

## *Death, memory, text: reading the landscape of remembrance*

KATRINA SIMON

*Katrina Simon gained a Master of  
Landscape Architecture at Lincoln  
University, and may be contacted c/o the  
Department of Landscape Architecture,  
PO Box 84, Lincoln University,  
Canterbury, New Zealand.*

VICTORIAN CEMETERIES ARE LANDSCAPES which can be 'read' both literally and metaphorically. In this paper, one particular Victorian cemetery, the Barbadoes St Cemetery in Christchurch, New Zealand is considered for the different meanings that can be found in its location, layout, vegetation, tombstones and written inscriptions. The discussion focuses on how these elements of the cemetery landscape relate to the burial traditions of Western Europe, how they expressed particular concerns about death and remembrance in the Victorian era, and how they can be 'read' in the present, in order to explore the relationship between interpretation and transformation in this highly symbolic landscape.

VICTORIAN CEMETERIES ARE DISTINCTIVE and complex landscapes, which can be 'read' in both a literal and metaphorical way. When visiting a cemetery, whether to see a particular grave or out of more casual interest, it is almost impossible not to be drawn from one grave to another, reading the names, the melancholy family sagas, and wondering at the stories that were told by the half-missing inscriptions left on fallen pieces of stone. It is a landscape that exists to be read. Yet this reading involves more than the words on the tombstones. John Berger has observed how 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or believe' (1972, p.8). Before a single inscription has been encountered, the landscape will have been recognised, from images, stories and films, as a cemetery, a place of burial.

The landscape of the cemetery is thus concerned with one of the most fundamental experiences of human existence—death and living with the knowledge that we will die. James Corner (1991, p.128) has described the relationship between the significant circumstances of human existence and the landscapes in which they occur:

Landscapes and buildings have traditionally formed the setting for these situations, framing and symbolising their content . . . Inevitably there is a correspondence between the setting and the situation, a dialogue that not only pertains to the moment, but also relates to an ongoing conversation between past and future.

### KEY WORDS

*Cemeteries  
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Therefore the landscape may reflect as well as shape human experience, in all of its diversity and ambiguity, and what we know or believe about death will shape the landscape of death, as well as how we read or experience it. In 'reading' the landscape, all of the fragments, symbols and weatherings which become embedded in a site can potentially be experienced as meaningful, and reinterpreted as part of the ongoing creating, or 'writing' of the landscape.

In this paper, the meanings that can be found within the Victorian cemetery are considered, with a focus on the Barbadoes St Cemetery, which was the first cemetery included in the 1850 city plan of the colonial settlement of Christchurch, New Zealand. The different elements of the cemetery landscape—the location, layout, vegetation, tombstones and written

inscriptions—are considered for how they relate to the burial traditions of Western Europe, how they were uniquely combined in the Victorian era to express particular concerns about death and remembrance, and how they can be ‘read’ in the present day.

### *Location and layout*

The location and spatial organisation of Victorian cemeteries bear some interesting similarities to the cemeteries of Ancient Rome. Roman cemeteries were placed outside the city, as the Ancients were anxious to keep separate the worlds of the living and the dead. Just as the living resided in the city, the dead ‘resided’ in tombs, which marked the precise location of a particular person’s burial, and frequently depicted their physical appearance in a relief or sculpture, thus preserving their individuality and personality (Aries 1981). These tombs were visited, and festivals and family occasions were celebrated there. Funerary gardens were also associated with many Roman cemeteries (Curl 1993).

Over the centuries, changes in attitudes towards death, including the spread of the Christian belief in resurrection, and the changing importance of the individual in society brought about different landscapes of death in Western Europe. From the fifth century, burial grounds were gradually established within the city walls (Curl 1993). At about the same time, through until they gradually reappeared from the late eleventh century, inscriptions and distinct graves became virtually unknown. Instead, the dead were buried in consecrated ground in and around churches, in graves which were anonymous and undated. As long as the body was buried on consecrated ground, it was thought to be in the care of the Church until the Day of Judgment, hence little consideration was given to the location of individual graves, which might in any case only be temporary. These burial grounds were often grotesquely crowded, with no specific marker showing where a particular person’s remains were. When more room was required, bones might be dug up, and placed in a charnel house, or common grave.

With the presence of the graveyards in the middle of cities, the living coexisted with the dead in a manner quite unlike today. The cemetery as a specific type of landscape did not reappear in Europe until toward the end of the eighteenth century, when the superstitions and ‘unhealthy practices’ of the earlier times began to be viewed with increasing repulsion and disdain. The interring of bodies, one on top of the other, in crowded churchyards was looked upon as ignominious, undignified and unsanitary (Curl 1993).

A significant innovation at the beginning of the nineteenth century was that the burial concession became a form of property, which could be owned in perpetuity (Aries 1974). The first of the European cemeteries planned in such a fashion was the great Parisian landscape cemetery of Père-Lachaise. Opened in 1804, Père-Lachaise was to have an enormous influence on the subsequent development of cemeteries in Western Europe, America and the other colonies, including New Zealand. Burial inside the city was regarded with increasing fear and revulsion, and the large new landscape cemeteries were built on the outskirts of towns. The vision of an arcadian landscape, with tombs set amidst verdant planting, ‘offered the solution to the urgent problems of chaos, unsavouriness and horror associated with the disposal of the dead in the overcrowded graveyards at that time’ (Curl 1993, p.163).

The cult of death was highly significant and ritualised in the nineteenth century, and the cemetery was the primary site for memorialising the dead, both in physical monumental fashion and through personal visits to the graves of loved ones. For bereaved family and friends, and for the general public, cemetery visiting became customary. As the burial plot belonged in perpetuity to a particular person, people could 'visit the tomb of a dear one as one would go to a relative's home, or into one's own home, full of memories' (Aries 1974, p.72). Yet, as towns grew and spread out to surround the new cemeteries, the desire to visit the dead again conflicted with the fear and distaste prompted by proximity to the cemetery. The layout and appearance of cemeteries were thus a physical manifestation of the changing attitudes to death, and how the living could relate to the dead.

When the English settlement of Christchurch began in the nineteenth century, the colonists brought with them ideas which were typical of the society that they left—ideas of respect for the remains of the dead, the importance of the family and the individual, and the cemetery as a 'home' for the dead. Just as the colony was to be a slice of England transported to a new country, the cemetery was created with a familiar vocabulary of tombstones, enclosures and cemetery trees; a landscape of remembrance, not just of the dead, but of the Mother Country left behind. The Barbadoes St Cemetery was located at the perimeter of the central city, in the northeast corner of a wide reserve which separated the urban and rural settlement areas. Thus it began outside the new city as such, but was rapidly surrounded by the expanding settlement. The cemetery's location epitomised the conflict between the importance of the cemetery as an accessible place of public and private remembrance, and the growing concerns for health and sanitation.

The division of the cemetery into denominational areas further imprinted the site with the social and religious aspirations of the city's founders. The oldest section of the cemetery was part of the 22 acres set aside for an Anglican burial ground. The religious superiority intended for the Anglican community in this officially Anglican settlement is evident in the large, high site, located with a view over the adjacent tree-lined river. By contrast, Catholics and Non-conformists were allotted an acre each on the opposite side of Barbadoes St.

The rectilinear arrangement of the graves themselves echoes the homogenous grid of the city plan. The individual graves were clearly distinct, many plots being surrounded by wrought iron railings like tiny fenced properties, family tombs frequently being defined by a large concrete cover. The wealth and relative social status of the deceased citizens were reflected in the size and cost of the tombs. There were also many half and quarter plots in the cemetery, as approximately half of those buried in the Barbadoes St Cemetery were children.

The size of the graves is thus a vivid illustration of the high infant mortality rates of Victorian times. Epidemics of typhoid, cholera and diphtheria were frequent and particularly dangerous for children. They helped fuel public concerns that a cemetery in the city was a threat to the quality of water and air. The swampiness of the cemetery site exacerbated these fears, and public pressure, combined with the concerns of health professionals, eventually brought about the closure of the cemetery in 1885, after which time only immediate family of those already buried could be interred there.

The original layout of the graves can still be seen in some parts of the cemetery, particularly the Anglican portion. In other parts, so many graves have disappeared that the remaining graves appear to be quite informally arranged under the many mature trees. Instead of movement being restricted to paths between the graves as it was for the Victorians, the visitor can now move freely in many places, over large open areas of grass. The original structure of the cemetery becomes less and less visible as erosion, subsidence and vandalism destroy the graves in a random and arbitrary fashion.

The scattering of graves throughout the site has created lawn mowing and maintenance problems for the Christchurch City Council, who inherited responsibility for the cemetery in the 1940s. As the fabric of the cemetery has gradually decayed, the council has put forward plans to remove some of the remaining scattered graves, and create larger open areas for 'passive recreation'. While the removal of tombstones and grave enclosures has been supported by some local residents as a way of creating more 'useful space', it has been strongly resisted by descendants and historical societies, who insist on the importance of retaining the original layout and relationship of tombstone to the place of burial. It is still important to many people that this landscape, while park-like, is primarily perceived and experienced as a cemetery.

### ***Tombstones***

The use of stones to mark a grave site goes back beyond Roman times, and is a part of the burial landscapes of many cultures. Wishing to remember the individual at the site of burial, the Romans used this medium to preserve the information concerning their identity. Stone and rock are symbols of permanence and endurance in proverbs and myths. In the context of a place dedicated to the remembrance of the dead, this symbol of perpetuity can allude to the literal endurance of identity and memory, the eternity of an afterlife, as well as the 'rock' or foundation of the Christian faith (Meller 1985).

Tombstones have traditionally been shaped and carved in a variety of motifs, which are part of a conventional 'language' of tombstone symbolism. These symbols came from a wide range of sources, including ancient Egyptian, Roman and Celtic civilisations, and were redefined as Christian motifs.<sup>1</sup> The Victorians used a great variety of symbols, such as anchors to represent hope, angels as the agent of God or the guardian of the dead, draped urns symbolising death, broken columns representing mortality, and crosses as a symbol of Christianity. While many symbols had several possible traditional 'readings', they could also be adapted for particular situations; for example, one anchor in the Barbadoes St Cemetery commemorates the death of a sea captain whose ship was wrecked on the coast of the province of Southland.

Even if the present-day visitor goes to the cemetery armed with a list of the meanings of symbolic motifs, they will be unversed in the subtleties and vagaries of the language, as much symbolic and religious understanding has been lost. The cemetery is still a tantalising reminder of such knowledge, especially when compared to the bland and uniform tombstones of municipal cemeteries in use today. The cemetery, with its weathered and decayed appearance, is like a symbol of a vanished, more spiritual age. This nostalgic impression is particularly sensitive to vandalism, which appears as deliberate desecration of the irreplaceable reminders of the past.

### *Vegetation*

Like the language of tombstones, the traditional trees and plants of the European cemetery are part of a rich symbolic language. The symbolism of trees and plants is a complex blend of physical characteristics which lend them to poetic, but often ambiguous, interpretation. To Victorians, conifers signified perpetual life, being evergreen, as well as death, since they stop growing as soon as they are cut down. The willow was a symbol for resurrection and new life, as it shoots away from a cut stump, yet it was also a symbol of death as it sheds its fruit before it is set, and thus murders its young.

The species traditionally connected with European burial included yew, holly, cyprus, laurel, willow and oak, and the settlers brought cuttings and seeds of these plants, as well as the traditions, using them to replace the indigenous swamp vegetation. Although there were symbolic origins for the use of particular combinations of trees and plants, it also had aesthetic consequences; the distinctive visual character of cemeteries is in part due to these characteristic ways of associating species.

Once the cemetery had been virtually closed there were not enough burials to generate sufficient income for the maintenance of the trees and graves. With the vegetation growing rapidly out of control, there were many complaints about the overgrown state of the graves and grounds generally. The unchecked growth also caused damage to the grave enclosures and tombstones, particularly ivy, which covered inscriptions and toppled stones. Instead of an arcadian landscape or garden, it became a wilderness, which was thought to encourage lewd and dangerous behaviour. Although periodic attempts were made to clear the overgrowth, its reappearance meant that the cemetery alternated between disorder and control. The ambiguous public yet private nature of the cemetery added to this situation, as dead shrubs in a private grave could give the cemetery an air of neglect and decay, yet at the same time be deeply significant to the descendants of the person or family buried there.

Since the mid 1980s the Christchurch City Council has followed a programme of replanting in the cemetery, with a combination of traditional cemetery trees, ornamental exotic species and indigenous tree species. The reintroduction of the latter species can be interpreted as an expression of a general consciousness of the culture and landscape which existed before European settlement.

### *Engraved inscriptions*

While the engraved inscriptions in the cemetery also follow specific traditions and conventions, they are a unique record of those buried in a particular place. As mentioned above, the Ancient Roman practice of identifying the place of burial disappeared during the early Middle Ages. Towards the end of the eleventh century, graves again began to be marked by epitaphs which 'manifest quite spontaneously a new need to assert one's identity in death' (Aries 1981, p.216). Over time, in addition to the name and status of the dead, these epitaphs began to refer to the date of death, the date of birth (by the fifteenth century), and (from the fifteenth century) the family of the deceased. Although gradual, the cumulative effects of these changes had a marked effect on the legibility of the landscape of death:

In a few centuries the Western world moved from anonymous silence to a biographical rhetoric . . . from a discreet statement of identity to an expression of familial solidarity. (Aries 1981, p.216)

Because prayers of the living were seen as a vital necessity to enable the soul of the deceased to enter heaven, the inscriptions often also included a prayer to God for the departed soul, and often a request for anyone passing by and reading the epitaph to offer their prayers. As the importance of religion began to decline in the eighteenth century, the emphasis on soliciting prayers also declined gradually, and the concern to keep the dead alive in memory took on a greater importance. Whereas previously the living had assisted and honoured the dead by praying for their immortal souls, they now assisted the dead by the cultivation of their immortal memory, at their permanent place of rest.

With this changed view of the significance of the tomb, visiting cemeteries became a personal duty for the relatives of the bereaved, as well as a public sign of devotion and a morally improving experience. Visiting the cemetery and reading the individual inscriptions thus fulfilled the meaning of the text embedded in the cemetery, which marks a grave as 'sacred to the memory' of a particular person. Commenting on the 'essentially participatory nature of all memorials', Young (1993, p.41) observes:

The site alone cannot remember . . . it is the projections of memory by visitors into a space that make it a memorial.

Visitors to the Barbadoes St Cemetery now, over a century after its closure, can still read the names of the dead at their place of burial, thereby participating in the cemetery as a memorial. Some of these visitors can read their own family history in the inscriptions; others can read of settlers whose names have since become embedded in the fabric and history of the city and province.

As the cemetery has aged, this written record has become broken and fragmented. Because the remaining inscriptions were transcribed in 1987 and made available in public libraries, it is possible to read this information in printed, bound form, away from the cemetery. In this context, the 'text' takes on an air of completeness and separateness, and seems to belong entirely to the past. Yet the same inscriptions read in the cemetery itself—however old, decayed and scarcely readable they have become—belong also to the present. The act of reading the inscriptions enables a personal identification with the lives of the dead, as the reader recognises and empathises with the inevitable human experience of loss and grief which they embody. Also bridging the gulf between the past and the present, the inscriptions continue to mark the site as sacred, as the actual place where the rituals of burial and mourning occurred, where the desire for remembrance and the neglect of forgetfulness have over time embedded themselves.

Reading the inscriptions in the landscape involves reading them as *part* of that landscape, with all of its different elements, in its decaying state. The reading of the text can also affect how that landscape is experienced. Reading of nine children from one family who all died in an 11-year period can alter how one experiences the ambience of the cemetery, and the signs of age and time.

### *Reading the landscape of remembrance*

The landscape is itself a text that is open to interpretation and transformation. It is also a highly situated phenomenon in terms of space, time and tradition and exists as both the ground and geography of our heritage and change. (Corner 1991, p.129)

Interpreting a landscape is not a passive or uncomplicated process. The account of each distinct element of the Barbadoes St Cemetery shows how the landscape itself, as well as perceptions, expectations and experience of it, is continually being interpreted and transformed. Moreover, it reveals three different, yet closely interrelated, ways in which the landscape comes into being.

The first way that the cemetery landscape is formed is through the deliberate use of specific symbolic languages or vocabularies, such as the traditional carved motifs of tombstones, the familiar selection of cemetery trees, and the customary and repetitious nature of inscriptions. The immediate recognisability of the cemetery relies on their presence. Yet while these different 'languages' can be interpreted strictly according to convention or tradition, symbols are frequently ambiguous and multi-layered, and may evoke quite unique meanings to an individual or community. As Davies (1988, pp.33-34) notes in his discussion of the evocative symbolism of trees:

Having once served as a focus for attention [symbols] are readily available to serve new, though perhaps derived symbolic purposes as circumstances and imagination change. So the symbolic language . . . is likely to include some ideas of longstanding significance, while also bearing the capacity for new expression to flourish.

The impossibility of fixing the meaning of a symbol adds to its potential for interpretation and transformation. Such uncertainty exists because the absence of a given meaning cannot be proved, and nor can any symbol 'refer to itself and tell us how much it is intended to signify' (Gombrich 1972, p.95).

The landscape also bears the unselfconscious expression of social structures and attitudes. In the Victorian cemetery, the layout and physical demarcation of grave plots express the importance of individuality, property and family ties. As these expressions take physical form, the traces they leave in the landscape may become part of the recognisable and specific symbolic language of that 'setting'.

Finally, in addition to these encodings on the landscape, there is the inherent tendency of the landscape to change—as Corner (1991, p.131) notes, 'we should remember that nature herself always enters into the contract to eventually supersede the encodings of humankind'. Weathering, growth and change over time can alter the look of a landscape, as well as its content; expression or symbolic meaning may be affected by the alteration or disappearance of parts of the landscape. The extent to which change is noticed, permitted or resisted, how change is perceived, is bound up with the meanings it has or gets and may become part of the symbolic language of a setting. The look of age and decay that characterises many Victorian cemeteries, for example, adds a sense of nostalgia to the setting, and increases their power as images of the 'past'. Rather than erasing the text of the cemetery, the presence of decay in a landscape which embodies the human encounter with mortality can enable a further reading. The landscape itself takes part in the dialogue which continues between past and present, and provokes further interpretation and transformations of the site.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the symbolism in tombstones, and in vegetation as outlined in the next section, see Cooper (1978), Hall (1974), Meller (1985) and Walker (1988).

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