

What Does the Cemetery of the Future Look Like?

by Daniel M. Isard MSFS

AFTER ALMOST 40 YEARS IN THIS PROFESSION, I never questioned the concept of the “size of a cemetery.” I have seen them 40 acres, 200 acres, and even family and church cemeteries that are only 1 or 2 acres. But those were cemeteries initiated 50 years to 200 years ago. As we exist today in 2022, how big will the cemetery of the future be?

Cemeteries in the Past

The creation of a cemetery was in many ways a requirement for a “town” to become a “city.” As the town wished to be elevated in sovereignty to a city, it needed to have a cemetery. Usually, that cemetery was built at the edge of the town. People would walk, ride their horses and buggies, and (for the past five generations) drive their cars to the edge of town for burial and memorial needs.

Ironically, in city planning, trash and refuse dumps were also built at the edge of town. As cities grew beyond their original boundaries, trash sites could be reclaimed and built upon; but except for

rare situations, burial sites had to be built around.

There have always been two barriers to entry when creating a new cemetery. The first being the investment in the actual development and the second is the neighbors’ approval. Therefore, there have been very few new cemeteries created over the past few decades throughout the entire country.

To keep the costs of development low, those who wanted to own a cemetery had to move to the edges of a town because the cost of land is a huge factor in the cost of development.

In the business plans I have done in

my life, many new cemeteries don’t see a positive cash flow for a decade or more. That negative cash flow has to be added to the cost of development. By going out to the farthest reaches of the city, the issue of neighbors’ objections becomes minimized as well.

In some states, there are restrictions placed on the minimum size of land if you want to create a new cemetery. The most common requirement I have seen is 40 acres. However, that requirement was probably created long before our cremation rate was above 50%!

Where Does Responsibility Lie?

It used to be that church or city cemeteries were exempted from needing to be governed by the rules that apply for non-church/city cemeteries for perpetual or endowment care (PC). It was most likely thought—at the time of the creation of these exemptions—that the church would always be there to care for the cemetery.

Again, this has proven to be anachronistic logic. Churches move. Churches can go broke. Church cemeteries can be abandoned. The most famous, in my opinion, is the bankruptcy of the Garden Grove Community Church founded by Robert Shuller, also known as the Crystal Cathedral. Shuller had created the magnificent boutique cemetery; and through the bankruptcy, it has changed from a Protestant church to a Catholic church cemetery. This offering is on less than 2 acres; but with above ground and niche offerings, it has increased its capacity to more than 12,000 interments and inurnments!

What About Success?

Can a 1.5-acre cemetery be profitable? Well, it depends on what you are charging for the interment rights. According to



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the *Orange County Register*, “Spots at the cemetery start at \$7,000 and can go up to \$2 million depending on the type of burial one desires. Most people purchase spots within the \$7,000 and \$50,000 range.” I haven’t done the business plan on this, but I would suspect at these figures, the boutique facility can be successful.

One property I did have the chance to work on was the Valley Of The Temples on the island of Oahu in Kaneohe, Hawaii. While the park itself is large (almost 240 acres), the most dense inurnment location is its Byodo-In Temple (Japanese for “Temple of Equality”). The Byodo-In Temple is a replica of the almost 1,000-year-old temple in Japan.

A Buddhist temple was recreated on this site and used to allow for worship, wedding ceremonies, and has niche spaces as well as a scattering garden. It has also been used



Valley Of The Temples, Oahu, Hawaii

for stage locations for movies and television shows. But, alas, the inurnment options at this part of the cemetery are totally sold out.

Do the Math

This opens the question, “Can you turn a home or church building into a free-standing cemetery?” This is a question for the

future. Do the math. A house sits on a quarter acre of land, which is about 10,000 sq. ft. If you were to pre-construct vaults in this space of 30 sq. ft. per burial interment, this would house only about 330 spaces.

If you created a double deep burial plan, that would take you up to 660 spaces approximately. However, the future of interment is predicated upon cremation. If

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Byodo-In Temple, Oahu, Hawaii

we did nothing more than bury urns, single level, in the same 10,000 sq. ft., we could not have 10,000 interments in that same space.

However, just as with burial we can go deep and/or go high. In the same space it would take for a double-depth burial, we can place about 40,000 urns by going 4 deep. Or we can go high. In 10-ft.-high columbaria, with walkways between columbaria, we can place more than 50,000 urns. Cremation gives us options that take a quarter of an acre and turn it from 300 to 50,000 interment rights.

I have seen cemeteries take small building additions and turn them into glass

front niche rooms. The allure of the glass front niche allows for higher revenue per interment. Glass front niches are often priced at 4 to 10 times ground niches and frequently 100% to 300% more than granite front niches. That 10,000 sq. ft. area can go from generating a modest \$1,000 per grave or \$300,000 of revenue to as much as \$4,000 per glass front niche; therefore, \$200,000,000 in revenue!

Size of the cemetery of the future is no longer an issue. Suddenly, this math causes us to think differently about the future of cemeteries. Can a family cemetery be on the corner of the farm or maybe in a corner of the barn or farmhouse? How can a church

turn a portion of its athletic field or parking lot into a perpetual care interment area?

Of course, some cemeteries are for pride and family care. They are not for generation of profit. Regardless of the motivation, the barriers to entry I have seen in the past are lapsing. Our mindset of what a cemetery looks like must be recast as well.

So, can the cemetery of the future be as small as a quarter of an acre? I think so. Smaller than that? Sure!

So long as the sky is the limit, the quantity of urn interments can increase as well. ☑



Dan Isard, MSFS, is founder of The Foresight Companies LLC, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing HR

services and family surveys. He is the author of several books and hundreds of published articles in industry magazines, including "The Director's Finance 201" column. He can be reached at 800.426.0165 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com.



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