

Berlin's Very Modern Crematorium

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Berlin is justifiably famous for its contemporary architecture, much of it the result of huge investments made since the city became the capital of reunified Germany in 1990. With the fall of the Wall, property developers suddenly gained access to huge swathes of prime real estate in the heart of the city, much of it once occupied by buildings destroyed during or immediately after the Second World War; the rebuilding of Potsdamer Platz is a case in point.

However, contemporary architects have also been leaving their mark in Berlin's suburbs, a superb example of which is the Baumschulenweg Crematorium (Krematorium Baumschulenweg) on Kiefholzstrasse, out in the district of Treptow. Opened in May 1999, it was designed by Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank, the architects who shortly afterwards began work on Berlin's new Federal Chancellery.



Unusually for a crematorium, it has quickly established itself as a firm favourite with students of postmodern architecture, most notably because of its breathtaking Hall of Condolence (*Kondolenzhalle*), access to which is gained through automatically-operated sliding doors. Inside, twenty nine soaring concrete columns, placed at irregular intervals around

the rectangular hall, rise from the floor like trees, creating the effect of an abstract sacred grove. The tops of the columns are crowned with circular capitals of daylight, where they break through the ceiling, allowing shafts of gentle light to fall on the mirror-like surface of a circular pool in the centre of the floor. This masterly control of materials, space and light has enabled the architects to create a dignified aura of reverential mystery that has been compared to the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak in Egypt, the Mezquita Mosque at Cordoba, and even Stonehenge.

Such disparate cultural references offer both visitor and mourner a profound, multi-layered and altogether unforgettable experience. The architects considered this aspect very important, taking into account the fact that there are no established rituals associated with the burning of bodies in the West, and that there is a likelihood that today's mourners may include people of different faiths, as well as those with no faith at all.



Extracted from the book *Only in Berlin* by Duncan J. D. Smith (Christian Brandstätter Verlag), 2008.