Hallowed Ground, Place, and Culture

The Cemetery and the Creation of Place

DeMond Shondell Miller
Jason David Rivera
Rowan University

Throughout most recorded history, human societies have used various types of cemeteries for burial purposes; this theme points to humanity's need to construct a meaning behind death and reflect life into the places where the dead are interred. Whether the bodies of the deceased are placed in the ground, within elaborate tombs, or simply in the presence of ancient or contemporary monuments, their location holds symbolic meaning as well as practical historical meaning for the surrounding living community. This article explores cemetery culture and architecture and their contribution to the social construction of the cemetery landscape. After exploring the historical development of the modern cemetery, the cemeteries of New Orleans, Louisiana, are used as a case study to illustrate how the cemetery, as a place, is influenced by culture and has cultural significance.

Keywords: place theory; cemeteries; New Orleans; monumental architecture; Hurricane Katrina

Social Concept of the Cemetery

According to Basso (1996, p. 7), before the advent of literacy, places served societies as symbols of the distant past and, thus, are indispensable for the remembrance of social

events; moreover, people are unconsciously linked to places with which they continually come in contact simply because each person creates his or her own relationship with a certain geographic location (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 11). Sometimes people in the surrounding city put sentimental feelings on the place because it is associated with historical, religious, or mythical events that contribute to the culture of its community. Although certain places acquire their significance with the passage of time or through specific events, "place making" occurs unconsciously, on a daily basis, and from moment to moment within each person's life because of the interactions each person has in various geographic locations (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 11). Thomashow (1995, p. 9) attests that people visit places to gain an awareness of the connections that other people have made, which awakens memories in consciousness of present and past situations. These principles of place are illustrated profoundly in the creation of graveyards and cemeteries, which allow the living to revisit their memories of the deceased in a specific environment.

Cemeteries, or burial grounds, have always been a part of the human environment. The undisputed truth of humanity's mortality forces human societies to learn how to cope with death and its role in life. Cemeteries, and the customs of burial, change from culture to culture depending on each culture's religious values and customs. The burial customs and placement of an individual are viewed as the deceased's point of connection between this world and the next and for this reason, many cultures place an emphasis on the specific place of burials (Alekshin, 1983, p. 137).

The burial sites of the past are completely different compared to modern cemeteries. Although some element of organization with regard to the arrangement of the deceased has always existed, the reasoning behind the arrangement has changed, especially within Western culture. In the ancient past, the positioning and arrangement of the physical body of the dead and his or her belongings were indicative of that individual's social position and his or her social worth within a community (Alekshin, 1983, p. 138).

In addition to the physical arrangement of the deceased, the physical location of a body with respect to placement in monuments or religiously significant natural or man-made structures is important when considering a community's emphasis on the place where the dead are buried. During all periods of time, monuments have been used throughout the world to indicate the religious or social significance of a particular place. In the ancient world, monuments dedicated to the remembrance of the deceased were thought to be constructed by an ancient race, the residence of dangerous and supernatural powers, or the place a great king or hero died. For these reasons, the monument evokes memories of the distant past, whether mythical or true (Williams, 1998, p. 91). Moreover, such structures or places of reverence become significant in a community's society because the place offers moral and cultural significance to the whole community. As Basso (1996) attests,

> For every developed place . . . [the] world manifests itself as a possible state of affairs, and whenever these constructions are accepted by other people as credible and convincing— . . . or plausible and provocative, or arresting and intriguing— . . . they enrich the common stock on which everyone can draw to muse on the past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them anew. (p. 6)

According to William Chapman (as quoted in Basso, 1996), "The past is at its best when it takes us to places that counsel and instruct, that show us who we are by showing us where we have been, that remind us of our connections to what happened here" (p. 4). In the case of man-made mounds created during the British Neolithic era, mound location and size were an expression of social and territorial cohesion as an identifiable "central place" within the local polity (Kinnes, 1975, p. 27). Regardless of

the condition in which a person is buried (full burial or cremation), it seems that because of the central significance of monuments and the people they represent, a strong emphasis is placed on the person's identity and the actual burial site, reflecting an extension of the living community. The reuse of ancient monuments and sites suggests a belief that the identities of the dead are retained when their physical lives cease. With time, a monument may become synonymous with several identities. If more than one person is buried in a specific monument, it becomes the embodiment of an idealized community of ancestors linked to the distant past and the supernatural (Williams, 1998, p. 96), exemplifying the societal experiences that occurred in that specific geographic location. The use and reuse of a specific monument aids in the construction and instruction of the contemporary community surrounding it (Basso, 1996, p. 4).

Although today large monument construction is limited to an extremely minute number of individuals, people create their own small monuments for their burial sites in the form of tombstones. Tombstones function similarly to large monuments; however, they are not usually of central significance to the community as a whole but to the deceased's family unit. Regardless of the impact the monument has on the community as a whole, it continues to evoke emotions for the family of the original owner.

Changing Views of Hallowed Ground

As human civilization expanded across the globe, the perception of cemeteries changed. Basso (1996, p. 4) explained that this shift in perception reflects a shift in awareness that changed the character of a place through the thoughts associated with it. This shift allowed the physical place to take on a new and foreign look in relation to the old. Moreover, this change in perception can be attributed to a change in views held by the larger country or community as a whole (Basso, 1996, p. 4).

In the latter part of the 18th century, graveyard arrangement and meaning changed significantly because of the apparent health risks posed by burial near the surface. Furthermore, changes in beliefs toward the exaltation of the dead as well as emphasis on the memory of the deceased also changed to reflect characteristics about the deceased (Mytum, 1989, pp. 294-295). With the Industrial Revolution and the inception of Victorian and democratic values of property, the cemetery began to reflect the deceased's material success in life. This is evident in the creation of private cemetery plots, often containing some variety of architectural structures, in the midst of other public plots. In this way, within the United States, the cemetery became a microcosm of the real world, which bound a particular generation of men to the architectural and perhaps even spatial preferences and prejudices that accompanied them throughout life (Francaviglia, 1971, p. 501).

With a new emphasis on memory, cemetery design soon began to incorporate nature in the beautification of the final resting place to strengthen the "interaction" between the dead and the living. To make the cemetery a place where the living would feel comfortable, arrangement was created by emulating the plans of a city:

> The grid pattern, prototype for almost all city, town, and farm layouts . . . became the dominant layout in cemeteries until very recent times, the "streets" becoming walkways, the "blocks" containing several grave plots. (Francaviglia, 1971, p. 505)

This system of placement allows the living to "roam" throughout a cemetery without the need to constantly walk over and among the actual graves.

The use of a burial ground as a significant religious site or place of ancestral veneration declined in the west shortly after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity. As the

state religion, the Roman Catholic church, the strongest political unit at that time, began eradicating pagan and other non-Christian religious traditions. The church effectively created a monopoly on where people could be buried and still be accepted into heaven. Burial of individuals took place in the cemetery of the local parish that was physically, ideologically, and socially linked to the deceased and his or her grieving relatives (Mytum, 1989, p. 286). The physical structure of a church, in relation to the dead that were buried nearby, took the place of ancient monuments and mythology, and it superimposed the moral concepts of the contemporary society on the place where the deceased was buried. However, the church's enforcement of Christian burial rites led to the overpopulation of graveyards. According to Harold Mytum (1989), the overuse of burial grounds caused health concerns, which in turn spurred changes in the way people viewed the burial sites:

> Burial grounds were used and reused, burials cutting through others in various states of decomposition. In earlier periods the size of a cemetery was sufficient to allow a pattern of rotation which ensured full decay of at least all but the bones before any subsequent burial. But with the rapidly increased rate of deposition, the need for over-burial came round too quickly for this. Bodies had to be interred over others, and in some graveyards this led to burial ever nearer the surface with consequent health risks. (p. 286)

Also, during the later 18th and early 19th centuries, the Christian religious symbols usually so prevalent in cemeteries began to fall out of popularity. Despite this fallout, in certain geographical regions, the emphasis on their meaning is still an important aspect of a cemetery in modern times. At an opening address of the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston, Joseph Story reflected society's open-minded view of religious symbolism within the presence of the deceased:

> He declared that contemporary Christian attitudes and practices concerning burial were, unfortunately, not the equal of those of earlier heathen cultures, and to prove his point he briefly surveyed the burial customs of the Egyptians, Greeks, Hebrews, and others. "Our cemeteries," he concluded, "rightly selected, and properly managed, may be made sub-servient to some of the highest purposes of religion and human duty. They may preach lessons, to which none may refuse to listen, and which all that live must hear." (French, 1979, p. 46)

The Mount Auburn Cemetery exemplifies design used to create a place where the living can interact with the dead in a serene environment. The incorporation of nature serves specific functions, which include:

> In the new type of cemetery the plenitude and beauties of nature combined with art would convert the graveyard from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succor and instruction. The world of nature would inculcate primarily the lessons of natural theology. The fullness of nature in the rural cemetery would enable people to see death in perspective so that they might realize that "in the mighty system of the universe, not a single step of the destroyer, Time, is made subservient to some ulterior purpose of reproduction, and the circle of creation and destruction is eternal." ("Mount Auburn," as cited in French, 1979, pp. 46-47)

The Mount Auburn Cemetery was the first of its kind to use nature while at the same time increasing its availability to people in all social classes (French, 1979, p. 43). Also, the

attractive features of the cemetery that once inspired feelings of terror and seclusion soon became tourist destinations, illustrated in the specific cases of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston and Père la Chaise in Paris.

Although cemeteries similar to Mount Auburn in respect to the social acceptance of all classes exist and continue to exist, some cemeteries serve as distinct indicators of the deceased population's social class (Francaviglia, 1971, p. 506). In the case of Père la Chaise, the first European garden cemetery, only the social elites of France, including renowned statespeople and artisans, were allowed to be buried there (French, 1979, pp. 53-54):

> 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 mausoleum, the poor man's by a small head or footstone, or perhaps by the absence of a stone. (Kephart, as cited in Francaviglia, 1971, p. 506)

This trend in the physical appearance of certain sections of a particular cemetery became apparent during the Victorian period when social distinctions became less evident as a result of the expansion seen during the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the middle class (Francaviglia, 1971, p. 506).

New Orleans: A Case Study of Cemeteries

Similar to those of earlier cultures, the cemeteries built into the New Orleans landscape are places of reverence and communion.[1] New Orleans's cemeteries are unique as a result of the relationship that the local population has with the location of the deceased as well as with the deceased themselves. The layout of these cemeteries, with their streets and side alleyways, mirrors the surrounding environment of the city. The cemeteries themselves are an extension of the city and are referred to by residents as the "cities of the dead" (Florence, 1997, p. 9). An example of cemetery planning can be observed in the layout of the St. Louis III Cemetery, where each of the streets has a name and each burial plot has a number—similar to a house address (see Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, because of the common usage of monumental architecture that towers over the landscape, the architecture indicating the resting place of the deceased resembles the architecture of a modern city with skyscrapers (see Figures 3 and 4).

The use of monuments and aboveground tombs stems from the problems of burial that have occurred since the city's founding. Because of the level of the water table in the area, underground burials were quickly seen as undesirable because seasonal flooding forced sealed coffins up through the soft earth. Besides the unwholesome sight of corpses floating down the street in the middle of a heavy rainstorm, health issues arose from the decomposition of the deceased, and their ability to be exposed to the public spurred the usage of aboveground burials in New Orleans. The aboveground tombs further highlight the connection between the living and the dead in that the tombs have been referred to as "homes of the dead" (Florence, 1997, p. 14; see Figure 5).

In addition to similarities in architecture, the cemeteries of New Orleans mirror the social structure of the surrounding environment. There are tombs that are extremely
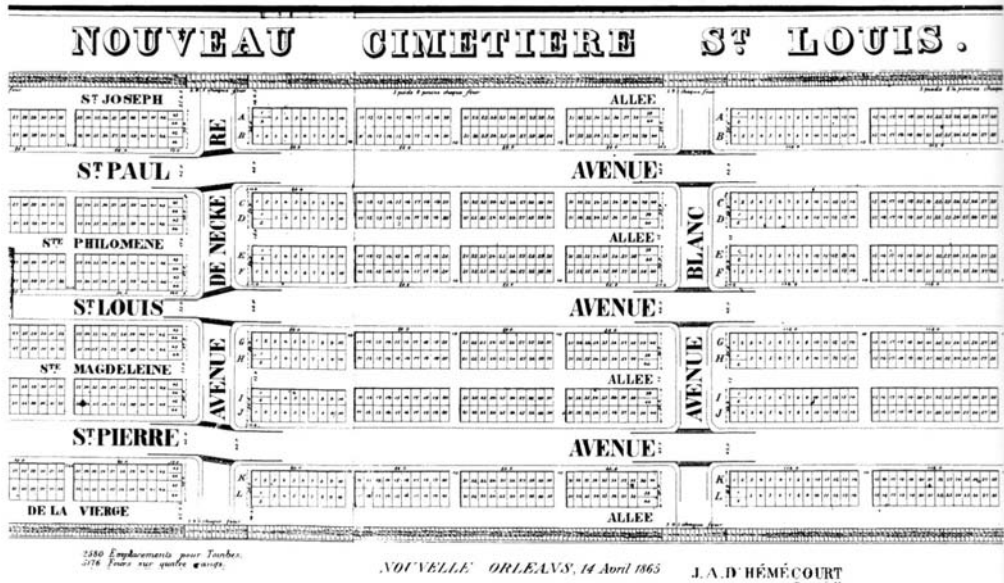
Figure 1. This is a plan of St. Louis III Cemetery illustrating the use of street names to make the layout of the cemetery appear more similar to a city plan. (Image courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection)

Figure 2. An example of tombs used by people of the middle classes that have been arranged along a street similar to homes on an avenue. (Photo by DeMond Miller, 2005)

Figure 3. These are examples of tombs that resemble homes but were built for their monumental structure and appearance. (Photo by DeMond Miller, 2005)

lavish and large, built by the upper echelons of society, as well as those that are little more than paupers' graves (see Figures 6 and 7 for comparison between the upper and middle classes). An interesting fact to note is that racial segregation of the cemeteries did not occur until the latter part of the 19th century. Prior to the end of the 19th century, it was common to see Whites buried close to Blacks and in some cases, in the same tomb as one another (Florence, 1997, p. 20). This is extremely significant because slavery was still a common practice, which would prompt one to assume that segregation within a cemetery would have been more prevalent then as opposed to after slavery was abolished. In some instances, tombs that were built and owned by slaves were more lavish in specific cemeteries, such as those in the Girod Street Cemetery (Huber, McDowell, & Christovich, 1974, p. 19). Although segregation eventually did occur on the basis of race, more prominent in older cemeteries was segregation on the basis of religion. In some of the older cemeteries, such as the St. Louis I Cemetery, specific sections are divided between Protestants and Catholics, pointing to some tension between the two groups at one time or another (Huber et al., 1974, p. 7). Moreover, like cities throughout the country that have predominate sections of certain ethnic groups, there are several cemeteries in New Orleans that were built specifically to cater to a certain ethnical portion of the population. This, however, does not mean that others were not buried there.

Although New Orleans is known for its use of aboveground tombs as well as the extravagance of monumental architecture, the relationship that the living have with the cemeteries makes its culture unique. The cemeteries create a sense of place that facilitates the communion of the living and the dead through religious and cultural activities. Although the population of New Orleans beautifies its cemeteries and shows reverence in different ways, the religious observance of All Saints' Day on November 1 illustrates the way in which the living attempt to interact with the past. For several

Figure 4. This is an example of monumental tomb architecture demonstrating the incorporation of regular buildings into the scenery of the dead, which makes the landscape appear more for the living. (Photo by DeMond Miller, 2005)

weeks before the actual event, tombs are repaired and painted, and vases are placed near the tombs by the families of the deceased. Then, on November 1, from morning until evening, people visit the cemeteries, placing chrysanthemums and candles on the tombs (Huber et al., 1974, p. 17; see Figure 8). This event allows people to visit the

Figure 5. Another example of a tomb made to resemble a residential home. (Photo by DeMond Miller, 2005)

Figure 6. An example of a tomb built by a more affluent patron of a cemetery. (Photo by DeMond Miller, 2005)

Figure 7. This is an example of graves used by the lower classes of New Orleans' society. (©Laura A. McElroy, All Rights Reserved)

grave sites of loved ones or to simply visit the elaborate tombs of individuals, families, and societies. Since the 1980s, cemeteries have been host to secular social events as well. The nonprofit organization Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. has a variety of outreach programs that teach the public about the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of the historic cemeteries.

Furthermore, Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. organizes a variety of secular events, such as the cemetery gala dance All Saints Soiree (a benefit for cemetery preservation), local grave tours, and school essay contests to raise awareness of and funds dedicated to the preservation of the cities of the dead. All Saints Day activities are the most widely attended activities and include private remembrances, gala events, and festivals complete with food and singing:

> The attraction this weekend for the crowds hanging out in Lafayette Cemetery in the Garden District was a festival complete with jambalaya, jazz and a gospel choir. The festival backers hope to raise cemetery awareness, to save historic tombs from destruction by vandals and the ravages of time.
>
> People here still throng cemeteries on All Saints Day. Burial places are blooming with white and yellow chrysanthemums. Family tombs have been scrubbed and whitewashed as in the past. . . . A century ago on All Saints Day, crowds poured into cemeteries from dawn to dusk. Families gathered there for picnics, entertained friends and told stories about the dead. In those days here and elsewhere, people visited cemeteries the year round. (Marcus, 1988, paras. 4-5)

Moreover, other events having nothing to do with the veneration of the dead take place within cemeteries in New Orleans. Activities for strengthening the relationship between the living and the cemetery as a socially significant place include weekly family

Figure 8. All Saint's Day festival at night. (©Laura A. McElroy, All Rights Reserved)

strolls, evening jogs, and the Run Through History 5K Run—an annual event in which participants can run or walk through the Metairie Cemetery in one of two races, a 1-miler or a 5K race (see Figure 9).

To many residents, the cemetery is used as a community focal point. Dating back to a time when many fraternal and benevolent societies built large tombs in the cemeteries, the "second line" tradition became cemented in the traditional landscape of New Orleans:

> The tradition of the second line is rooted in the city's history of fraternal groups and burial societies, who often competed with each other to see which group could send off a member in the greatest style. When the church service was over, and the procession moved from church to cemetery, a band played sad hymns and dirges. (Schjonberg, 2005, para. 5)

Figure 9. Runners pass through a cemetery, exposing themselves to the reverent and instructing environment. (©Laura A. McElroy, All Rights Reserved)

However, after the graveside services were over, the sad music would be followed by joyous music and dancing would fill the streets. Today the service is traditionally known as a "Jazz Funeral."

More recent, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, St. Louis Cemetery I served as a symbol of cultural rebirth as hundreds of people gathered in the cemetery and emerged with a triumphal sprit as the second line funeral tradition sparked a rejuvenation of the city. This first of such cultural traditions since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina offered hope and inspired the city:

> On November 16, New Orleans smiled. And shouted. And danced. More than 200 people formed up into the first big band "second line" since Hurricane Katrina, and moved out of St. Louis Cemetery #1 on Basin and St. Louis. . . . It was billed as the "the cultural reopening of New Orleans."
>
> This revival of the second line was "a sign of hope for us here in the city," said Bishop Charles Jenkins of Louisiana at the cemetery before the festivities began. . . . Jenkins said, the second line is both "a diversion, a passing thing" but also an "outward and visible sign" that New Orleans can return to life. (Schjonberg, 2005, paras. 1-4)

Furthermore, Schjonberg (2005) continued by highlighting the significance of the cemetery as a space from which the living draw inspiration:

> After leaving the cemetery, the music became more joyful. The band played high-spirited tunes. The second line, those people who joined in behind the band and the family, danced with wild abandon, usually sporting umbrellas and handkerchiefs, both of which were in evidence during this second line.

Figure 10. Photograph courtesy of The Episcopal News Service. (Photo by the Reverend Mary Frances Schjonberg)

This second line began after a short service inside the walls of the cemetery, the oldest still extant in New Orleans and founded by a royal Spanish land grant in 1789. There, the Very Rev. David Allard duPlantier, dean of Christ Church Cathedral in New Orleans, conducted a service that echoed the committal service in the Book of Common Prayer [see Figure 10].

At the end of the service Jenkins gave his blessing and duPlantier asperged the second liners along with a large gathering of photographers, videographers and reporters. As he flung holy water on them, jazz musician Irvin Mayfield began a slow version of "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" [see Figure 11].

Figure 11. Photograph courtesy of The Episcopal News Service. (Photo by the Reverend Mary Frances Schjonberg)

Figure 12. Photograph courtesy of The Episcopal News Service. (Photo by the Reverend Mary Frances Schjonberg)

Figure 13. The Metairie Cemetery. Photograph courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection.

> The small gathering inside the cemetery's walls moved out to the street and joined the band made up of a number of New Orleans musicians. Oswald Jones led the second line with duPlantier and Mayfield right behind him. Jenkins was in the crowd as well. As the band played and people danced along, duPlantier continued to asperge the crowd in what he had said at the cemetery was a "symbolic cleansing of our city" and a reminder of our baptisms when we rise to new life [see Figure 12]. (Schjonberg, 2005, paras. 6-9)

Like monuments of the ancient past, the tombs and cemeteries of New Orleans connect residents to the place in which they live and offer inspiration for the future. Whether by visiting the mass graves made in the midst of epidemics or the graves of distinguished individuals, the cemetery allows the observer to experience the place, the space, and the culture.

Conclusion

Throughout time, cemeteries have served as hallowed ground, a place where the terrain of the living meets with the terrain of the dead (see Figure 13). Humans have created the special nature and culture that influences the cemeteries and the traditions that take place within their confines. Burial sites are centrally significant to a community's

sense of well being and indirectly, to the preservation of history by teaching the living about the past. A cemetery is a living place that reflects the conditions and social realities of the surrounding community both past and present. The cemeteries of New Orleans remain significant symbols of not only the city but also the city's recovery from past disasters. By studying any given cemetery in New Orleans, one is able to observe the social emphasis New Orleans' society places on the "places of the dead" in the minds of the living.

Note

1. The cemeteries of New Orleans include St. Louis I, II, & III; St. Patrick I, II, & III; St. Roch I & II; Lafayette I & II; St. Joseph I & II; St. John; Metairie; Cypress Grove; Greenwood; Odd Fellows Rest; St. Mary-Carrollton; Carrollton; St. Bartholomew; St. Mary; Masonic; Holt; St. Vincent de Paul I, II, & III; Valence Street; St. Vincent-Soniat Street I & II; Gates of Prayer I & II; Hebrew Rest; Dispersed of Judah; Ahavas Sholem; Anshe Sfard; Jewish Burial Rites; Charity Hospital; Mt. Olivet; Beth Israel; and Chivra Thilim.

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DeMond Shondell Miller is an associate professor of sociology and director of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Institute for Research and Community Service at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. He has worked as an evaluator for alcohol and tobacco social norms projects and as principal investigator to facilitate research projects involving environmental issues and community satisfaction. His primary areas of specialization are environmental sociology, disaster studies, the study of the social construction of place, community development, and social impact assessment.

Jason David Rivera is a research associate in the Liberal Arts and Sciences Institute for Research and Community Service at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. He has recently worked on research dealing with public policy in reference to disaster mitigation and relief, social justice in the face of disasters, and the reconfiguration of landscapes and their affect on local and global politics, as well as research pertaining to improving university and community relations.