

San Michele Cemetery

Venice, Italy 1998–2017

Established in 1807 as Venice's principal cemetery, and enlarged in 1839 when two islands were joined together, San Michele has been under continuous development for over 200 years, but its romantic exterior contrasts sharply with the sometimes rather municipal character of its interior.

Following an international competition, the development and extension of the north-east side of the cemetery began. The proposal was developed in two main phases and realised over an extended period, with the first phase of construction beginning in 2004 and the second phase being completed in 2017. A further phase currently remains in planning, along with a proposal to create a connected cemetery island to the east.

The guiding idea behind the scheme is an organisational structure that uses courtyards of varying sizes, defined by enclosing walls and colonnades that echo the fifteenth-century cloister of San Michele nearby. In contrast to the existing arrangement of tombs in rows, the scheme groups buildings, walls, tombs and landscape together, creating a sense of intimacy and enclosure.

The built scheme comprises three rectangular structures. Formed externally by blind walls and internally by colonnades with burial recesses, these structures enclose a series of interlocking garden courtyards. Different courtyards are designed for burials, cremations or ossuaries, and are defined by varying sizes and a diverse but harmonious range of materials. The walls are clad in basalt and pietra d'Istria – two types of stone commonly used in Venice – inlaid with texts from the Gospels, while the internal colonnades are formed from dark grey concrete.

The programme also called for a warehouse and a boat dock, which are distinguished by their use of traditional, hand-made red bricks, with interiors formed from in-situ exposed concrete. The original scheme also featured a chapel and crematorium, which will now not be realised, but three further courtyard complexes will be completed over the coming years.

Project start	1998
Project completion	2017
Gross floor area	7,180m ²
Client	Comune di Venezia
Architect	David Chipperfield Architects London and Milan
Contact architect	Zero4Uno Ingegneria
Landscape architect	Wirtz International
Structural engineer	Jane Wernick Associates Studio Associato Forcellini-Breda-Scarpa Zero4Uno Ingegneria
Services engineer	Zero4Uno Ingegneria Arup
Site supervisor	Studio Associato Vio Francesco Buonocore, Franco Gazzarri
Quantity surveyors	Tim Gatehouse Associates Andrea Faggion
Contractors	Consorzio Stabile Pedron Sacaim
Photography	ORCH, Christian Richters, Ute Zscharmt



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