

BOOK STALL



Designs on Death: The Architecture of Scottish Crematoria

By Hilary J Grainger

Reviewed by Dr Brian Parsons

Professor Hilary Grainger's track record of scholarly research concerning the architecture of crematoria is unparalleled. 2005 saw the publication of *Death Redefined* being the first study and gazetteer of what were then the UK's 251 such buildings (it's now 311), and in 2017 she was one of the five contributors to the comprehensive volume entitled *Cremation in Modern Scotland*. *Designs on Death* continues the country-specific focus by examining the background and architecture of Scotland's thirty-one crematoria. Within the covers of this book each is described in terms of its planning, building, architecture and landscape.

The text is divided into four distinct parts commencing with a commentary considering the unique nature of the crematorium; it is a building type without precedent that is neither exclusively sacred nor secular, in which an emotional parting occurs followed by a destructive process. However, the environment around the facility is one of remembrance and this context is also discussed. The subsequent parts are framed by the time periods when crematoria have been constructed. Considerable attention is given to the small number built in the first wave (1895-1939). The period 1955-1975 then examines the role of local authorities in

the provision of facilities (and often the lengthy dialogue before agreement was finalised, such as Inverness), while the final chapter considers the re-emergence of the private sector in the most recent crematoria to open. In contrast to England and Wales where a proportion of crematoria are converted cemetery chapels, this is not the case in Scotland; indeed, one was formed out of a private residence while two occupy former churches.

One factor in the layout of the chapel that will be of interest to funeral directors away from Scotland will be the mode of committal. In the early crematoria the coffin would be positioned on a catafalque and covered with a pall during the service before descending to the crematory. As time progressed the committal was effected by the coffin moving through doors and also by being screened by curtains. In one of the most recent crematoria (Baldarroch), the coffin rests on a Victorian wheel bier before being moved to the committal area.

All of Scotland's crematoria are different and distinctive, which is a theme repeatedly highlighted by the author. Whilst some structures hint at a possible house style, a few earlier examples are particularly outstanding in terms of their striking architecture: Daldowie (1955) and The Linn (1962) both in Glasgow, and Edinburgh's Mortonhall (1967) by the architect of Coventry Cathedral, Sir Basil Spence.

This is a substantial and important volume. All credit must be given to the publishers for their excellent design. The book is not only written in an engaging style, supported by copious quotes (including one from the Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin) and referenced, but the text is complemented by superb illustrative material. Architectural drawings and historic images are combined with stunning contemporary photographs taken by Steve Wallace. The panoramic snowy view of Clyde Coast & Garnock Valley Crematorium in North Ayrshire shows not only the breath-taking setting, but the skill of the photographer.

Professor Grainger's exhaustive and long-standing study of the subject has greatly benefitted our understanding of the architecture of the UK's crematoria. She is to be warmly congratulated on this magisterial tome devoted to Scotland.



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