



## Sacred Places

You have just been handed a new project description in your design studio: You are to design a 5-acre cemetery and the grave-markers to be used in it. This would be a worthwhile exercise for landscape architecture students since landscape architects have been responsible for the design of most planned cemeteries in this country.

What sort of cemetery would you design? Would you have broad, rolling lawns bordered by neat rows of shade trees? Would your grave-markers be similar rectangles of stone laid flush with the sod so as to provide unity, and thus tranquility to this pastoral scene? Would your focal point be a grand entry gate or fountain? We can easily imagine such places. They appear in cities across the country, and all look the same whether in Boston, Houston, Portland or Honolulu.

But perhaps one among you is a renegade. He or she designs a cemetery to look like this: There are no manicured lawns, no irrigation, and no neat rows of shade trees. Instead, there is sage and wild grasses, junipers, pines, or whatever the indigenous vegetation is. Nestled in the grass or atop earthen mounds are the grave-markers. Each grave marker is handmade and no two are alike. The grave-markers are crafted out of wood, stone and common household objects. One grave-marker is an upturned floor grate whose tips have been formed into crosses. Another is a brightly painted sawblade. Yet another is a cross made out of pop bottles cemented together. The list of materials this student has used to create the grave-markers goes on to include candlesticks, metallic letters, barrel rims, picture frames, colored tiles, plastic flowers, horseshoes, radiator parts, ball bearings, marbles, shells, egg cartons, chicken wire, paint cans, plastic beads, tacks, nails, pie pans, garden hose, astroturf, sheet metal, popsicle sticks, metal chains, wooden crates, door knobs, lava rock, beer cans, and baby bottles.

Does this sound ghastly? Is this student's design solution a breach of good taste?

You may think so and yet in our southwestern states there are such places. They are the *camposantos*, or 'field of the Saints', where hispanic catholics bury their dead.

*Camposantos* are sacred and inspiring places. The *camposanto's* unity is a unity with nature. Its variety lies in the grave-markers, each a unique form of folk art. Its focal point is a large central cross, usually of hewn timbers; and the whole is encompassed by a fence or wall.

*Camposantos* are filled with poignant expressions of emotion. They are alive with the personalities of those interred and those whose insights are etched on the grave-markers.

Unfettered by design biases, the grave-marker craftsman utilizes common household objects in ingenious ways. Often the grave-marker is decorated with treasured possessions - bits of jewelry, a rosary, buttons from a favorite shirt, a piece of stationery, or a whiskey bottle.

Once graves in the great park cemeteries like Mt. Auburn and Spring Grove were decorated to memorialize the deceased. Graves were personalized with fences, urns, pictures, cast iron animals and statuary. Park cemeteries became as popular for monument and decoration viewing as they were for the contemplation of nature. But in the mid 1800's, a landscape designer, Adolf Strauch, campaigned against the personalization of graves on the grounds that it was 'in poor taste'. Although initially opposed by lot owners, Strauch eventually launched the 'lawn cemetery' movement, precursor of the 'memorial park' so prevalent today.

Interestingly, the banishment of grave ornamentation corresponds to the invention of the lawn mower. Cemetery owners heavily promoted the lawn cemetery realizing that the simplified maintenance would greatly increase their profits. Strict regulations were established ostensibly to preserve the tranquil beauty of uninterrupted lawn, but more pragmatically, to assure the uninterrupted sweep of the lawn mower.

What can we learn from a study of *Camposantos* and cemetery history? We learn the same thing that we learn if we study what you do when you first move into a new apartment or dorm room - that people like to personalize space.

The personalization of graves in the *Camposanto* has created a place rich in cultural identity and meaning. Our modern memorial cemeteries, on the other hand, as expressed by Harvard professor, John Stilgoe, are characterized by 'a bland horticultural homogeneity'. Landscape Architecture professor Catherine Howett refers to modern memorial cemeteries as 'lost landscapes' explaining that they are 'lost' because "we cannot find in them the image of our lives or our times."

But it is not just our cemeteries which are bland, or lacking meaning. Our country abounds with generic, landscapes, bland urban plazas and run-of-the-mill housing developments.

Author and lecturer John Naisbit implores people to offset the cold and calculating aspects of technology with an emphasis on the more humanistic and spiritual aspects of mankind. As designers, we can imbue places with significance, personalizing them on some scale, whether decorating an urban plaza wall with handprints of its noon hour visitors, or galloping lifesize bronze horses across an immense space as in a downtown near Dallas, or by allowing people freedom of expression in the final and most profound rite of passage.

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