THE CEMETERY AS AN EVOLVING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT. Cemeteries are deliberately created and highly organized cultural landscapes. Investigation of five Oregon cemeteries, and casual observations in Utah, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and New York, has led to the conclusion that cemeteries have undergone the same general spatial and architectural evolution as the American scene, and that they may in fact be miniaturizations and idealizations of larger American settlement patterns. KEY WORDS: Architectural style, Cemeteries, Landscapes, Necrogeography, Oregon.

Despite apparent interest in cemeteries, cultural geographers have published relatively little on necrogeography.1 Studies of cemeteries in social science literature fit into two broad categories. The first, architectural analysis of style and stylistic change of markers, gravestones, or tombstones, has primarily been used by historians, folklorists, and archaeologists.2 The second is a more purely geographic analysis of the cemetery as an element in local land use patterns.3 Studies dealing with cemeteries as total landscapes, incorporating both spatial and architectural elements, have been rare.4

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Necrogeography relates intimately to architecture, sociology, psychology, and economics.5 The cultural geographer, working with the literature of these disciplines, can find much of interest in cemeteries. Sociological studies provide insight into views of death, but they usually neglect spatial and morphological considerations of interest to geographers. Questions such as the following almost invariably go unanswered: What pattern are cemeteries laid out on? Are there architectural differences in tombstones in different parts of the cemetery? Are there architectural differences through time? These questions are certainly fundamental to necrogeography, and the changing morphology of cemeteries is investigated here. Drawing heavily from other social scientists, and by analyzing several cemeteries, I have reached the conclusion that the cemetery in the United States is a microcosm of the real world, and binds a particular generation of men to the architectural and perhaps even spatial preferences and prejudices that accompanied them throughout life.

Cemeteries serve both functional and emotional purposes. They provide for disposal of corpses and, far more important, provide a place where the living can communicate with the dead. They are thus both sacred and profane, in the true sense of Eliade's concept.6 Warner's analysis of the meaning of the cemetery to the living offers the observation that


"the fundamental sacred problem of the graveyard is to provide suitable symbols to refer to and express man's hope of immortality . . . and to reduce his anxiety and fear about death as marking the obliteration of his personality —the end of life for himself and for those he loves." Thus, the cemetery, both as a place and a landscape, has spiritual and mystical overtones. It is, as Sopher has noted, a distinct and positive expression of religious ideology on the land.  

The cemetery is analyzed as a cultural landscape, that is, as a place having definable visual characteristics based on individual forms, such as tombstones, trees, and fences, and on the placement of those forms in a particular spatial arrangement. The cemeteries studied have spatial and chronological variability. Two fundamental considerations presented themselves: 1) how do cemeteries vary in the spatial dimension, or what kind of variability is encountered in different parts of a cemetery at any particular time? and 2) how have cemeteries changed through time, or what kind of evolving landscape does one find during a particular period, say from 1870 to 1970? 

CEMETORIES STUDIED

Five cemeteries felt to be representative of those in the southern half of the Willamette Valley, Oregon, were studied. These are the Brownsville Pioneer Cemetery, the Coburg I.O.O.F. Cemetery, the Danebo I.O.O.F. Cemetery (now called West Lawn Memorial Park), the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery, and the Bailey Hill Cemetery in Eugene. All are active or semiactive cemeteries dating back to around 1865, and thus represent about 100 years of continuous occupancy. They appear to correspond in many ways to the "population center" cemeteries of southern Illinois.

Little ethnic diversity or religious uniformity was encountered in the five Oregon cemeteries. This area has had a high religious diversity with mixed Protestant domination for more than a century. Primary migration from the 1850s to the 1880s was from Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, not directly from foreign countries, or from one particular religious group.

CATEGORIES OF TOMBSTONES

At first glimpse any cemetery, especially a fairly old one, seems a complex jumble of spires, blocks, plaques, and shafts. The forms of monuments was analyzed in relation to their date of installation. The stones in each cemetery were classified according to age into nine main categories (Fig. 1):

1) the gothic, or pointed, upright monument. Usually of marble, and averaging about thirty-four inches (ninety cm) in height, this type resembles the pointed arch, important in ecclesiastical architecture in western cultures for the last 900 years;

2) the obelisk. This is a vertical shaft of marble, reminiscent of the obelisks of ancient Egypt. The plain obelisk rises about fifty-eight inches (150 cm) and is topped by a pyramidal point. Others may have balls or other ornaments on top;

3) the cross-vault obelisk (or groined vault obelisk). This is also a marble spire about fifty-eight inches (150 cm) in height, but is topped by a cross-vaulted "roof," rather than rising to a point;

4) the tablet. Usually of marble, this type terminates in a rounded, romanesque arch. Sometimes two are placed side by side, resembling the tablets of the Ten Commandments as they are often represented in western art. Average height of this type is about twenty-eight inches (seventy cm);

5) the pulpits. This stone of either marble or granite, with an average height of about thirty inches (seventy-six cm), resembles a pulpit with an inscription on the top, slanting surface. Occasionally the form of an open book, perhaps a bible, is represented on the top;

6) the scroll. This monument, usually of granite, resembles a horizontal, broken column. Actually, it may represent a scroll: earlier examples are indeed rounded, but they are partially open scrolls, with inscriptions on the unrolled portion. This type is only about twelve inches (thirty cm) high;

7) the block. This is a tabular block of granite about twenty-four inches (sixty cm) high, twenty-four inches (sixty cm) wide, by
about six inches (fifteen cm) deep. Sometimes the top is slightly rounded or even pointed.

8) raised-top inscription. This type of monument is usually of granite, only about six inches (fifteen cm) in height; and differs from the pulpit in that its top inscription is a horizontal plane, not slanted; and
9) the lawn type (or plaque). This is a plate, usually of granite or bronze, whose top surface is flush with the ground level, or about an inch (2½ cm) above it at most.

These nine types include about ninety-five percent of the monuments in the cemeteries studied. The conspicuous absence of the cross-form in cemeteries in the southern Willamette Valley is probably related to the small number of Catholics in the area. The dominance of crosses in Catholic cemeteries elsewhere is reported by Kniffen and Adams. Catholic cemeteries in Wisconsin and Minnesota have the types of monuments noted in Oregon cemeteries, but these are usually modified by a cross motif. An example is the obelisk topped by a cross.

**CHANGES IN MONUMENTS: 1870–1970**

Arrangement of the nine forms for the five cemeteries along a time scale, from 1870 to 1970, reveals some definite preferences in fashions in grave markers by time periods (Fig. 2). A smaller sample in Chisago County, Minnesota, and St. Croix County, Wisconsin, reveals similar changes (Fig. 3). The minor differences point to several possibilities for time diffusion studies of tombstone markers. Although most markers are commercially made, "catalog" items available throughout the United States, some areas lag in acceptance, and some stones remain in style longer in some places than others.

The general conclusion that certain types of markers are related to specific periods is supported by other studies. Price found that the plain marble marker was common in southern Illinois between 1840 and 1900, that the obelisk was common from 1880 to 1900, that many granite stones were common by 1930, and that most recent graves had brass or bronze plates level with the ground. Young's study in two Canadian villages revealed a decrease in height of stone markers after the turn of the century, with a cut off date at about 1911. Casual observation in California, Utah, and New York reveals similar changes in styles and height of stones. The East, however, ap-

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12 Price, op. cit., footnote 4, p. 205.

pears to lead the West in acceptance of styles, as was true in all facets of architecture and culture in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14}

The general trends may be summarized briefly. Early stones were simple, and were usually about thirty inches (seventy-six cm) high. After the Civil War a change can be detected: height and ornamentation of monuments increased, and by 1890 the tall obelisk became common. After 1905 monuments became more simple, and height decreased to less than thirty inches (seventy-six cm). This condition has continued to the present, with low plate-like markers being the rule today.

**LAYOUT AND LOCATION**

Oregon cemeteries exhibit striking changes in basic layout between 1870 and 1970 (Fig. 4). In the very early (family) cemeteries, graves often were located facing eastward, with no regular pattern. Town or rural-focus cemeteries, however, were laid out on a strict compass-oriented grid. The grid pattern, prototype for almost all city, town, and farm layouts in the Willamette Valley, became the dominant layout in cemeteries until very recent times, the “streets” becoming walkways, the “blocks” containing several grave plots. A sinuous road or trail pattern is encountered only in the new memorial parks. Even in the new cemeteries, however, graves are located with reference to the old grid patterns, and are recorded in the county offices with a plot numbering system that has not changed appreciably between 1870 and 1970.

The earliest cemeteries were usually located on hill tops, and even today there is a tendency to locate on hilly land. Price noted a similar relationship in southern Illinois.\textsuperscript{15} Hilltop locations probably had both religious and ecological significance. Hill and mountain tops are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage as spiritual locations. Hilltops are also least susceptible to flooding and without much value in terms of agriculture, or, in older days, city expansion. Today sloping hill lands are becoming desired sites for housing developments, and the concept of the cemetery as a valid type of land use has come under attack. It is not expected, however, that cemeteries will be replaced by space-saving solutions such as crematoria or mass burial. Although Pattison found that some cemeteries in Chicago have been removed for residential and other uses, both Price and Kniffen feel that


\textsuperscript{15} Price, op. cit., footnote 4, pp. 201–07.
cemeteries are very conservative land use elements.\textsuperscript{16} Differential property values characterize most cemeteries. As Young noted, “cemeteries lots are differentially priced and vary greatly in their elaboration. Grave markers, in particular, can reflect the wealth and prestige of the buyer, and very likely a whole family.”\textsuperscript{17} Kephart stated that\textsuperscript{18}

Traditionally, class distinctions within the cemetery were based on size of lot and size of memorial or mausoleum. Historically, the rich man’s grave was marked by a large memorial or mauso-

\textsuperscript{16} Pattison, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 248–49, cited examples of cemeteries “moved” to other locations, but Price, op. cit., footnote 4, p. 206, noted that “most people respect the existence of a cemetery and although they may not bother to maintain it, they do not molest it either,” and Kniffen, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 427, observed that “there is a special reluctance to disturb graveyards.”

\textsuperscript{17} Young, op. cit., footnote 13, p. 447.


leum, the poor man’s by a small head or footstone, or perhaps by the absence of a stone.

There are “good” and “bad” neighborhoods in cemeteries as well as in cities and towns. These can easily be discerned by an analysis of cost and plot size. In Oregon’s cemeteries the differentiation of space by status appears to have reached a peak in the 1880s and 1890s during the Victorian era. Kephart commented that “all in all, the ecology of a Philadelphia cemetery shows the same kind of class distinctions—though less marked—that exist in the spatial hierarchy of the city itself.”\textsuperscript{19} These differences are today becoming less apparent in Oregon and Philadelphia cemeteries. A rising middle class, and a de-emphasis on the importance of death, seem to be responsible. Nevertheless, hilltop locations and those in specially landscaped parts of the cemetery still bring the highest prices in Oregon.

The cemetery reflects a dominant though changing pattern, the exclusion of blacks from the more attractive or more expensive areas. Racial segregation in cemeteries was not studied in the southern Willamette Valley because the Negro population has always been less than one percent of the total. Price noted separate Negro cemeteries in southern Illinois and Pattison discussed the nearly complete segregation in Chicago cemeteries.\textsuperscript{20} Segregation in death appears to be as much a reality in America as segregation in life. In some cemeteries blacks are given peripheral graves in “bad” neighborhoods, and in some cases, admission is completely denied.

Most cemeteries are basically suburban. There appears to be a contrast of nature versus the monument. Architecture dominates only so much of the scene. Shrubs, grass, and (symbolically) evergreen trees provide the framework, and cemeteries are generally pastoral. A cemetery may be “a miniature, symbolic replica or the garden-like dwelling area of a better-class suburb, or an elaboration of the formal gardens of aristocratic families.”\textsuperscript{21}

The combination of monument, garden, and

\textsuperscript{19} Kephart, op. cit., footnote 18, pp. 642–43.

\textsuperscript{20} Price, op. cit., footnote 4, p. 206; and Pattison, op. cit., footnote 3, p. 251, mentions that “the Negroes of Chicago, generally (though not completely) denied burial space, have turned to five cemeteries of their own.”

\textsuperscript{21} Warner, op. cit., footnote 5, p. 282.
pastoral nature contains, to a striking degree, the elements which Lowenthal and Prince found important in the English landscape. Yet in its basic rectilinear geometry, the often neglected or abandoned character of its older sections, and its basic dichotomy between architectural form and open space, the American cemetery is intimately a part of what Lowenthal calls the “American scene.”

EVOLUTION OF THE CEMETERY LANDSCAPE

I consider the cemeteries studied in detail to be idealized microcosms of the Oregon landscape. Both the cemeteries and the landscape have undergone an evolution classifiable into several main periods. Four periods are detectable in terms of total morphology (architecture and spatial organization) and attendant concepts regarding death: 1) the pioneer period; 2) the Victorian period; 3) the conservative period; and 4) the modern period.

1) The pioneer period, from 1850 to 1879, was a simple one both in the cemetery and in Oregon architecture. The American gothic revival is represented both in houses and in ecclesiastical architecture. Most architecture during this period is quite simple and devoid of frills. Characteristic cemetery monuments were the gothic, table, and block forms. The dominant stylistic theme was the pointed arch, and ornamentation was absent, or extremely simple. Gravestones in cemeteries averaged only about thirty inches (seventy-six cm) in height. They were worked in white marble, and often possessed simple inscriptions. Both architecture and form of monument seem to correspond. At this time the religious image of the pointed gothic arch pervaded secular architecture, and was also expressed in cemetery monuments. The grid dominated the cemetery as it did all other settlement. Ross has discussed the striking changes in architecture between the early or pioneer period and the lavish Victorian era which followed in Oregon.

2) The Victorian period (1880–1905). Both architecture and cemetery monuments changed radically after about 1880, when ornate architectural styles and patterns of life reached Oregon from the eastern United States. Lavishness and grandness, along with a desire to emulate the classical, appeared in houses, public buildings, and churches. In the cemetery, the popularity of the obelisk and certain other classical forms (columns) reached a peak at this time, along with ornate wrought iron enclosures for family plots. The latter suggest late Victorian balustrades and railings, and effectively separated the rich from the poor, a rare distinction in the pioneer period. The height of stone monuments reached a peak of about fifty inches (127 cm), which was never to be attained again. This was a time of contrast; small markers erected by the poor were overshadowed by the lavish monuments of the rich. Some monuments at this time were truly massive; replicas of Greek temples, often weighing several tons, appeared. One obelisk at the Pioneer Cemetery in Eugene is about twelve feet (365 cm) high. These were monuments in an age of monumental architecture. The culmination of the flowery epitaph was also reached at this time. Cemetery neighborhoods became established. The primary dividing line was social and economic status. The grid pattern was strictly followed, but many cemeteries were given visual focus toward the center. Circles or “turnabouts” became common, and fountains were installed in the central square area of some cemeteries. The prototype for this central focus may perhaps be found in the courthouse square or centrally located town parks. For the rich, the Victorian cemetery suggested a rejection of death, or at least a struggle for immortality by monument. Almost as if classical culture could not be forgotten because of its tremendous architectural accomplishments, so too, the extended epitaph and the truly “permanent” monument of the Victorian cemetery represented a striving for immortality by statement of deeds accomplished on earth. The ancient obelisk, a symbol of eternity, served as the logical model for many monuments at this time.

3) The conservative period (1906–1929). The first quarter of the twentieth century saw a change toward the simple in both architec-

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ture and cemetery monument. The value of classical form was seriously questioned and new solutions appeared. Ornamentation, both on public buildings and private housing, began to be trimmed. The new buildings exhibited the questioning exemplified by Walter Gropius, L. H. Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Simple geometric forms were becoming popular. The cemetery reflects a rejection of the frivolous or "overly fancy." Lavish ornate form was abstracted into geometric shape. The rounded scroll, the slant pulpit, and the block form became common. Height of stones, especially those of the rich, began to decrease. From the fifty inches (127 cm) of the late Victorian, the monuments became shorter, and averaged only about twenty-four inches (sixty cm) high by the 1920s. Block forms and raised-top inscriptions became popular. The cemetery began to resemble rows of square buildings in the city. Garish displays of wealth were more difficult to find. The grid remained, but some curving lines were introduced. There was less differentiation of plot by property value than in the Victorian period.

4) The modern period (1930-1970). The trends of the previous period continued into the 1960s. The forms became more simplified, and in many cases the tombstone disappeared because it "spoiled the landscape." Raised-top inscription monuments became lower and lower until they were almost flush with the ground surface. Maintenance became easier, since grass mowers have no stones to avoid. "Streets" often followed the contour of the land, not the rigid grid system. Jackson has equated the disappearance of the monument of death not only with economy, but also with an "American fear of death." He contended that the pastoral open landscape of the new "memorial garden" possesses none of the reminders of the fate awaiting all at one time or another. But the removal of monuments, on the other hand, may symbolize a resignation, if subconscious, to the inevitable and a rejection of the Victorian emphasis on permanence. As Young noted, "the new style of


26 Whatever the case in any change in cemeteries "the replacement of one universal motif by another through time over the entire area is certainly a function of changes in religious values combined with significant shifts in views regarding death." I have used Oregon as an example, but feel that the four periods described herein may generally be applicable to large areas of the United States between 1870 and 1970. Most architectural historians recognize similar changes in motif and style during the last century.

PATTERNS OF CEMETERY EXPANSION

Although differential property values have slightly modified the picture, the general analogy between city and cemetery patterns is striking. The earliest graves in all the Oregon cemeteries studied are located in the center surrounded by tall monuments of the Victorian period, with the graves of the conservative and modern periods around the pioneer and Victorian core. The resulting visual connotation is one of a city center surrounded in almost every direction by sprawling suburbs. Most cemeteries observed in other parts of the United States appeared to have, on a gross level, a similar pattern.

Two main types of centrifugal patterns have been encountered. A concentric evolution pattern, which resembles idealized diagrams of concentric city growth, has been noted where a cemetery has expanded outward in all directions from a centrally located core area. The oldest part commonly is at the top of a hill, and the new rings of growth are downhill in all directions.

The asymmetrical plan is typical of cemeteries which have grown outward in only one, two, or three directions from the main core and are restricted from attaining a truly concentric pattern by cultural features, such as property lines, or by natural barriers, such as rivers, lakes, or swamps. Usually the oldest part of the cemetery is on the highest ground available, and the newer development is downslope. Asymmetrical patterns are analogous

26 Young, op. cit., footnote 13, p. 448.
27 Deetz and Dethlefsen, op. cit., footnote 2, p. 506.
to those of towns and cities located on the shores of rivers, lakes, or oceans. Very large cemeteries in cities, not herein investigated, may have a combination of these patterns. Perhaps they might grow centrifugally from multiple nuclei until all available land has been used.

Centrifugal growth patterns, however, are not always encountered. The family plot cemetery, which accepts burials over large areas and retains space in all blocks for future burials, is an important exception. Old Victorian stones may be next to modern plaques, and each block, rather than the entire cemetery, has evolved individually through time. Burials are accepted at random across the entire cemetery, and no well defined zonation exists.

CONCLUSION

Investigation of five cemeteries in Oregon, and casual observation elsewhere, has led to some conclusions about American cemeteries in general. Most of the ideas presented here are speculative. They are based on only a small sample of cemeteries, and clearly more field work is needed in other areas, but they are supported by the work of other social scientists. Only a rather small group of cultural geographers has investigated cemeteries, and I second Kniffen’s suggestion that their ranks could profitably be expanded.

Cemeteries are but one element in the cultural landscape, but they may bridge the nebulous gap between subconscious and conscious motivation in the manipulation of form and space. They suggest that architectural form and settlement patterns are so deeply ingrained in the genre de vie that they even affect relatively sacred places. If “landscapes are created by landscape tastes,” as Lowenthal and Prince advocate, then perhaps the cemetery offers a clue to the processes involved in the connection between the preferred and the resulting in landscape.

In the cemetery, architecture, “town” planning, display of social status, and racial segregation, all mirror the living, not the dead. Cemeteries, as the visual and spatial expression of death, may tell us a great deal about the living people who created them.