

'WOOD AND LIGHT AND PEACE AND BEAUTY'



PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Husband-and-wife team Robert Martin and Danica Robertson drew on elements that touch many religions when they designed the multifaith National Memorial Centre at the Beechwood Cemetery. 'This is more about celebrating light and nature,' Mr. Martin says.

A place for all to mourn

Beechwood Cemetery, the burial place for Canada's military and the RCMP, hopes to comfort members of all faiths with its new memorial centre, which blends nature, light and geometry, **MARIA COOK** writes.

The new National Memorial Centre at Beechwood Cemetery is a sacred space devoid of religious symbols. It is believed to be among the first memorial centres in the world designed to serve all faiths.

Today, Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean will preside over the official opening, which will include military bands, a fly-past and announcement of a \$1-million fundraising campaign.

"There are worship spaces, but we believe there are no other multifaith memorial centres in the world," says Ottawa architect Robert Martin, whose design draws on universal references such as nature, light and geometry.

The memorial hall, which can accommodate about 400 people, will be used for

funeral ceremonies or commemorations as an alternative to a religious setting. Chairs can be removed for ceremonies in which the faithful kneel on the floor, which is carpeted and warmed by radiant heating.

As a multipurpose space that tries to be all things to all people, the memorial hall doesn't have the emotional intensity that one usually experiences in religious architecture.

Instead, Mr. Martin, 39, and his wife, Danica Robertson, have created a quiet, unobtrusive backdrop for highly personal events. It is a light-filled meditative space that uses natural materials and offers views of the magnificent grounds.

"The traditional funeral home is dark and oppressive

and looks like a little old lady's living room," says Mr. Martin. "This is more about celebrating light and nature."

The \$5-million project was spearheaded by Padre Gerry Peddle, former chaplain general of the Canadian Forces. Beechwood, which dates to 1873, is Canada's national military cemetery as well as an RCMP cemetery. The original idea was to create a special place for their services.

"Then the idea evolved to accommodate every family," says Sylvia Ceacero, executive-director of Beechwood Cemetery and Foundation.

Once perceived as an Anglo-Protestant cemetery, Beechwood has become a multicultural place with clients from the Lebanese,



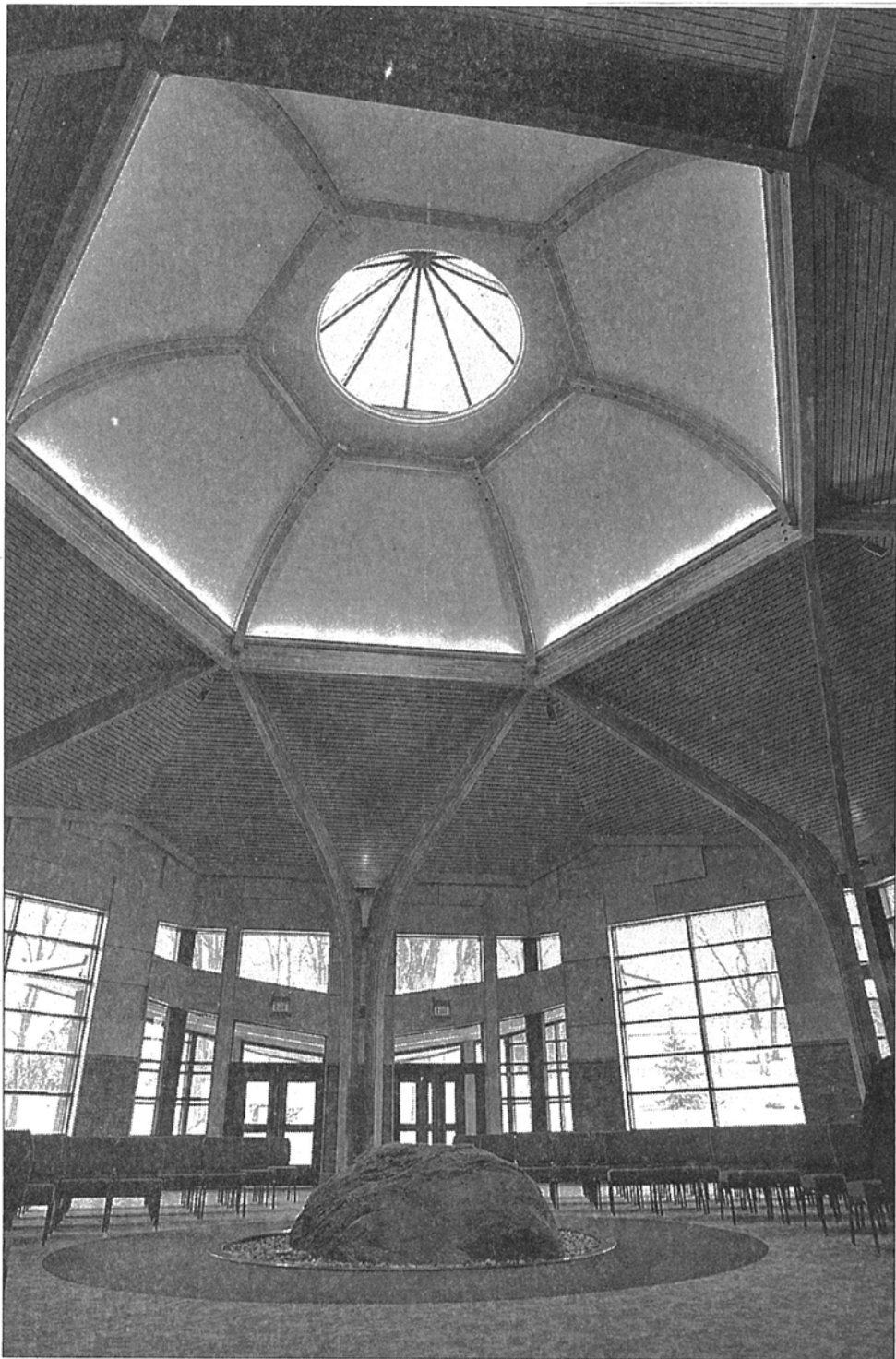
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An icicle graces a detail of a stone and chain sculpture at the entrance of the National Memorial Centre.

Chinese, Greek, Polish and Ukrainian communities.

"We wanted a place where every world faith can worship and feel comfortable," says Grete Hale, chairwoman of the foundation board.

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PHOTOS BY PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

The National Memorial Centre is a multipurpose space that tries to be all things to all people. A four-tonne rock, above, anchors the centre of the room. Icicles add a touch of natural beauty to the outside courtyard, right.

Beechwood: 'So Canadian and so right'

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That goal became the architectural challenge for the 14,000-square-foot centre. "It's a neutral common ground that could belong to anyone," says Mr. Martin.

The memorial hall has nine sides, allowing members of different faiths to face whatever part of the Earth is holiest to them. Six sets of wooden arches, inspired by trees or upswept praying arms, bring out the nine-cornered geometry and support a central dome and oculus.

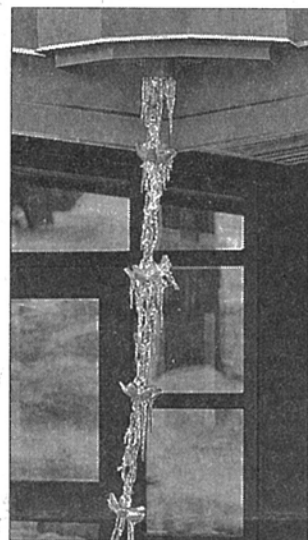
The multiples of three within nine suggest number symbolism. For instance, the Baha'i faith, which emphasizes spiritual unity of all humankind, builds nine-sided temples. Six res-

onates with Judaism and Islam, while three is meaningful for Christians.

A four-tonne rock anchors the centre of the room. Its markings recall the layers of time and its permanence counters the transience of life. Remarkably, a tiny wild raspberry seedling has sprouted from a crack in the rock. "It's one of those amazing marvels you can't explain," says Ms. Hale.

Unfortunately, a tacky lectern and table strike a wrong note in the room.

Four tastefully-decorated reception rooms are organized around a courtyard. Also in the memorial centre, the Hall of Colours is a room for honouring military personnel or police. It displays retired regimental and nautical flags and a



stained glass window depicting a chaplain ministering to a wounded soldier.

The building's exterior is made of stone with a steel roof and copper canopy. Still to come is an outdoor reflective pool and herb garden.

Ms. Hale recently attended a funeral service here.

"It was just wood and light and peace and beauty," she recalls. "The acoustics are magnificent. I heard every word from the back. It was everything I dreamed that the building could be. It's so Canadian and so right."