Sociology in Stone:
Regional Cultural Inferences from Cemetery Art and Architecture

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The art and architecture styles that comprise any cemetery can visually describe its culture in various aspects. The inscriptions and images on tombstones, monuments, and other objects indicate a society's general outlook on death, its prevailing religions or secularization, gender roles, and other social stratification such as race and ethnicity. There is quantifiable data about life expectancy, birth and mortality rates, family size, and even some political and economic history recorded in the wood, stone, and earthen assemblages. Furthermore, the evolution of cemetery design closely correlates with regional landscape and architecture trends, and the commercialization of the mortuary business followed standard contemporaneous business models in America and Europe (Hamscher, 2003).

Cemeteries and graveyards are designed to memorialize individuals. By contrast, the term "burial ground" implies a more communal type of depository (Kearl, 1989). This distinction is important, and defines the scope of this paper, because the marking of individual graves evinces facts not only about the deceased, but also about their relationship to the individuals, families, and communities that make the marker(s). Although the term *grave* implies interment, cenotaphs are also included for the purpose of this study, as it is the marker and not the grave that is being highlighted here. The lack or presence of corporeal contents is extraneous to the study of marker design and cemetery layout, and a mere logistical variance for the funerary business.

Hominoid history reveals that we, upright apes, were practicing formal and ceremonial disposal of our dead before we ever invented the tools necessary to dig a grave (Pettitt, 2013). Of course, once we *did* invent some type of shovel, there was seemingly no stopping our progress (and eventual regress) in conscious and creative memorialization. In graves dating back as far as 60,000 BCE, bodies have been found bound in fetal positions, adorned with flowers, ivory beads, shells, and painted bones (Kearl, 1989). Other early burial accoutrements include animal bodies, weaponry, and preserved foods. Anthropologists have discovered the oldest cemetery in the Middle East (14,500 BCE) at a site in Jordan called Uyun al-Hammam. Some of

the graves at Uyun al-Hammam contain a red fox buried with human remains, suggesting that animal was possibly domesticated long before dogs were (Science Daily, 2011).

The archeological evidence for certain funerary practices gets more ascertainable as the record approaches the Greek, Roman, and Anglo-Saxon eras. This is when grave markers began to identify who was buried within, and gravemarking had become as much a record as a ceremony. Each of these early Western cultures designed their cemeteries and grave markers using the styles of their domestic architecture, usually with locally sourced materials. They utilized sunken graves as well as simple mausoleums and columbaria (for cremated remains only).

With the rise of the Christian era, graveyards became associated with churchyards, and many Europeans were buried alongside the parish, abbey, or church at which they had worshipped. The practice of cremation waned, so these sites usually only contained sunken graves except where geological conditions were prohibitive. The consecrated area would be fenced or walled, accessible through the church or a through a lichgate set into the wall or fence. Where geology permitted, crypts were often built beneath the larger churches to hold high priests, heads of state, and other prominent citizens in individual stone sarcophagi. There was often a carved likeness of the deceased in a position of repose atop the vessel's lid (Kastenbaum & Kastenbaum, 1989). Christian graves were usually aligned on an east-west axis with the head at the western end, the body supine. This was so that the deceased would face eastward upon the dawning of Judgment Day (Yalom, 2008).

The cemeteries of the Monterey Bay Area reflect the blending of immigrant and native cultures over the course of nearly three centuries. The earliest immigrants were mainly comprised of ocean-borne colonists (Protestant pilgrims from Western Europe), overland pioneers (homesteaders, explorers, and profiteers from broader origins), and missionaries (Catholic priests of Spanish origin). More recent inflows have included a variety of cultural influences, leading to a blended cemetery style that is specific to the area. To make any inferences about the funerary art and architecture of this region, it is helpful to review the traditions from whence the inhabitants came, and the origins of those traditions.

North American grave-marker symbolism over the past four centuries is directly linked to European mortuary attitudes. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century headstones are typically

shaped into a *tripartite* (three-lobed) shape with a coped edge, relatively uniform in size and shape – reflective of the contemporaneous European style. The following centuries would display a procession of shapes, sizes, and materials that increasingly differed from European trends. Colonial grave markers first displayed a continuation of medieval images representing the fleeting nature of life, typically with an hourglass or the death's-head figure (a stylized skull with wings). The later popularity of the cherub was inspired by the "Great Awakening" and a renewed positivity among the populace. The nineteenth-century motif of the staid urn and willow reflects the Victorian veneration of sorrow and grief (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). All American cemeteries are not alike, though; there is a vast diversity of burial customs and settings. And they are plentiful – nationwide, as many as one hundred thousand European-style graveyards have been identified (Sloane, 1991).

The oldest extant gravestone dating from America's colonial period is that of Barnard and Joan Capen, c. 1637, located in Jamestown (Yalom, 2008). This is not to say that the Capens were the earliest colonists buried, just that their stone marker is the oldest to survive. While a typical New England headstone was made of slate, in some areas (the Chesapeake and the coastal South) wooden grave rails were more common than tombstones (Yalom, 2008). Since wooden markers are vulnerable to brush fires and weather erosion, these markers are harder to find. A headstone was sometimes accompanied by a small footstone placed at the opposite end of the grave; the headstone would contain the main information, the footstone usually only the initials of the deceased.

Domestic burials were also common in all of the colonies but less popular in New England, where the Puritans were more likely to bury their dead around the Meeting House. In rural communities, families joined together to create neighborhood burial grounds at the intersection of private roads or property lines. Larger settlements had more organized churches, and most people were buried in graveyards contiguous to the churches (called "churchyards") which fast were outgrowing their capacities. Southerners had churchyards in the larger towns, but were also buried at home on farms and plantations. Domestic burial bears the risk of the site being disregarded by future property transfers and deferred maintenance, as was the precarious case for George Washington's tomb on Mount Vernon (Sloane, 1991).

California owed its first European-style cemeteries to Spanish missionaries. Between 1769 and 1823, Franciscan friars laid out a series of 21 churches over 600 miles from San Diego to Sonoma, each with an adjoining burial ground. Missionaries placed wooden crosses over the graves of white settlers, but usually buried converted Indians wrapped in shrouds without the benefit of markers or coffins. Natives who died without Catholic conversion were buried just outside the cemetery walls in unconsecrated ground. Many "converted" natives still sneaked away to die according to their ancestral customs (Yalom, 2008).

The drastic transformation of the American burial ground began a few decades after the American Revolution, when centrally located graveyards were removed to the outskirts of growing towns. The term *cemetery* (from the Greek *koimeterium,* or "place to sleep") came into popular use, replacing the grim *graveyard*.

The first new design was for rural graveyards located away from the city, serving as refuge from the increasingly hectic pace of urban life. At this time, removal of graves from urban graveyards was not considered unusual, although relatives sometimes objected. In fact, wholesale disinterment would not be legally barred until the mid-twentieth century (Sloane, 1991). The new rural burial grounds offered the option of expansion rather than removal, as American real estate could be cheaply obtained during the days of territorial expansion.

As America spread across the continent, our traditions of burial and memorializing followed and adapted to new conditions. Most overland emigrants were leaving families behind and the continuation of old rituals would certainly be a comfort to travelers across "an enormous and undeveloped frontier" (Brown, 1994). U.S. homesteaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries established many smaller pioneer cemeteries which would became the dominant type of graveyard in the "Wild West" (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). Typical markers were shaped as a simple cross or rounded tablet, with basic identifiers drawn or carved onto a vertical surface.

These cemeteries sometimes appeared spontaneously as an isolated grave located wherever a death occurred along the wagon trails. Subsequent travelers were likely to seek such site upon the death of a party member so that both deceased persons would have companionship, even if it was with a stranger. California has a poor history of cemetery protection, allowing developers to deliberately remove or build upon the resting places of thousands of pioneers.

Vandalism is responsible for further significant loss (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). Of what remains, design choices are still apparent and reflect a distinctly California aesthetic that blends Victorian, colonial, and ancient nomadic traditions.

Across America, the new pastoral cemetery design included paths winding through sections of plots, presuming that there would be visitors. Marker inscriptions became more informative, intending to provoke thoughtful consideration of an individual's personal, familial, and social identity (Hamscher, 2003). The aesthetic preference was for sprawling vistas enhanced by exotic flora and artful monuments (Yalom, 2008). Rural cemeteries grew into parks of substantial acreage, the markers increasingly opulent and complex throughout the Victorian era of drama and decoration. The American funerary lexicon also began to change under Victorian influence: *casket*, (a chest for precious things) began to replace *coffin* as a word for the burial vessel (Mallios & Caterino, 2011).

Peré Lachaise, the first public cemetery in Paris, opened in 1804 and set a decorative standard throughout Europe (Sloane, 1991). Similarly, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, became the American model when it opened in 1831. Sprawling Spring Grove cemetery in Cincinnati designed many large sections separated by a series of connected lakes presenting gliding swans and swaying trees (Sloane, 1991). It was a lovely place to have a picnic and mourn the dead.

Victorians everywhere cherished and exalted death; elaborate grave markers seemed compulsory. Prescribed mourning periods—2 1/2 years for widows—were extended by choice. Mary Todd Lincoln wore black for 17 years following the President's death, but Queen Victoria became the archetype of a mourning widow after forty years of wearing black in honor Prince Albert's death (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). These were indeed grievous years for our own nation. Historian Daniel Sutherland noted that "A people [Americans] who had just borne the human cost of a civil war, whose infants and children died in large numbers, and whose life expectancy at birth was under 45 years, knew how to mourn." Our cemeteries were truly on par with Europe's finest.

Soon this propensity for ornamental largess would result in overcrowding and spatial confusion. As the weeds grew between the monuments, maintenance became nearly impossible. Designers streamlined the landscape of the cemetery beginning in the 1850s. There was a

general agreement that, in aesthetic terms, the Victorian cemetery landscapes simply did not match up to the prevailing modern aesthetics that embraced clean lines, eschewed clutter and saw virtue in uniformity (Rugg, 2006). The results were more rational and efficient in design, and more dependent on professionals to develop and maintain (Sloane, 1991).

There are a variety of additional explanations for the shift from Victorian cemetery aesthetic to a more conservative, even austere, display. The social trauma experienced by much of Western society in the early 1920s resulted in more humble mortuary expressions, evinced in significantly smaller grave markers. The 1918–19 influenza pandemic devastated many US cities. Responsible for over 50 million deaths worldwide, it infected a fifth of humanity and killed over 675,000 Americans, more than half of them in their 20s and 30s. Influenza lowered the average American life expectancy by a decade (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). The automobile was a significant cause of accidental deaths as the twentieth century progressed (Hamscher, 2003). We were living and dying differently than ever before.

One reason for the rejection of the Victorian mindset was that it was class-obsessed and pretentious. Allowing unrestrained expression of individual adoration had allowed the rampant expression of poor taste, exemplified by so many "headstones surmounted by a blasé looking angel in a whitish nightie… in varying degrees of ugliness, concern for status had overtaken the expression of sincere sentiment" (Rugg, 2006). Catastrophic economic events changed the social stratification of our society, and egalitarian sentiments were rising. While the form of gravestones slowly evolved from large monuments to smaller flush markers during the late 1800s and early 1900s, they collectively experienced a pronounced shift during the 1920s (Mallios & Caterino, 2011).

Overall trends reveal that granite gravestones gradually replaced marble as the marker of choice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though pronounced fiscal struggles were evinced in distinct surges in less expensive marble and metal grave markers (Mallios & Caterino, 2011). Concrete markers were the least expensive. These homemade markers were made of an easily obtained and extremely cheap material, sometimes called "the poor man's marble." It has been asserted that "there are probably more 20th-century folk markers made from concrete than from any other substance." (Mallios & Caterino, 2011).

The mid-twentieth-century cemetery was renamed the *memorial park* in an attempt to improve Americans' relationship to our dead, which had become increasingly distant. The causes for this distancing includes hospitals as new the place to die, the removal of the funeral service from the home to the public parlor, and the purchase of the cemetery lot *preneed* as a standard business transaction. Following World War II, cemeteries became Patriotic, nonsectarian, and segregated rather than totally separated as racial clauses disappeared in the 1950s (Sloane, 1991).

Most memorial parks were modeled after Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, which was established as early as 1913. By 1935, more than 600 memorial parks had been established across the West, Midwest, and South (Hamscher, 2003). The memorial park is immediately recognizable by the absence of many of the attributes of previous eras. Paths were replaced by wider roads suitable for the automobile. Instead of small sections of plots, graves were grouped in several large sections often called "gardens" with statuary limited to a single feature in each garden. In order to facilitate maintenance by "mowing machine", markers of granite or bronze were placed flush to the ground. Aside from manicured lawns, vegetation was generally sparse. Nature, in and of itself, was no longer a source of instruction and consolation to the new industrial society (Hamscher, 2003). The memorial park reflected the public's distancing from the subject of death by the absence of standing headstones or any other visible reminders of the dead, and by the rarity of benches for visitors to pause and contemplate (Hamscher, 2003).

During the 1920s and 1930s, there was a growing belief that cemetery management might be construed as a profession with specific services to deliver and skills to develop "beyond the ability to keep burial records, dig holes, and cut grass". As the design evolved, the task of improving the landscape required some expertise: "the prevailing idea of the present day is to turn cemeteries into parks… and to do this successfully is becoming the work of a specialist". (Rugg, 2006). Through their efforts, the memorial park gave way to the *lawn cemetery*.

In the lawn cemetery, death is the 'great leveler': No one looks rich or poor, no one is exalted above any others (Rugg, 2006). This reflects sociopolitical shifts resulting in the upset of previous stratifications. By the late 1940s, the cemetery landscape contained no visible

monumentation whatsoever. Inscriptions were limited to as few as forty characters, and often displayed only a name and two dates (Rugg, 2006).

So what is the current state of the art? The pendulum is swinging back in the direction of tasteful personalization. "What people did in life is now coming through on the stones" says one modern sociologist. New technologies make it possible to etch photographs in granite, and people are including nicknames, relationships, occupations, hobbies, and even videos (Yalom, 2008). Whereas cremated remains previously were relegated to dusty mantle-mounted urns, new solutions are emerging: memorial gardens abound (for the scattering of ashes), and artistic vessels of clay, wood, glass, metal, or other media are offered by specialized and general artisans. A gallery called Funeraria in Graton, California advertises a "new aesthetic of death" and specializes in these artistic funerary creations.

Furthermore, traditional cemeteries are inventing new ways to honor those buried in their community whose graves were never marked or which markers cannot be located. Tombs holding the unknown body, dedications to immigrant populations, and other considerate acts of remembrance are attempts to right some of the perceived wrongs that have been enacted upon the dead in times past. Still, the cemetery's role as a repository of the history and memories of the local community is fading. Other cultural institutions, such as art museums, local historical societies, and botanical gardens have assumed the earlier functions of the cemetery (Sloane, 1991). The result will be that posterity will not learn about us by walking among our dead, but will have to seek out our stories in the other assorted places.

The problem with this eventuality is that no institution is as inviolate as the cemetery, despite our distancing ourselves from its implications. We might raze the museums and other buildings that house our memorabilia, but we have legally barred the destruction of cemeteries. It seems that the only assuredly permanent record of any individual is his or her tombstone. If these are minimized to only a name and a date, and increasingly installed chronologically rather than in groups of familiarity, then further cultural surveys such as mine (and those cited) will be impossible to conduct, and the cemetery will become more of a census than a story.

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