The landscape is drenched in memory. Everywhere we turn there are memorials to people and events; informal and formal; grand and humble. Memories are recorded in place names, monuments, trees, and park benches. Entire landscapes are dedicated to the need for remembrance. Landscapes of memory reveal much about the cultures that made them, and their values and beliefs. For landscape architects, a heightened awareness of the role of memory in culture provides a significant opportunity for the creation of meaningful landscapes. As Wasserman suggests, “Landscape architectural training typically includes rigorous studies of site histories as well as the use of spatial organisation and materials to transmit meaning. Landscape architects are thus uniquely poised to influence the design of memorial landscapes. In doing so, they can transform space into a place of significance, a place of storytelling, a place of lessons.” (Wasserman 1998:42)

This article explores landscapes which commemorate the death of ordinary individuals, rather than monumental tributes to heroes or historic events. The expression of the individual in death varies enormously, and reflects cultural beliefs about death. Cemeteries reflect both the time and place of their establishment. Even within Aotearoa New Zealand’s relatively recent history and small area there are significant variations in the way in which individuals are commemorated within cemeteries. The recognition of the individual can vary from an elaborate monument to nothing more than a buried marker and an inscription in a book. There is also a continuum in terms of the apparent corporeality, or physical evidence of the dead on the site. In some cases the individual bodies are clearly expressed, whereas others might seek to expunge all evidence of an actual body. The issue of cremation raises further issues about the expression of the body in death. The disconnection of the memory from the body can be taken even further where the memorials to the dead become disconnected from the site of the grave. Roadside crosses and living memorials are two such examples.

As a reflection of time and place, cemeteries are revealing cultural landscapes. While each culture takes its own practices for granted, those of other times and other places can appear abhorrent. For example, the practice of storing bodies en masse in a charnel house, seems alien to a culture where the individual remains important after death, and grave-visiting is part of common practice. In the older cemeteries in New Zealand the large monuments reflect preferences for dramatic and strongly symbolic commemoration. By contrast, military cemeteries downplay the importance of the individual, reflecting a culture of regimentation and uniformity. Individuality is even further suppressed at the experimental Avonhead Park cemetery in Christchurch. In a bold move, the Waimairi District Council established a cemetery with no headstones,

Left: Naseby Cemetery, Otago
and a flat, verdant surface. The cemetery has a very different appearance and atmosphere to the more traditional cemeteries which have a sense of being 'populated' with headstones and memorials. In order to locate a specific grave it is necessary to refer to the grid diagram and use a metal detector to find the buried plaque. Another diagram signals a remote site for floral tributes, yet many visitors still seek out the actual site of burial.

While Avonhead Park cemetery seeks to avoid any apparent evidence of buried remains, other cemeteries are powerful in their expression of burial. In the MacKenzie Country, a small rural cemetery is a profound expression of a dry, harsh landscape. Individual graves are very much in evidence, almost like miniature versions of ancient funerary barrows. There is a real sense of poignancy in such a setting, where there is no attempt to remove or dress up the very fact that the place is a site for burials. The selection of local material for tombstones, rather than generic granite or marble, reinforces the cemetery's powerful expression of place.

At the other extreme to the very apparent corporeality of the MacKenzie country cemetery is the issue of cremation. New Zealand has a high cremation rate by international standards. Only 20% of Americans are cremated, but figures here can be as high as 50%. Last year cremations outnumbered burials in Invercargill. (Southland Times, 16 July 1999) While cremation is often cited as a means of preserving the land for the living, there is a problem with adequate recognition of the dead. The volume of cremated remains is small, compared to that of full body burials. The treatment of ashes can vary from scattering on a relevant site – in the mountains or on the sea for example – to internment in a cemetery-type setting. This latter option is problematic in terms of the absolute size of the memorial. Those who have been cremated can be seen to be less significant than those who have a traditional grave. Finding a means of addressing this imbalance is a challenge for designers. A columbarium designed for St Mary’s Church in Halswell seeks to provide a feeling of presence and substance for cremated remains, by aggregating them in a monumental tomb-like structure.

While cremation might be seen as the extreme in terms of minimising the presence of an individual after death, there are other examples where the memorial becomes completely dislocated from the site of the grave. Roadside crosses are one of the most recent, and most debated, additions to the landscape of memory. The origins of the practice of erecting crosses in the landscape in memory of road accident victims have been traced to a road safety campaign in Tauranga in 1989, and it appears to have developed into a phenomenon almost unique to New Zealand. While there are some examples in the United States and Australia, New Zealand has adopted the practice more extensively.

The crosses have been controversial. While grieving families may see it as their right to erect a memorial cross on the roadside, for some it is an intrusion in the public landscape. There are also mixed messages about the appropriateness of a cross as a symbol. Crosses are associated with sites of burial, are symbols of the Christian faith, and according to an Anglican minister who was opposed to the crosses, they are “spooky”. From a road safety point of view the crosses are also viewed ambivalently. On one hand, as safety officer for Transit, John Grummit points out, the memorials can exacerbate already dangerous points on the road: “Crosses tend to be on dangerous sites where people should not be stopping vehicles or wandering around. Gardens and other adornments can also interfere with roadside maintenance.” (The Press, 16 April 1998). But on the other hand, crosses can act as warnings to others. Doctors in the Selwyn District in Canterbury erected 35 crosses on roadsides in the region to represent crash victims and remind people to drive safely.

One concern over the roadside crosses is that they are becoming surrogates for graves, heavily adorned, accompanied by gardens, photographs and other mementoes. Transit New Zealand has developed a policy on roadside crosses, including recommended materials, size and siting. The guidelines stipulate that the only inscription on the cross should be the date of the accident. Focusing on pragmatic rather than emotional issues, Transit New Zealand adopts an objective position regarding the landscape of memory; recommending that the memorial is removed “when the purpose of the cross has been” fulfilled.” (State Highway Control Manual 8/98)

Another memorial landscape where the memory is detached from the grave site itself is the Living Memorial Mau Mahara project, developed by Lamb & Hayward Funeral Directors and the Department of Conservation. Mau Mahara means 'remembering you', and although there are no graves on the site, a tree is planted every time a funeral is fulfilled.

Opposite page top left: Cemetery at East Cape.
Top right: Floral tributes linked to grave sites via a diagram, Avonhead Park.
Bottom right: Mau Mahara, the Living Memorial, Christchurch.
Bottom left: Local materials reinforce sense of place.
Lamb & Hayward. The project is located at Otukaikino, a wetland north of Christchurch. In addition to the opportunities for revegetation and ecological enhancement the site is particularly appropriate because of its connection with funeral preparations by Maori. It is a wai tapu site, and tohunga used the materials from the site for embalming. In terms of contemporary ritual on the site, the overall attitude is one of informality. The plantings are not individually ascribed to the departed, and the planting is carried out by DOC, rather than by the bereaved. The one concession to formality is an annual inter-denominational service for families and friends.

The way in which we commemorate the death of individuals is a commentary on culture. Some experiments, such as the absence of markers in the Avonhead Park cemetery, can be too challenging for cultural norms, and indeed a new area of the cemetery has been developed with traditional headstones. Cemeteries are also a profound means for linking culture with place. A cemetery in the dry and lonely landscape of the MacKenzie country or clinging to the wild shore of East Cape (figure II), are emphatic place markers. Landscapes of memory are sites where culture intensifies. They are prime opportunities for the creation of meaningful landscapes. While Transit New Zealand’s guidelines for roadside crosses address the pragmatics, designers hold the key to unlocking the cultural and spiritual significance of such sites. The success of the Mau Mahara project indicates the potential for projects which link death with the spirit of the landscape. Memorial landscapes are a means of realising an emerging design imperative: the need for spiritual investment in place.

REFERENCE

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From top to bottom:
- Diagram to show the location of grave sites, Avonhead Park Cemetery, Christchurch
- Flowers placed on unmarked grave, Avonhead Park
- Papakura Cemetery with military graves in foreground
- Columbarium, St Mary’s Halswell.
(Design: Jacky Bowring)