that people talk about easily,” says Bergne. “Our digital world seems to have lost its memory, focusing on the present. The general public are less educated at reading symbolism and meaning in objects than they used to be.”

Donating the auction’s proceeds to Maggie’s is apt, since architecture is integral to the ethos of the charity, founded by Maggie Keswick Jencks, who was married to the architecture critic Charles Jencks, and whose friends included luminaries such as Daniel Libeskind.

Laura Lee, Maggie’s chief executive and one of the competition’s judges, says: “Great design and architecture play a vital role in the care we offer, and the creativity in this competition has been both impressive and inspiring.”

Another judge, Neil Luxton, Highgate Cemetery’s stonemason, says the range of entries and judges’ opinions highlights the diverse views people have about death. He works with bereaved families to design monuments, sometimes consulting with the individual before their death, or occasionally, as with artist Patrick Caulfield, working from a sketch made by the deceased before they died. Asked if gravestones are still visited, he says: “There is a ‘supermarket’ of off-the-shelf memorials, but there is also an opportunity to design something meaningful that can be returned to frequently.”

The competition’s relevance was demonstrated last week when it was announced that, in 2024, the British-led project “Lunar Mission One” will aim to embed on the Moon millions of personal items — from photos to locks of hair (supposedly able to survive there for more than 1bn years).

In this digital age, with many seeking to be a star or storyteller, whether through a Facebook page or an autobiography, “Monumental Masonry” is ahead of the curve in questioning what “timeless” legacy we leave on this earth.

‘Monumental Masonry with Bompas & Parr’ runs at Sir John Soane’s Museum in London, until January 3; soane.org