

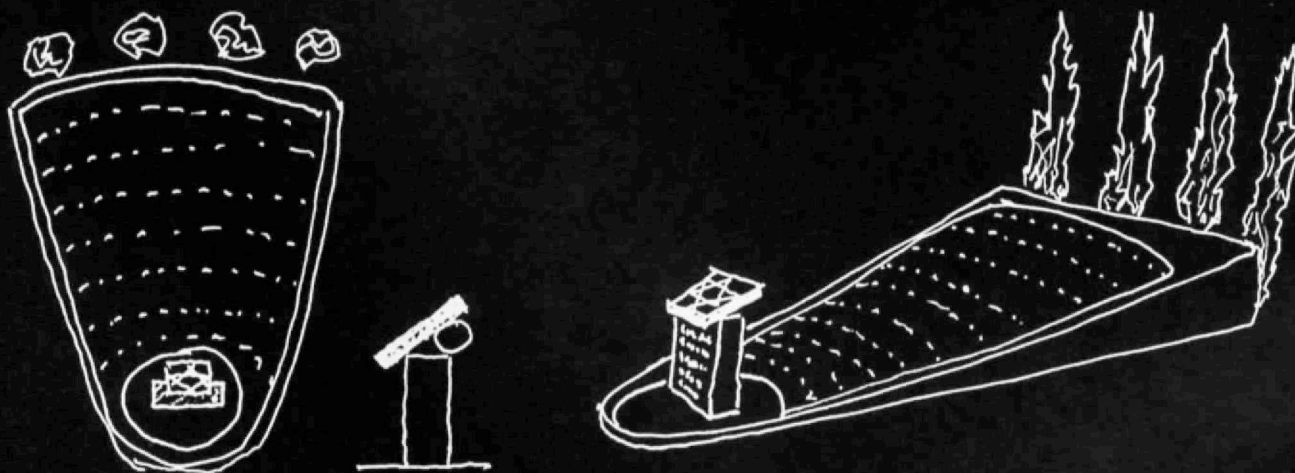
TO DIE FOR



Cameron Armstrong and his plain pine coffin, designed in the form of an art crate.

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IN DEATH, DESIGN MATTERS



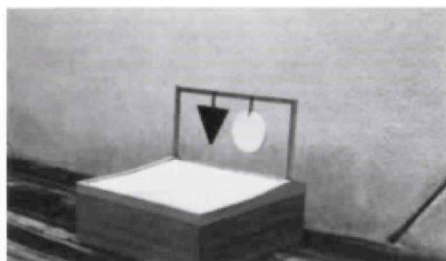
Burdette Keeland's original design for the grave of conductor Efrek Kurtz. The family loved it, but the cemetery refused it.

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS

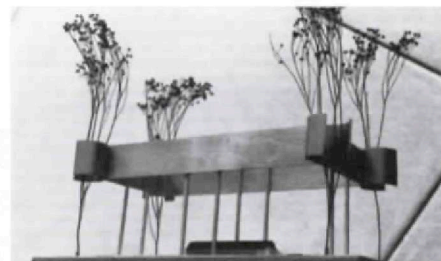


Efrek Kurtz's grave, as allowed by Mount Carmel Cemetery.
A basic lectern form can still be seen in the headstone.

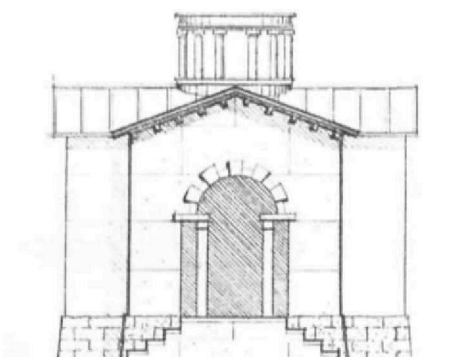
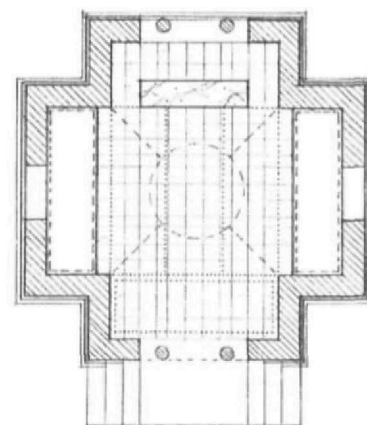
Photo courtesy Burdette Keeland



A Burdette Keeland tombstone design. The markers would hang at the head of the grave like a mobile, moving in the wind.



In this Keeland design, a metal frame around a family plot guides the growth of sheltering trees.



Elevation of "Paris," an as yet unbuilt mausoleum Burdette Keeland designed for AGM Memorials in Austin.

It was, almost everyone involved agreed, a lovely idea. Efrek Kurtz, a former director of the Houston Symphony, had died, and his family wanted Houston architect Burdette Keeland Jr. to design his gravesite.

Keeland was a reasonable choice for the undertaking; over the last four decades he has become something of an expert in funeral matters. In the 1960s, as Keeland tells the story, he was wandering the city of Milan with his wife when they decided they were too footsore and weary to continue. Keeland was dispatched to call a taxi, and from the upper floor of the building where he found his phone he saw an unexpected vision: 400 acres of cemetery in the very middle of Milan's urban expanse. In front of him stretched a vast city of the dead that closely mimicked the cities of the living. There were obviously rich neighborhoods and middle-class neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods, all distinct, all separate. Keeland, interested in what this sort of urban planning might teach his architecture students at the University of Houston, snapped a few photographs. Back home, he slipped pictures of the cemetery into his lectures, and was surprised at the response they drew. So the next time he traveled he sought out more graveyards, and took more pictures, and eventually his slide shows on the design issues surrounding death gained some small fame.

"The point I was trying to make," Keeland says, "is that people shouldn't be afraid of looking at death as an opportunity for an architectural statement." Efrek Kurtz's grave definitely offered an opportunity. His family wanted something that reflected the man's life, and after a few preliminary sketches and discarded ideas, Keeland came up with a concept he felt was particularly appropriate. Rather than have the tombstone at the head of the grave, he would put it at the foot and design it like a conductor's stand. Then the grave itself would be raised to suggest the spread of a concert hall, with different flowers planted to represent the people in the audience. Anyone coming upon this particular plot would know, without doubt, that here lay a musician.

The family loved it. But then Keeland sent his plans up to the cemetery in Glendale, New York, where Kurtz was to be buried, "and they just laughed me out of the room." Headstones had to be at the head of a grave, he was told, and the plot itself had to be as flat and level as those around it. Keeland tried to at least get the headstone-as-conductor's-stand accepted,

but even that was turned down. "I was used to the architectural restrictions of cities and zoning and all this stuff," he sighs, "but I didn't have any idea that the cemetery business would be so difficult to deal with."

What Keeland had learned was the same lesson that a handful of other architects and craftsmen who have attempted to bring new elements of design to the funeral process have been taught: people are resistant to change when it comes to death. When Keeland designed a series of mausoleums for AGM Memorials in Austin, using traditional patterns but opening the mausoleums up to light and the elements to make them more cheerful and attractive to visitors, they were widely admired, but to date not a one has been sold. (Of course, the price of the mausoleums — \$1 million to \$1.5 million — may have had some effect on that.) And his various updates on tombstones, many of which look as much like modern art as they do grave markers, have had a similar fate. They exist in models and sketches, but not in cemeteries.

Similarly, Cameron Armstrong's coffins have yet to make it to the grave. Armstrong, a Houston architect, had little interest in funerals until his mother died. A year after her passing, he was suddenly stricken with profound depression, a delayed reaction to his grief over her death. He also felt guilt that he, as an architect, had not designed her coffin, and that as a result she was permanently entombed in a commercial product "I just have a horror about."

"In some ways," Armstrong says, "designing caskets fits in exactly with what an architect does — designing useful spaces. And it is a piece of real estate as well. It's the sort of thing architects should think about; it's part of their territory."

But when Armstrong began thinking about it, he found it more complicated than he'd imagined. At first he thought he would simply let his creativity run wild. As he delved into the issue, though, he kept running into constraints. "I was confused about how easy it would be," he says, "and when I discovered I couldn't just whip out a design, I focused on the problem of the correct proportions." Those proportions had to take into account the dimensions of the hearse that would transport the coffin, the limitations of the vault it would be lowered into, and, perhaps most important, the issue of comfort — not of the deceased, but of those who viewed the deceased's body. "You

have to be able to fit a person and some upholstery into the casket and not make it look too crowded," Armstrong says. "If you build a casket that's too constrictive, the people viewing it will get a little bit nervous, a little tense."

With caskets, Armstrong discovered, every change took on unexpected significance. Designing a casket wasn't just about creating a container for a body, it was about the rituals related to death. When he designed a casket with no handles, for example, the question became, how do you lift it? If with ropes, what do you do with the ropes afterward? Cut them up — cut the final bonds, as it were — and distribute them to the mourners? And on and on. "The minute you diverge from the conventional casket, you end up in a whole new world of psychodrama," Armstrong says. "Even the smallest thing can suggest an whole new world."

Eventually, Armstrong came to believe that simple design was best, though it was far from easy. One casket, which now resides behind a couch in his living room, was inspired by a plain pine box, which in the late 20th century, as Armstrong notes, "is a remarkably exotic kind of carpentry. To make one, you have to get wood that is generally not available, and you have to find a fairly sophisticated carpenter." Armstrong created his plain pine casket with the help of artist Terry Andrews, cobbling it together in the basement of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, where Andrews worked. Another Armstrong casket was made of sheet metal with the assistance of sculptor Ed Wilson; that casket sits in the entranceway to Armstrong's home, where it doubles as a table for stacking papers and magazines.

Though Armstrong has worked with artists to construct his coffins, he had originally hoped to create prototypes that could be replicated with relative ease. Early on, though, he discovered there wasn't exactly a burning demand for his caskets. To date, he has made half a dozen coffins, all for people who are still living.

Perhaps the most successful of the new funeral designers has been David Pipes, a woodworker in San Antonio who in the mid-1980s added caskets to his line of heirloom furniture. His first casket was designed for a client in Paris, Texas, whose house he was renovating. The mother of the family wanted her son to have a proper vessel in which to leave this world, and asked Pipes to design a casket for him. Since the son was still

very much alive — it was, Pipes recalls, a fairly eccentric family — he and Pipes created the casket together, making it so that it could serve as an armoire or bookshelf until it was time to lower it into the ground.

Since, Pipes has built other dual purpose coffins, but most of his caskets are created for the sole mission of containing a body. He makes between one and three a month, following traditional patterns but using wood, mainly long leaf yellow pine, rescued from old houses. His very traditionalism may explain why Pipes has a steady supply of customers, while designers such as Keeland and Armstrong have more ideas than commissions.

Still, Keeland argues, something needs to be done. When he travels to Russia, he says, he sees cemeteries that look distinctly Russian. When he journeys to Indonesia, he finds thatch roof tombs of unquestionable Indonesian design. But when he visits new cemeteries in America, he sees nothing of distinction. "My concern about this country," he says, "is that we're just taking a stamped out version, a cookie cutter deal, and say that's death." Today, people visit cemeteries that are 100 years old and find them a memorable reflection of their time. Will people 100 years from now be able to do the same with modern day cemeteries? Maybe, but not, Keeland suggests, until someone figures out a way to breath new life into America's approach to death. ■