DESIGN FOR BEREAVEMENT

THESIS PRESENTATION
April 26th, 2012

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How can architecture be utilized to aid in the process of grieving?
Funeral home, to be designed for the community of Alexandria, MN
Purpose
Closure
Socialization
PURPOSE
Traditional funerals are performed as a way of formally releasing the deceased into death, for loved ones to say their final goodbyes. They offer the survivors the opportunity to share stories and memories while congregating together under shared emotions. Funerals are really ceremonies for the people the deceased has left behind.

The death of a loved one is often a very difficult and emotionally challenging time. Death impacts people of every culture, every faith, and in all parts of the world. It is a universal constant in every society, yet it remains a mysterious and seldom-discussed topic. Most cultures throughout the world approach death in a similar way, by performing a ritual or ceremony to mark the passing of that person who has died.

In their book Living Through Loss, Nancy R. Hooyman and Betty J. Kramer expanded on the reason for these rituals. Rituals have the ability to bring about the feeling of the sacred from the ordinary. They elevate the level of importance of an activity and make interactions more special. Often, these rituals utilize symbolic acts that can convey a transcendent significance on experiences or certain life events. (Hooyman & Ross, 2006)

It seems only right that a ritual would be performed at the time of a death. Death is an important marker in the life of a person. Not just the person who has died, but also all of those related to the deceased and all of those who have befriended that person. The death of a loved one produces life-changing consequences and the ritual performed marks the significance and importance of that loss.

Typically, the ritual performed for the event of a death is a funeral. The basic function of a funeral is to serve as the rite of passage for the deceased. It is used as a ceremony for the final disposition of the body. (Hooyman & Ross, 2006, p.221) Funerals have a number of secondary functions as well, mainly intended for the survivors. Dorothy S. Becvar wrote in her book, In the Presence of Grief, that a function of the funeral ceremony is also to make an acknowledgement of the loss and pain of those the deceased has left behind. The ceremony facilitates an opportunity for the bereaved to have an open, public expression of their grief. (Becvar, 2001, p. 213)

This public expression of grief within the community also affords an opportunity for a public confirmation of the reality of death.
CLOSURE

Closure is also a very important function of a funeral. The funeral ceremony, as well as the socialization of survivors within that context, can help the bereaved come to terms with the death and acknowledge the impact that it will have on their lives. Some who might wish to ignore the death or chose not to have a funeral at all may have reasons to act in that way at the time, but research has shown that later this can lead to great emotional distress over the lack of closure with the death. (Becvar, 2001, p. 216)

In her book, In the Presence of Grief, Dorothy Becvar continued her argument with the idea that the survivors have little or no part in preparing their loved one for their funeral. In fact, most of the survivors have very little actual contact with the deceased at all after death. They might have visited him or her prior to their death and, when they next see the deceased, the setting is often a wake, visitation, or viewing. At this point the deceased person has been embalmed, made-up, and dressed to appear as life-like as possible. There is little sense of having the true experience of this person’s transition from life to death and, in this way, the survivors do not have the opportunity to have full closure. The lack of closure can add to grief and confusion. (Becvar, 2001, p. 17)

This can also become a factor if there is no viewing of the body before the body is cremated. A picture of the deceased next to an urn containing ashes does little to solidify the idea of death in a way that can offer closure.
SOCIALIZATION

Another important function of a funeral is to offer social support for the friends and family of the person who has died. The funeral is a venue where the bereaved can openly discuss memories shared with their loved one. In the process of this socialization, the survivors also begin to redefine their identities with one another. After a death, the bereaved suddenly find themselves to no longer be a mother, father, sister, brother, etc. and their identities change within their community. Socialization between people mourning the loss of an individual becomes the most important part of the grieving process. There is comfort in knowing others share similar feelings during times of bereavement because observation of others grieving validates the feelings and emotions felt during one’s own grieving process.

While this interaction is taking place, an interesting occurrence can be noticed. As people socialize, they may become more emotional and the tone of the socialization changes. When strong emotional bonds are present between survivors and intense emotions are shared, those listening reduce their use of verbal mediations. Their responses begin to rely less on words and more on nonverbal comforting behaviors. Commonly seen behaviors are hugging, kissing, or just touching. These actions can be exceedingly comforting for some, much more so than verbal communication. This would suggest that during times when the bereaved are sharing an intense emotional experience, they decrease the physical distance between themselves. People literally come together to comfort one another. (Stroebe et al, 2002, p. 525)

To foster these activities will help aid in the process of healing.

An additional important part of this socialization is that the survivors will often discuss shared memories. These stories are shared back and forth and serve as a way to make certain those memories and emotional events are not forgotten. By discussing these events and memories with each other, people begin to build a social narrative. In this way they develop a collective memory while also confirming their own personal memories of the loved one who has died.

Ultimately, those relationships formed or strengthened during the funeral and visitation are very important for the weeks and months following the funeral. Long after the funeral is finished and the body has been laid to rest, the process of grieving continues. Social support is still a very important part of the grieving process long after the funeral, but there are generally few formal occasions after the funeral to grieve together. This is why it is imperative that people begin socializing and grieving together at the funeral to make social connections that will carry through the remainder of the grieving process.
In summary, funerals serve many functions within society. They not only offer a place to bid farewell to a friend or relative, they also allow for the beginning of the healing process.

Through my research, I have learned that the common, traditional funeral may not be the best option for modern bereavement. We might need to reevaluate how we perform these ceremonies and find a more appropriate method of closure and healing.

As this information related to my thesis project, I needed to take special notice of every aspect of the traditional funeral ceremony. I needed to evaluate each of the parts and decide if there is another way it can be done and, if so, how would that be reflected in the design of the building.

The spaces within the building were designed to foster the idea of community, while also serving as a mechanism to also offer visual cues to help the bereaved acknowledge the death so healing can begin.
Each major space is separated by a path that allows the bereaved the opportunity for quiet reflection as they progress to the next part of the building.
WRIGHT FUNERAL HOME

- 6,000 SQF
- 3,000 (OR 1,000) ADDITION
Regarding my Theoretical Premise, it was important to examine each of these case studies to evaluate how the designer approached the idea of cultural context, socialization, and the aesthetic interpretation of death and mourning.

An important common thread that I found with all of the case studies I examined was the progression of spaces. Although these buildings are located in different countries with different cultural norms and ceremonies for the dead, they each had a distinct path from the public entry to the final chamber where the last rites or funeral are to take place. I find it interesting that no matter the location or religious background, each ceremony has a formality and a similar progression of activities as the body is prepared after death. An understanding of this progression of space will be essential for the development of my thesis project.

The inclusion of traditional architecture might also be important for Alexandria, as something radically different from the traditional funeral structures might not be a peaceful environment for local mourners.
SITE INFORMATION:
The site chosen for this project is a hill on outskirts of Alexandria overlooking Lake Connie.
The site is undeveloped, on the outskirts of the city where growth is anticipated. The way the site is approached is from the East on McKay Avenue S. Woodland Elementary School has recently been constructed along McKay Avenue, just Southeast of where the site is located. Between the school and where the site is a new street has begun to be constructed. It only has been built as far as is needed by the school, but it will eventually continue past the site to the South as the city continues to grow. This road will be the main access for the site. It is expected that as the city expands in that direction that the city’s utility grid will follow to service the site.
First sketches expressing community and socialization

SURROUND THE DECEASED, ENVOLVE WITH LOVE AND ENGAGE THE BEREAVED.
MAJOR PROJECT ELEMENTS

Lobby
Chapel
Crematory
Embalming Room
Visitation Lounge
Kitchenette
Administrative Office
Funeral Planning Office
SCHEMATIC DESIGN

PATIO
VISITATION
KITCHENETTE

CHAPEL
LOBBY
ENTRANCE

PORTIC COUCHER

SACRED
PRIVATE

PRIVATE

RECEPTION

PRIVATE

ARRANGEMENT

GASKETS / RINGS

SEMI PRIVATE

PROCESSION ➔ MORTUARY TEMPLE - HATHOR / ERF

9:30 Fri.
- PIN-UP

DESIGN DEVELOPMENT
- Natural lighting for best viewing of body
- Incorporation of water

Design Development
DESIGN DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURE

TRUSS LENGTHS

ZINC ROOFING
INSULATION
DECKING OR
GYPSUM BOARD

GLUE LAMINATED
WOOD ARCHES

MASONRY WALLS, FACED
WITH STONE
FRAMING & GYPSUM BOARD
SLAB
AIR SYSTEM
- CONSTANT AIR VOLUME
- MULTIZONE SYSTEM

ZONE 1: PUBLIC SPACES
(MECHANICAL ROOM)

ZONE 2: PRIVATE SPACES

ZONE 3: SEMI-PUBLIC SPACES

* COOLING TOWER
* CHIMNEY AT REAR
OF BUILDING NEAR
MECHANICAL ROOM

MECHANICAL SYSTEMS
EXPOSED GLUE LAMINATED ARCHES
NATURAL VERTICAL WOOD SIDING
LOCAL STONE
ZINC ROOFING
MIDTERM DESIGN

FRONT FACADE
MIDTERM DESIGN

CORRIDOR TO CHAPEL
MIDTERM DESIGN

RECEPTION SPACE
FINAL DESIGN

LOBBY VIEW OF REFLECTING POOL AND CHAPEL
FINAL DESIGN
CORRIDOR TO CHAPEL
FINAL DESIGN
RECEPTION SPACE
DESIGN FOR Bereavement

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