



A Place to Wait for the Messiah: Cemetery Architecture by Uri Ponger and Tuvia Sagiv

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Author Esther Hecht March 26, 2001

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Conventional graves designed for double occupancy, Haifa; the empty space on the tombstone is for the spouse who is still living. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv

Two Israeli architects have designed cemetery architecture that meets the strict requirements of Judaism, yet affords far greater density than conventional burial. (9 images)

Israel is such a tiny country -- about the size of New Jersey -- it barely has room for its 6.4 million inhabitants. Now, planners are worried about where to put the dead.

The burial needs of greater Tel Aviv show how critical the problem is. Zoning restrictions limit the size of cemeteries and use of the land around them. Thus, conventional (field) burial over the course of one lifetime (75 years) would require 24 square kilometers, or half the area of the city. Ultimately, there would be no room for the living.

The problem is most acute among the country's Jews -- about 81 percent of the population -- because of their traditional beliefs. Jerusalem architect Uri Ponger explains: 'In Judaism, a grave is 'forever,' that is, until the coming of the Messiah, because the body itself will be resurrected, with all its bones and organs, and until then must repose in nature.' Thus, neither cremation nor reuse of graves is an option. Ponger and Tel Aviv-based architect Tuvia Sagiv have specialized in solving this thorny problem, following a recent decision by national planners that urban cemeteries built on state land must allow for higher burial density.

The architects' simplest solutions -- reviving historic Jewish burial practices -- include burial of two family members in a single grave that is dug an extra meter deep, and aboveground niche burial, in which the niches are precast concrete units.

But their most important innovation -- one they say is unique -- is the multilevel cemetery of stone or stone-textured concrete, which allows for single and double conventional graves as well as niche burial on at least two levels, and is landscaped on its outer side. In combination, these methods allow for a quadrupling of burial density.

In the existing Yarkon cemetery, north of Tel Aviv, Ponger and Sagiv have redesigned the periphery for dense burial so that the landscaping will flow into that of the adjacent Yarkon River Park. A more ambitious design is a vast new cemetery cluster in Bareket, 15 kilometers east of Tel Aviv. Built in stages, with burial to begin by 2004, it is to transform the eyesore of a disused quarry into a lush area of greenery, while providing the burial needs of Tel Aviv and surrounding areas for the next 30 years. Quarry debris will serve in building up the landscaped areas.

To gain approval from the Chief Rabbinate, which controls burial practices, Ponger and Sagiv had to meet strict religious requirements. Though there is no prohibition against burial in tiers and no limitation on the number of tiers, each body must rest on soil, and there must be 21 to 22 inches between bodies in every direction. This space may include concrete, but may not be all concrete. In multilevel burial, one side of each level must be in



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A skylit multilevel burial in Haifa. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv



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Exterior of multilevel burial area, Haifa. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv



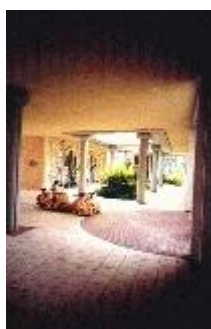
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A conventional grave designed for double occupancy, Haifa; tombstone for the spouse who is still living.



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Funeral hall for multilevel burial, Tel Aviv; niche burial on far wall, and large stones in foreground with metal rests to support the bier. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv



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Hall for multilevel burial, Tel Aviv. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv



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Temporary entrance to multilevel burial, Tel Aviv. Burial niches on wall and additional multilevel burial units, with terraced landscaping on outer walls, are planned to replace the green areas as the cemetery expands. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv

contact with a natural extension of the ground (for example the slope of a hill, the side of a cave, or the wall of a quarry).

In Ponger and Sagiv design, the facade of a niche grave is either the wide end or the narrow side, and there is a shelf for flowers, candles, and the stones that visitors customarily leave. Encouraged by the Israel Lands Administration -- which is interested in reclaiming problematic tracts like disused quarries -- the architects have designed cemeteries or cemetery extensions from Acre in the north to Beersheba in the south.

Israel's first dense burials took place about eight years ago. In the past year, more than 2,500 people have been buried in this way. Cost, however, is not a factor in their choice, since burial costs are covered by the state and by voluntary societies. But when land value is factored in, Ponger says, dense burial (which has higher development costs) is more economical than field burial. Ponger and Sagiv designs have even gone beyond the borders of the country: With Los Angeles architect Robert Levonian, they have added multilevel burial as an option at Mount Sinai Memorial Park in Los Angeles.

Uri Ponger and Tuvia Sagiv are independent architects who have joined forces in designing dense burial, competition entries, and residential mini-neighborhoods.

[Uri Ponger](#), based in Jerusalem, was born in Israel in 1936. He studied architecture at Vienna Technical University and Karlsruhe Technical University, completing his studies with Egon Eiermann in 1968. His projects include a school, a drug rehabilitation center, synagogues, residential developments and an annex to Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel.

[Tuvia Sagiv](#), based in Tel Aviv, was born in Belgium in 1947. He completed his architecture studies at Haifa's Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology, in 1973. He has focused on designing residential projects.

Editor's Note: [Esther Hecht](#) is a freelance writer in Jerusalem who enjoys writing about architecture.



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Funeral hall for multilevel burial, Tel Aviv. Skylight and niche burial on far wall; large stones in foreground with metal rests support the bier. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv



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Multilevel burial, Tel Aviv, with stone-textured concrete on walls, skylights, and arched detail over niches on wall. Photo: Tuvia Sagiv