

The Cemetery: a highly heterotopian place

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In the UK as elsewhere in Europe, cemeteries are increasingly managed and developed as green open spaces, natural habitats, cultural or historical sites and educational amenities.

English Heritage suggest that 'in the main they are public.... open spaces with great amenity potential and are a diverse historical resource with tremendous educational potential' (SCRC, 2001b: 80). Arnos Vale cemetery in Bristol aims to be a 'place of remembrance, an historic park, and a learning and education resource for the City' (SCRC, 2001b: 65). Carlisle local authority has produced teachers' notes to assist in the 'Citizenship' component of the National Curriculum. Children are encouraged to 'study areas of graves for the Victorian rich and paupers, and compare these with "green" woodland graves and conventional lawn type graves' (SCRC, 2001b: 30). Have these developments radically altered the function of cemeteries? Walters (SCRC, 2001b: 45) is adamant: 'though cemeteries provide positive values such as urban green space, and may be of historical or architectural significance, these benefits are subservient' to the prime purpose of a cemetery which is to 'bury the dead of the locality'. Moreover, its prime significance is 'as a *memento mori*, a reminder that we will die that challenges citizens to consider their true values and motivates them to live fully in the meantime'.

Contemporary cemeteries have adopted various 'useful' applications, but they also remain highly complex and ambiguous spatio-temporal enclosures. Worpole (2003: 56), in his study of cemetery landscapes, wonders whether we have the 'vocabulary for describing what these unsettling landscapes mean culturally'. Are they religious or secular, places of despair or places of hope and reconciliation? Does the reminder of mortality help to moderate the fear of death or highlight it? In a pioneering social anthropological study, Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou (2005) trace contemporary burial culture across six active municipal cemeteries in Greater London, interviewing some 1,500 visitors over an 18 month period. The researchers concentrated on the experience of those who used the cemeteries, primarily the bereaved. They wanted to know why people visited cemeteries, what they did during their visits and what these spaces meant to them. However, in analysing their findings and conclusions, what I find most interesting is the different ways in which the researchers attempt to articulate the

significance of these cemeteries. Their extensive research finds a variety of seemingly paradoxical meanings. For example, the study notes that the cemetery is at the same time both public and secret and also holds both continuity and transience. But in particular, I want to trace how the researchers assume the cemetery is an extraordinary space, but find that the users' practices and rituals are ordinary, mundane and domestic.

The study notes how people who visited cemeteries persistently use the related metaphors of 'home' and 'garden' to describe their experience:

To think about a grave and its cemetery as being like a garden appeared to help many mourners make sense of the incomprehensibility of death and the experience of loss (3).

They found three central themes from their observations, combining the notions of the grave as the deceased home; the cemetery and the grave plot as garden; and the grave as containing the physical presence of the body (21). For example, many respondents seemed to treat the grave as garden and home in the sense that it was important to keep it tidy, neat, clean and well tended. In this argument the authors often rely on some sweeping assumptions about the 'English love of gardens', for example, 'a home with a private garden is an ideal of English life' (82) and also some simplistic oppositions between nature and culture (83). But the study also contrasts these domestic images with the extraordinary conception of death. This comparison does not seem to come directly from the respondents but from the researchers' interpretation of a process of transposition:

The 'ordinariness of planting, tending and ordering the grave allows the extraordinariness of death to be transposed to a more mundane level' (22).

In the cemetery, death becomes 'everyday' and the images of home and garden facilitate this process. The study returns to this argument repeatedly, asserting that death is tamed, managed, resolved, obscured and camouflaged as the 'bereaved attempt to domesticate that reality' and 'ameliorate and mask the stark truth of death's finality' (85). However, in the conclusion, they rather surprisingly acknowledge that this is not a meaning that was grounded through their extensive interviews and observations. The 'central secret of the cemetery' is 'circumvented and generally unspoken by most of our study participants' (214).

Interestingly, the study attempts to articulate these seeming paradoxes of the cemetery with various brief and oblique references to heterotopia. Here the space itself is presented as extraordinary, a 'world set apart' from the everyday, 'another world':

Both cemeteries and gardens are bounded places set apart from the rigid regularity of daily schedules and calendars; they are timeless spaces of generational and accumulated time (6)

The spatio-temporal paradox seems to echo Foucault's concept nicely but there appears to be more explicit, completely unacknowledged, reference to heterotopia in the description of cemeteries and gardens that 'display, contest and invert social relationship; both represent, reinterpret and re-model the relationship of person to nature' (23). Foucault actually uses the terms 'represented, contested and inverted' (1998:178). However, rather than these unacknowledged references, I am more interested in the assertions themselves. The study presents the cemetery as being both exceptional and separated from everyday regularities and at the same time a domestic, or at least ordinary, space. As with the contrast between the stark reality of death and the domestic rituals of tending the grave, this paradox is explained through its ability to both evoke and manage grief. Overall the study concludes that the cemetery is fundamentally incongruous: 'they face the visitor with contradictory meanings and existential ambiguities that alternate between clarification and obfuscation through ritual action' (214-215). In a sense, the researchers seem to want it both ways. On the one hand, the evidence from their respondents suggests a thorough domestication of the cemetery and the grave; on the other hand, with some help from Foucault, they assert that the cemetery is a totally different space. But perhaps they have stumbled upon a key feature of heterotopia. The domestication within contemporary English cemeteries highlights how the space represents or reconfigures what is outside, but simultaneously the space remains utterly disruptive. Why? In part, perhaps, because we cannot know death directly, so we set up metaphors to try and come to terms with it in some way, to make death thinkable. But the potential therapeutic value is never settled. The grave is an inherently incongruous spatio-temporal unit. In some ways, modes of domestication highlight as much as mask this incongruity.

How does this ambiguity emerge? Frances *et al* touch upon some of the spatio-temporal dimensions that are found in cemeteries: 'timeless spaces of generational and accumulated time' (2005: 6). The timeless feature is also reiterated by Worpole who thinks the fascination with the cemetery 'suggests that it represents a corner of the world that seems inviolable and

timeless' (2003: 25). And yet against such notions of timelessness, we should set multiple spatio-temporal disruptions that are to be found in cemeteries and individual graves or markers. I think this is a critical feature of cemeteries that Foucault suggests but does not fully recognise in his lecture to architects. . He argues that heterotopias are linked to temporal discontinuities [*decoupages du temps*] and that they operate most fully when there is an utter break with conventional time, as with the complete rupture of death. But he then goes on to distinguish formally and rather pedantically between two sets of 'heterochronias': those spaces that accumulate time, such as museums and libraries, and those which are temporally fleeting and precarious, such as fairs and festivals. He suggests that experiencing Polynesian life in the 'straw huts of Djerba' combines both forms of heterochronias, but he does not go on to discuss how the modern cemetery itself unites both extremes in an intense manner. One of the many functions of the modern cemetery was to provide an historical record, forming a carefully ordered museum. A deep ambiguity emerges when this accumulation of time is set in exactly the same space as the one that records an 'absolute break with traditional time' (Foucault, 1998: 182).

Hallam and Hockey's (2001; 51) study of memorials and '*memento mori*' continue to explore this theme, suggesting that these objects in fact 'articulate tensions between stasis and change, preservation and decay; between the recognisable and the radically unfamiliar aspects of the self and other....' . Concentrating on the processes and spatialisation of memory, they note that these objects play with notions about 'longevity and transience' and highlight a complex spatio-relational dynamic:

Just as the spatialising of memory and death allows human mortality to be apprehended and given meaning, so the temporal reach of material spaces transcends the here and now, connecting with future lives and deaths (84)

They underline the point that 'while such objects stimulate memories that remain motionless, they simultaneously evoke the passage of time'. Cemeteries are full of graves that possess simultaneously a presence and absence, or as they say, rather mauling TS Eliot, 'past presence and present absence are condensed into the spatially located object' (85). In this sense, a cemetery is a space for emplacing the placeless. Tracing various etymologies throws some light on this fundamental ambiguity. Harrison (2003: 20) notes that the Greek word for 'sign', *sema*, is also the word for grave. The grave pointed to itself, a sense of 'here' that is

only manifest in the sign itself: 'prior to gaining outward reference, its 'here' refers to the place of its disappearance. It is the disappearance of death that 'opens the horizon of reference in the first place'. In contrast, Worpole makes the point that in German the word for monument, *Denkmal*, means 'think-mark' or object that makes you think. (203: 195). It provokes a notion of absence. Hallam and Hockey also refer to Foucault's concept of heterotopia directly. In their interpretation, heterotopias are spaces that are assigned a multiplicity of meaning. For them 'death has the power to create a heterotopia, that is, the layering of meanings at a single material site' (2001: 84).

Contemporary cemeteries adapt and mutate, taking on and developing a variety of new educational, environmental and historical functions and are perhaps at the same time the most 'highly' heterotopian sites in contemporary society. Cemeteries incorporate all the ambiguous spatio-temporal features of gardens; they recall the myths of paradise; they manifest an idealised plan; they mark a final a rite of passage; they form a microcosm; they enclose a rupture; they contain multiple meanings; and they are both utterly mundane and extraordinary. Frances *et al* conclude that:

However public and municipal they may appear, each and every cemetery is the most concentrated repository of mystery and secret that is available to modern, urban, twentieth century people. (2005: 215)

It is worth recalling that with some amusement, Defert describes how at the end of Foucault's lecture on heterotopia, the architect, Robert Auzelle, offered Foucault his history of funerary architecture (Defert, 1997: 276). Auzelle, who appreciated Foucault's lecture, was an advocate of the cemetery park as an integral part of town planning (Rogan, 1983: 259). He saw the cemetery as an important 'green space' and at one time also proposed the creation of a single cemetery for the whole of France, built in an under populated department of the country which would be devoted entirely to the dead (301). Much of the recent debate about the future of cemeteries in Britain has surrounded practical concerns about the lack of burial space and the potential for incorporating new functions. But apart from this pragmatic debate, it should not be forgotten that cemeteries offer a certain imaginative intensity. Faubion contrasts heterotopias to the 'mundane monotony.... of everyday life' and suggests they are 'brighter, darker or more complex' (2008: 32). I do not think this is quite right. They have an ambivalent position that is often part of the mundane and yet they enclose something that is bright, dark and complex. Cemeteries have some resemblance to the free time/space in

Hippodamus' triad of space in ancient Greek cities, which De Cater and Dehaene link to heterotopia. They argue that such sacred or cultural spaces interrupt the continuity of time; break up entrenched binaries such as private/public, ideal/real and nature/culture; provide a creative 'clearing'; and offer a protected space, refuge, haven, or sanctuary (2008: 90).

Such spaces can act as a 'reservoir of imagination' (Foucault, 1998: 185) and, returning to the specific context of Foucault's original lecture, may offer a lesson and opportunity for architects and town planners alike. Much open public space is made up of cemetery land. But as Worpole remarks, although 'high-tech architecture has created many new kinds of buildings and civil engineering wonders', few planners, architects and landscape designers have addressed the question of how to create 'new kinds of cemeteries within the weave of the modern urban fabric' (2003: 31). Worpole finds imaginative responses to death, loss and public memory in examples such as Derek Jarman's garden in Dungeness and adaptations of Japanese garden design that he found at a medieval church at Gamla Uppsala in central Sweden (60-61). He contrasts these spaces with many dull, standardised civic cemeteries that he visited across Europe and North America. Such spaces contest the notion that 'as life becomes more heterodox and aestheticised, death becomes more mundane' (56).

Cemeteries recall the myths of Eden and paradise; manifest an idealised plan; mark a final rite of passage; form a microcosm; enclose an utter rupture in time; offer multiple and contradictory meanings; and enfold both the mundane and the extraordinary. This brief exploration of contemporary cemeteries, within the context of Foucault's concept of heterotopia, highlights their potential as disturbing spaces of, and for, the imagination.

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