

CEMETERIES ALIVE

Graveyards are resurging as green spaces for the public



"Live jazz" concerts take on a new meaning at historic Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford, Connecticut. Cedar Hill is among a growing number of cemeteries that blend traditional burial with a number of parklike amenities and programs for residents and visitors. Photo: Cedar Hill Cemetery Foundation.

By Peter Harnik and Aric Merolli

You would think that Shakespeare's *King Lear* is morbid enough without having it performed in a cemetery. But in Lincoln, Nebraska, a group called Flatwater Shakespeare has developed an enthusiastic and loyal following over the past decade by staging theatrical performances in the carriage house of Wyuka Cemetery. It began when the board of the state-owned cemetery recognized that the graveyard would never get the restoration it needed unless the public had a much broader awareness of it. A consultant had noticed that the carriage house had excellent acoustics, so the trustees approached Bob Hall, Flatwater's director, about using it for performances. Hall, whose mother and father are buried at Wyuka, loved the idea, calling it "life-endorsing." And to skeptics, he developed a standard response: "I asked my parents, and *they* didn't say anything."

"Cemeteries are for the living," says Mark Smith, and he should know because he is the sexton of the publicly owned Salt Lake City Cemetery. Smith rejects the idea that his facility is only for somber reflection; rather, it's "a hidden gem within the city," he says, an open space resource that can and should be used for something other than burial.

Historically, it's not a new idea. Before there were public parks, cemeteries—most famously in the United States Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which dates to 1831, and Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, which opened in 1838—were the primary manicured and sculpted green spaces within cities. As parks arose, the recreational use of graveyards fell off. But today, some cities have hundreds of acres of public and private cemetery grounds. Some already help mitigate the shortage of urban parkland (see "Selected Urban Cemeteries That Function Like Parks"). Others, with some modifications, could do the same.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, Elmwood Cemetery, which has been home to many prominent residents since the 1850s, has for years been a place for people to walk, run, and take their dogs. The 111-acre facility sits next to a development of housing, theaters, restaurants, and shops, and there are conceptual plans to connect it to a citywide greenway network. Across town, the 200-acre Evergreen Cemetery was established when Elmwood began to fill up in the 1940s. About a quarter of the heavily wooded site was set aside

for burial plots, fountains, and roadways; the rest was left natural and immediately became a sort of protected nature preserve. People in the surrounding neighborhoods of Sheffield Park, Eastway, and Medford Acres used the undeveloped parts of Evergreen for hiking and birdwatching. In 2001, Mecklenburg County codified the reality, setting aside 77 acres of the cemetery as the Evergreen Nature Preserve.

Cemeteries come in three varieties of ownership: private for-profit, private nonprofit, and public. In general, the older the cemetery and the less used for current burials (which is normally the primary source of revenue), the more likely it is to be publicly owned. There is thus a gradual flow of cemeteries from private to public; in New York City, for instance, between 2003 and 2008, 11 small, abandoned private cemeteries were legally transferred to the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. (Most public cemeteries in cities are managed by a parks or public works department.)

Nearly all public cemeteries are open to the public, but they differ widely in the kinds of activities they allow. At the far hallowed end we have the federally owned Arlington National Cemetery, where almost nothing is permitted except walking from grave to grave; jogging and eating are prohibited and there are virtually no benches. Across the Potomac, in a somewhat gritty part of Washington, D.C., Congressional Cemetery puts out the welcome mat to the community, allowing running, picnicking, sledding, children with balls, and even off-leash dogs. The private, nonprofit facility, which gets almost no new burials, had had no steady source of income and had fallen into severe disrepair. With few options, the board took the risky step of allowing off-leash dogs and selling a limited number of canine memberships at \$200 a year. (Humans get in free.)



Quirky Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., happens to contain the steepest descent in the Capitol Hill neighborhood—perfect for kids after the record snows of 2010. Photo: Caryn Ernst.

Selected Urban Cemeteries That Function Like Parks

CEMETERY	CITY	ACRES	FEATURES
Cedar Hill Cemetery	Hartford, CT	270	running, picnicking, bicycling, jazz concerts
Elmwood Cemetery	Charlotte, NC	111	running, dog walking, bird watching, bicycling
Evergreen Cemetery	Portland, ME	240	running, dog walking, picnicking, bird watching, bicycling, bench sitting, trails
Grand View Cemetery	Fort Collins, CO	40	bicycling, cross-country team training
Highland Cemetery	Wichita, KS	25	dog walking, bird watching, bench sitting, grave rubbing, docent tours, art classes, ghost hunting
Highland Park Cemetery	Cleveland	160	running, dog walking, bird watching, event space
Oakland Cemetery	Atlanta	48	running, dog walking, picnicking, bench sitting, Halloween program
San Jose Burial Park	San Antonio	83	running, dog walking, bicycling, grave rubbing
St. Marcus Cemetery	St Louis	60	running, dog walking, bird watching, bench sitting
Union Cemetery	Kansas City, MO	27	dog walking, bench sitting, grave rubbing, event space, docent tours
Wyuka Cemetery	Lincoln, NE	130	running, picnicking, docent tours, theatrical performances

The idea worked (there is a waiting list), and the funds kick-started a renovation campaign that has made the space much more beautiful, more successful, and more frequently visited every year.

Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, owned by the city's parks department and run by a foundation, is one of the city's oldest public spaces and offers a fascinating glimpse of the possibilities of a well-rounded cemetery park. Naturally, it features roads, walkways, and gravestones, as well as benches, gardens, and a small central building for events. An impressive collection of specimen trees, some dating back to the 1880s, make it much like a park. The added benefit is in the programming. Visitors are allowed to bicycle and jog and, as with any other Atlanta park, they can picnic and stroll with their dogs (on leash). In addition, the foundation offers or encourages tours, photography classes, charity runs, a Halloween festival, and an annual Sunday in the Park festival with music, food, and crafts for sale. The propriety of an annual Halloween tour, under the slogan "Enlighten, Don't Frighten" necessitated some negotiations with heirs of the deceased, but it ultimately worked out well.

"We've settled on a historic first-person format—an actor who educates," explains Kevin Kuharic, director of restora-

tion and landscapes for the foundation. “We get permission to open up four or five of the mausoleums every year, and as each group comes by, guided by tiki torches and luminaries along the pathways, an appropriately costumed character comes out to perform a historical tale. It’s so popular we now run it for three nights, and last year it brought in \$45,000.”

Southerners are so proud of their history, “They just want everyone to know about it,” Kuharic explains. “But we’re also fortunate that the cemetery is largely filled up. We have only about 12 to 15 burials a year, so inviting people in for the park ambience is what we’re mostly about. If we’re not having visitors, what’s the point?”

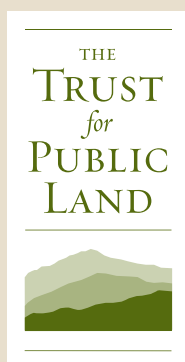
This wasn’t always the case. By the 1970s, the 48-acre cemetery, along with its wrong-side-of-the-tracks neighborhood, had fallen into disrepair. But a small group of idealists, including Mayor Maynard Jackson, had a dream of bringing it back to its former glory. “The mayor wanted to transform Oakland from a municipal expense to a municipal benefit,” said Kuharic. To do that, the Historic Oakland Cemetery Foundation was created, and a formal management partnership was arranged with the Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs. As with nearly all successful public-private partnerships, ultimate authority remained in the hands of the city, but the foundation was given wide latitude on programming, publicity, and fundraising. The facility and the neighborhood around it have been on a steady upswing ever since. (Directly across the street now is a popular gathering place, the Six Feet Under Pub and Fish House.)

In both public and private graveyards, family rights can become an issue, with cemetery authorities owning the ground and individuals owning a burial right that is similar to an easement. At Oakland Cemetery, a family that hadn’t visited its ancestral plot for years was surprised to find a tree growing there and asked the cemetery authorities to cut it down. “That was painful,” Kuharic confesses. “But they were within their rights.”

The historic Cedar Hill Cemetery has been revered by the people of Hartford, Connecticut, since its founding in 1864. At 270 acres, with specimen trees and water features, the grounds are used for typical things such as bicycling and jogging as well as for a summer jazz series, scavenger hunts, “notable tours,” and séances. With corporate backing, the \$8-per-person concerts can serve as fundraisers for the Cedar Hill Cemetery Foundation. The foundation hopes to line up a new sponsor for 2011 to schedule another jazz series as well as a movie festival featuring Katharine Hepburn—one of the cemetery’s most prominent “residents.” Cedar Hill is a private graveyard. It has two financial entities, one to handle burials and the other to raise philanthropic funds for maintaining the cemetery’s art, architecture, and horticulture and for presenting public programs. But it has many characteristics similar to public cemetery parks. Most striking is its commitment to maintaining and increasing public visitation and use.

Lincoln’s Wyuka Cemetery has also tried to bring in more visitors—in addition to the 2,000 people who come to watch Shakespeare—starting with the creation of the Wyuka Historical Foundation. The foundation’s executive director, Lori Merliss, has begun to build relationships with local schools, encouraging visits by elementary students for a day of outdoor education. “The cemetery can teach about local history as well as biology,” Merliss explains, “and our wetlands are alive with wildlife.” Wyuka is even planning a playground, one that will be “naturalistic and contemplative” to fit in with the surrounding landscape, she notes.

Some of Wyuka’s wildlife, in fact, may be attracted by its cultural offerings. Bob Hall, the Shakespearean director, reports of a duck that kept waddling into the courtyard of the carriage house to watch the actors rehearse. The frequent visitor was even given a name: Cordelia, after King Lear’s youngest daughter. Finally came opening night and the big question: Would she be intimidated by the crowd? Not one bit. Hall found Cordelia waiting at the front of the line.



The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.

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