



Architecture, Memory and the Old Western Front

by **Tim Fox-Godden**

2016-08-09 08:25:36

If we think about artistic responses to the First World War we are likely to conjure up images filled with vibrancy and movement: the works of Paul Nash, Percy Wyndham Lewis and Christopher Nevinson amongst many others. These visceral landscapes, whilst being stalked by death, capture so much life, too. Likewise, if we consider the poetry and literature of the war, we are confronted with the cutting satire of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, by the gritty modernist visions of David Jones' trench and battle scenes and by the poignant, elegiac writings of Rupert Brooke. In both forms of response we regard them as multi-layered representations of the experience and memory of war.

Now let us consider architecture. If we think of any architectural response it is likely to be one of these: a village war memorial, the seemingly endless names on the larger, national memorials, or rows and rows of white grave markers. As a result of this, concepts of war experience, memory and death within the architectural response have become inextricably entwined. There is no life in them. The architectural response to the war has come to represent only death.

Of course, most soldiers weren't poets or artists. Indeed, the involvement of mass civilian armies meant that for much of the war most soldiers weren't even soldiers. Most soldiers certainly weren't architects, but, for many, the most common creative experience of the war was an architectural one 'one defined by designing, building and living in trenches, and done so in the wider architectural setting of ruined villages, billets and blockhouses. Indeed, even the absence of architecture is noted in many a memoir. Strangely, despite these architectural memories serving as a framework for the veteran to hang the narrative of their own war experience upon, the architectural connection between war experience and the creative response to the war has not received the same academic attention as the poetic and artistic responses. It should not be forgotten that these 'architectural memories' (Chapman, 1933) were also the experiences of the nearly nine out of ten soldiers who returned, not just those commemorated in the cemeteries and memorials. My research considers architecture as both a reflection on war experience and a response to the war. It explores the relationship between experience, memory, and the architectural designs of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC). More specifically, it seeks to understand the layers of memory, beyond the primacy of a death-centric narrative, designed into the cemetery architecture.

One of the central themes of my research is the role of the architecture of the war cemeteries in retaining aspects of memory that are as pertinent to those who survived the war and to those of us who still visit the former Western Front, as they are to those buried in them. The broader role of memory designed into the cemetery

architecture can be split into two groups. First, the direct relationship between the architectural treatment of the cemeteries ' that constituting anything that forms part of the design, be it the entrances, perimeter walls, layout etc ' with the retaining or preserving of an aspect of the wartime landscape. Secondly, those aspects of design that do not literally preserve an element of the battlefield but use motifs of the landscape and the broader experience within the design, such as the architecturally inferred shell hole designed into the cemetery at Hedge Row Trench Cemetery.

An important additional concept is that of space and place; a space being a non-specific area and a place being geographically (or in this case metaphysically) locatable. In terms of a soldier's war experience, the passage of time turned the places of their memories into indistinct spaces with no relatable features. Their experiences became dislocated from the landscape - the home of these memories. Direct experience of these places and spaces was intrinsic to the design process enabled by the IWGC's policy to only employ ex-soldiers as Junior Architects. This decision ensured that the architecture of the cemeteries retained not just the identity of place, but also reconnected individual memories of the Junior Architects and communal memories of the returning veteran with the post-war landscape.

Until now it has been assumed that the cemeteries are arbitrary in both design and location. The received wisdom is that the men are buried where they fell and the designs were purely practical. This approach has led to the dislocation of the cemeteries from the broader experience and memory-scape of the landscape they sit within. By placing the architectural designs into the context of the First World War landscape of the old Western Front, forgotten aspects of the design process that contain multiple layers of experience and memory are revealed. These revelations urge us to reconsider the architecture of the IWGC as important a response to the war as that of art and poetry. With the passing of the war from living memory, my research highlights the need for the cemetery architecture of the now Commonwealth War Graves Commission to truly be considered a memorial, not just to the dead of the war, but to the lives and experience of all who served.

*This image is shared under a [IWM Non Commercial Licence](#); the rest of the photographs were taken by the author.

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)