Constructing Colma

Ethan Treiman
Yale University

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Here the spirits of ages are singing
In the tall redwoods - swaying and swinging,
In our Memorial Park.
Man’s finest mold - these trees of our County
Now as an emblem - in San Mateo County
In our Memorial Park.
Come to our grove - where God seems nearer
There you may room where life seems dearer
In our Memorial Park.
There life’s cares - sure cannot reach you,
There God’s purpose - cannot but teach you;
Come, yes come, again I beseech you
To OUR MEMORIAL PARK.

“To Our Memorial Park”
Mattrup Jensen, c. 1957
Notice
This paper describes the processes applied to human remains in preparation for burial. It gets kind of gross.

Acknowledgements
For the living!
Introduction

The town of Colma is noted for its individuality of appearance. The well-kept lawns and varied flowers around the cemeteries, the mausoleums with their architecture that suggests fairy tale castles, the general quiet of the whole area --- all contribute to an atmosphere which is unique.1

This paragraph appears in the condensed autobiography of Mattrup Jensen, the first mayor of Colma, California. Since his writing in 1957, the spirit of Jensen’s idyllic cemetery town remains intact — despite the constant traffic on the major thoroughfare, El Camino Real, running through its center. I entered Colma via El Camino Real one February day, having driven about nine miles south from San Francisco earlier that morning. Shortly before entering Colma proper, we passed the only big-box stores that cater to the city’s few living residents. Soon we came to an overpass at F Street and El Camino, embossed with concentric rounded rectangles. This relief evoked a sunset; passing underneath, I realized it more aptly represented a gateway (Image 1).2

The scene ballooned out in front of us. Sloping, grass-covered fields dominated the landscape on either side of the wide road. The El Camino Real continued resolutely, interrupted only once or twice by stoplights. Few cars turned into one of the many drives that perforated the road’s shoulder; these drives helpfully partitioned the eleven cemetery lots along the main road. We could see low-rise administrative buildings and columbaria deep within the shallow hills.


2 Image of the Overpass at El Camino Real and F Street, Google Earth, shorturl.at/cqKQ0
The town of Colma is indeed quiet (Image 2). Its official slogan, “It’s great to be alive in Colma!” reflects the unusual proportion of dead residents to living ones: 1000 to 1. After all, it’s the nation’s only official necropolis, with 17 cemeteries covering 75% of its surface. Colma’s history of burials predates the town’s official incorporation in 1924; as early as the 1880s, Jewish and Catholic leaders had dedicated plots of Colma land to serve as burial grounds for their communities’ dead. Cemetery industry executives, led by Mattrup Jensen and Colma’s first chief of police Joe Cavalli, saw the “writing on the wall” when San Francisco deemed its land too precious for use for burial, and permanently prohibited in-city interment in 1890. The town’s occupants feared their neighboring towns might legislate Colma out of existence, too, so the city incorporated as Lawndale just a few years later. When the metropolis to the north mandated the disinterment of most of its cemeteries’ corpses in 1937, Lawndale was well-positioned to receive these bodies. (The town changed its name to Colma shortly after, as another California town had already incorporated as Lawndale.)

The town of Colma bears a strong resemblance to a modern American cemetery in its plan and its public image. As we traversed Colma, I noticed four cemetery-like characteristics: the incorporation of gateways, artificial and natural, and gateway iconography; visual buffers to mediate the visitor’s experience of the landscape; the erasure of visual hindrances such as signs and foliage; and the obfuscation of death in favor of life, parks, and recreation. The incorporation of these characteristics, conscious or not, reflects an ideology of experiential design that emerged over 200 hundred years of cemetery evolution, also known as the American Cemetery Movement. The term ‘American Cemetery

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3 Image Positioned at the Entrance of Colma, Google Earth, shorturl.at/cqKQ
Movement’ isn’t as broadly used as the Rural Cemetery Movement, but it helpfully frames the American cemetery as a project in motion and a collective undertaking. The movement spans four epochs of cemetery development. David Charles Sloane, in *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History*, identified these epochs by significant transformations in cemetery form and societal perception.

The first epoch began in the early 1800s when a distinctly American form of secular burial grounds emerged across the northeastern colonies. These communally managed plots were in the middle of town, separate from the meetinghouse (church) — the Ancient Burial Ground, once a feature of the New Haven Green, typifies this form. The rural cemetery emerged next, though the intervening development of New Haven’s Grove Street Cemetery paved the way for many of its fundamental characteristics. The societal rupture caused by the Civil War produced the lawn park cemetery in the late 19th century. We live, supposedly, in the last of these four eras, the era of the memorial park — think flat grave markers and rolling hills of green, felt-like grass (and the occasional tree).9

The memorial park might be the end of the movement, but it’s not the end of the story. In this paper, I argue that Colma, though unique, fits neatly as the fifth chapter of the American Cemetery Movement — an example of the current and future ‘city cemetery’ — since it incorporates many of the characteristics that define American cemeteries, albeit at a large scale. For evidence, I’ll trace the emergence of these socio-spatial characteristics through the four different epochs via the examination of case study cemeteries. Later, I will use maps of Colma to identify these salient features within its landscape. Finally, I will illuminate the familiar societal forces that constructed Colma as a receptacle for the Peninsula’s dead.

The concept of an “American” cemetery movement is predicated on the exclusion of other burial practices and their practitioners. Most mainstream cemeteries featured in this essay populate history books due partly to their size, notable interments, and significant monetary investment — characteristics often privileged to the dominant group of the era (white Christians). Cemetery developers often excluded black and immigrant populations from burial in significant cemeteries. Ultimately, my narrow focus on identifying the urban features of Colma that derive from mainstream American cemetery developments will insufficiently illuminate the variety of other burial practices.

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The American Cemetery Movement

Chapter 1: Isolating Death
(17th century - 1830)

Early New England colonists buried their dead in one of four locales: frontier graves, potter’s fields, churchyards, and family farm graveyards.\(^1\) Frontier graves — solitary, usually anonymous burials performed in haste by the deceased’s traveling companion — were common resting places for the frontier’s earliest colonists. Potter’s fields predated the Europeans’ arrival in North America; communities worldwide had long designated empty tracts of outlying land for the burial of travelers, strangers, and immigrants. Such sites exist today: New York’s Hart Island is a notable example of an American potter’s field. The confluence of bad roads and the long distances between colonial towns encouraged burial of the deceased on the family farm. Family farm plots became increasingly communal burial sites as homesteads grew into small settlements, a development perceived by some as a sign of increasing collectivism and domestication.\(^1\) Meanwhile, churchyard burial, a European practice, remained popular in many colonial towns.

Puritans avoided churchyard burials as part of their broader divorce from British traditions. Puritanism concentrated focus on the individual and their struggle for salvation. Death, rather than community, was front of mind — and preparation for death, the “supreme Eschatological event,” was the source of conversion and repentance.\(^1\) They disavowed the “medieval ritualism of death,” which involved collective ceremony undertaken by an established church community.\(^1\) Accordingly, a Puritan funeral was unceremonious, starting at home with the reading of an elegy and ending in a graveyard burial shortly before dark. Puritans buried their dead on the outskirts of town, enforcing a separation between the living and the dead as not to intermingle the struggle of the living with the dead’s eternal sleep.\(^1\) Further, such an estrangement emphasized their dissimilarity with the British, as Puritans did not consider burial in consecrated grounds necessary for a soul to reach heaven.\(^1\)

Despite the Puritan sentiment, much of nascent New England conducted burial in the town church or under its yard, and the practice eventually inspired a public-health centered discourse of cemetery placement that thrived in America through the 1900s. (These colonists clung to their European roots; some even planned to make the return journey, though memories of the Great Migration dissipated over the first generations.) For them, in burial, as in life, real estate was key — one’s gravesite’s

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\(^{10}\) Sloane, 5-30
\(^{11}\) Sloane, 15
proximity to the church reflected one’s status while living. Sloane writes that “parishioners hoped for a comfortable closeness to heaven and a sentimental attachment to their church community.”\(^\text{17}\)

New England colonists grew skeptical of churchyard burial by the mid 18th century, fearing that churchyards and church vaults, which often looked dank and smelled vile, emitted toxic miasmas (gaseous, disease-causing vapors) that endangered public health.\(^\text{18}\) This about-face marks the first appearance of miasmatic theory in the colonies. (In Europe, the idea had already produced interventions such as the Catacombs of Paris.) Over time, colonial churchyard burial grounds, frontier graves, and expanding family farm plots, by and large, gave way to communally managed graveyards in the middle of town.

The middle of town had a vital role in colonial society. New Englanders vacated their homes from the town center, designating that space for communal functions like church, governance, jail, and burial; visiting the graves at the town center would forcibly remind a towns-person of their ancestors lying in wait for Resurrection. The ritual of collective remembrance inspired unification, serving as “[an important means] by which townsmen publicly reaffirmed their commonality in the face of ever-present threats of disharmony and disunion.”\(^\text{19}\) On the other hand, societal disunion instigated by religious pluralism often produced multiple graveyards. Thus, locating the graveyard in the town center interwove norms of societal behavior with explicit moral codes of life and death, endowing the site with didactic capabilities. (Interesting to note, the expansion of colonial towns placed bodies on the fringes at the risk of disinterment; burial in the town center offered relief from this threat.)

The appearance of nondenominational public cemeteries heralded the separation between church and burial. Robin S. Lacy, examining burial in colonial North America, noted that the increasing “secularization of the colonial burial landscape” led those who wished to emphasize a religious identity to turn towards monuments and tombstone carvings.\(^\text{20}\) The emergent iconography of the mid-18th century provided just the vehicle for religious expression. For example, the death’s head (skull) and skeleton symbols reminded the living of the inevitability of death; Puritans leveraged these symbols to edify New Englanders who might have been ‘spoiled’ by rising life expectancies. Iconography that explicitly evoked death encouraged passersby to “live piously in the hopes of salvation.”\(^\text{21}\) Morbid epitaphs that warned of the perils of hell aimed to influence the behavior of the living rather than inspire remembrance of the dead. Over time, these representations gave way to melodramatic symbols, like weeping angels, weeping willows, and carvings of children in eternal sleep.

As a first case study, I use the Ancient Burial Ground in New Haven, a prototype of early 19th century nondenominational, centrally located graveyards. The Ancient Burial Ground, known in its heyday as the New Haven Burying Ground, sat on the New Haven Green before the architect Ithiel Town built

\[^{17}\] Sloane, 20
\[^{18}\] Sloane, 43
\[^{19}\] Brooke, 464
\[^{21}\] Sloane, 22
the Center Church over a small portion of it in 1812. Today, the graveyard resides in the church’s famous basement crypt, somewhat intact.

President Stiles’ 1775 map of the Green provides a rare opportunity to examine the burial ground within its original urban context. First, the burial ground dominates a surprisingly large portion of the northern quadrant of the Green. The yard lies just south of the town jail, across the road from the first Yale college buildings. The burial ground is also, almost literally, in the residents' front yards (Image 3). The second image of the paved-over crypt gives a sense of the density of the gravesite; one notes the starkness of the rows of nearly identical tombstones (Image 4). Image 5 features the soul-effigy, a winged-head, which rode a wave of optimism about death to prominence in the 1740s. In contrast to its dour cousins, the soul-effigy symbolized the hope of salvation. It’s not clear when the town excavated the rest of its graves, but we know that weather events like Hurricane Sandy have unrooted trees to reveal withered human remains under the grass.

23 New Haven Green as Shown in President Stiles’ Map of New Haven in 1775. https://findit.library.yale.edu/?f%5Bdigital_collection_sim%5D%5B%5D=Manuscripts+and+Archives+Digital+Library&per_page=100&q=%22New+Haven+Green%22&search_field=all_fields&utf8=%E2%9C%93. Manuscripts and Archives Digital Library.
26 Sloane, 22
Graveyards like the New Haven Burying Ground fell out of favor with New Englanders by the early 19th century. Congestion and pollution had plagued colonial settlements since the American Revolution, after which many towns grew rapidly. Colonists saw burial grounds as both perpetrators and victims of this plight: that they were sprawling, unseemly, and offensive to residents of New England towns only amplified the sense of loss at the degradation of these grounds. One alderman in 1823 lamented that the graveyard should bring tears of affection, asking, “are our graveyards in the city fit places for feelings like these?” Further, the proximity of burial grounds to the city had itself become a source of concern. Rising worry about burial grounds as “contaminating agents” in the early 19th century signaled a resurgence of miasma theory, and the integration of these sites within the town square had decreased the sense of awe one felt when looking upon the dead. In other words, burial grounds had stopped edifying the public. In 1822, the mayor of Boston tried to outlaw in-city burials. He was unsuccessful, but the gesture nevertheless raised the question of whether such graveyards were sanitary.

In the subsequent decades, the crisis of in-city burial grounds reached a boiling point due partly to an outbreak of Yellow Fever that produced an increased demand for burial space. Despite public antipathy towards cemeteries, proponents of cemetery reform faced an uphill battle, for the close marriage of the graveyard and church had become an iconic feature of life in New England. Sloane writes that “only the social dislocation caused by the migration westward from New England, the appearance of

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28 Sloane, 35

new religious ideas, the rise of manufacturing, and other changes rocking the region could have shaken the cultural underpinnings of New England to allow dramatic new burial habits.\textsuperscript{30}

Change arrived in the form of the Grove Street Cemetery, the nation’s first chartered cemetery.\textsuperscript{31} James Hillhouse and 30 New Haven families organized for the development of this cemetery in 1796, which radically recontextualized burial in New England and beyond. Their cemetery had gridded and named boulevards, mimicking familiar urban features (Image 4). Tombstones faced the visitor ambling along its paths like houses along a street. Despite the regularity of its form, the cemetery’s grave markers remained diverse in size and inscription. Towering obelisks signified the resting places of prominent figures, such as Eli Whitney, while others were afforded smaller, roughly hewn stone markers. I came upon many grand monuments ensconced within low perimeter walls during my visit. One such cluster resembled a little neighborhood of graves; its tombstones all bore the same surname, Fitch. The tallest monument memorialized John Fitch, born in 1792 (Image 5).

The Grove Street Cemetery saw some plaudits but ultimately failed to establish a new paradigm in cemetery design. Its critics perceived its methodical organization as too urban; Hillhouse had misguidedly incorporated aspects of city life that he ought to have left at the cemetery gate. However, Hillhouse wisely decided to distance the graveyard from the Town Green; its physical isolation inspired a sentiment appropriate for the

\textsuperscript{30} Sloane, 45

contemplation of death. This redefinition of the cemetery’s spatial relationship with the city endures today. Thus, the isolation of death is the first of the salient characteristics of the American Cemetery Movement.

Chapter 2: Mediating Death (1831 - 1860s)

The next major iteration in cemetery form emerged in the 1830s at the intersection of two evolving cultural phenomena: the ‘softening’ of death and the elevation of domestic horticulture. Though mortality rates for children remained high throughout the 19th century, American society grew less preoccupied with death, and religious and moral appeals on the subject fell somewhat out of fashion. Subtle shifts in language revealed this change. Epitaphs began to read “In memory of” instead of “Here lies,” displacing the object of remembrance from the decaying body to the eternal soul.32 Death took on a more benevolent form; one approached it “like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams.”33 Meanwhile, the practice of gardening had taken on new moral currency, with domestic gardens seen as “cherished cultural [symbols].”34 Immersion in a naturalistic (though not natural) environment inspired tranquility, allowing the urban citizen to transcend the anxieties of daily life. Early 20th century Americans saw their beloved domestic gardens as antithetical to noxious, overcrowded graveyards.

The resultant cemetery type, the rural cemetery, synthesized a newly gentle view of death with copious floral elements and embodied a veritable “garden of graves.”35 These “miniature gardens of Eden” allowed for the peaceful rest of their deceased inhabitants and demonstrated man’s dominance over nature.36 Mount Auburn was the first of these cemeteries, inaugurated in 1831 to the west of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mount Auburn departed from Grove Street’s stark geometry; instead, it sprawled over 175 acres of undeveloped land.37 The earliest visitors to Mount Auburn employed terms like ‘vast,’ ‘picturesque,’ and ‘sublime’ when recounting their experiences. 66 Copycat cemeteries had sprung up across the nation within 20 years of its opening, speaking to its broad success.38

The cemetery at Grove Street’s Achilles’ heel was the semblance of its gridded boulevards to urban streets — naturally, the rural cemetery took a very different approach. Mount Auburn had winding roads that took visitors on extended tours of the grounds, constantly turned them around, and allowed for the pleasure of getting lost in the wilderness. The designers of rural cemeteries planned paths in deliberate contrast with the efficiency of the urban grid.39 The American public also appreciated rural cemeteries for their lush, variegated landscapes and elaborate floral arrangements: lavish plantings and an arboretum’s variety of trees

32 Yalom 42
33 Sloane, 46
34 Sloane, 46
35 Ibid.
36 Yalom, 44

38 Yalom, 46
39 Sloane, 50-58
observed the lawn, and lakes and streams crisscrossed the park-like grounds, furthering their dissimilarity from the urban landscape.

I visited the famous Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn one gray March afternoon. Like Grove Street Cemetery, Green-Wood was built at what was once the fringes of urban development. However, Brooklyn’s rapid expansion over the 20th century consumed the land around Green-Wood, placing the cemetery squarely within the borough’s fabric.

Rural cemetery developers were notoriously picky about siting their cemeteries. Hilly sites made for great candidates, as hills and valleys naturally partitioned the landscape, sowing one’s experience of traversing the cemetery with moments of surprise and delight. My experience at Green-Wood Cemetery confirmed that immediately. Soon after entering, I climbed a hill to find an entire lake body revealed — a very well-kept secret. Mausoleums beyond the water obscured the next portion of the landscape. I’d have to walk a fair distance to see what lay beyond (Images 8 & 9).

I also noticed that sleeping angels and statuettes had overtaken the skull and crossbones as preeminent signifiers of death. These gentler images reflected the widespread belief in the Good Death: the idea that death brings an eternal, blissful sleep.

A glimpse of the park from some elevation revealed the jarring presence of the Brooklyn block I’d just exited; I’d forgotten my proximity to the city in the expanse of the park. From that vantage point, I noticed traces of a latent urbanity within the cemetery itself. Image 10 captures two neighborhoods facing off across the median of 5th avenue: one a collection of tall offices for the living, the other a group of stately mausolea for the dead. I found an analogue between the cemetery and urban civilization in this uncanny juxtaposition. Green-Wood’s founders would not have been pleased.

Eventually, I found the grand gate at the Main Entrance — I realized I’d entered the park from a minor side entrance. I was relieved to see Green-Wood’s famous gate, built by Richard Upjohn and his son from 1861 to 1863 (Image 11). I exited and re-entered a few times to get a sense of the intended experience: the gate physicalized the barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead and, with its grandeur, endowed the latter with conspicuous significance. The portal embodied a contract. It compelled me to behave differently after moving through it. The gateway also reaffirmed the cemetery’s vital function despite its physical isolation. Containment didn’t sideline death; it made it sacred. After all, the designers of rural cemeteries sought to reestablish death’s inviolability for the 19th-century urbanite. Gateways and visual buffers were crucial tools in this endeavor and would remain prevalent for the next hundred years.

The changing terminology of this period reflects the nation’s evolving spiritual beliefs and environmental priorities. The word ‘cemetery’ replaced its antecedents (‘burial ground,’ ‘graveyard’) in the popular vernacular with the development of the rural cemetery; derived from the Greek for “sleeping chamber,” the term reflected Americans’ gentler views of death. The usage of ‘rural’ to describe cemeteries in Boston and New York may seem out of place, but the term refers less to a spatial designation

40 Map of Green-Wood Cemetery, Brochure

A Lake Revealed

Mausoleum Hill

Two Neighborhoods

Main Gate at Green-Wood
than to the qualities of the landscape. Aaron Sachs writes, in a paper on the nineteenth-century landscape tradition analyzing Mount Auburn:

The blending of seeming opposites, the stunningly lovely images of death and decay, the accessibility to all kinds of walkers, the preservation of the past in sacred soil and thickening trees as well as in sturdily elegant human constructions — these were the qualities that made a landscape truly and democratically ‘rural’ in antebellum America.42

As the industrializing nation prioritized large cemeteries over smaller burying grounds, it turned to its rural cemeteries to reconnect with an environmentalist ideal. The inauguration of designated wilderness spaces across the country foreshadowed the rise of public parks, with the integration of nature into city life heralding a “better public sentiment about to dawn.”43

Americans saw in the rural cemetery the promise of an equitable burial, perpetuating a notion of wilderness as the site of an egalitarian ideal. However, managers of rural cemeteries continued to marginalize minority groups; of the roughly 100,000 laid to rest in Mount Auburn, only an estimated 300-500 were black,44 and those bodies were relegated to shabbier portions of the grounds — evidence that segregation persisted even in death. The reality of slavery, which outlasted the fall of the rural cemetery in America, further countered any romantic notions of equality touted by proponents of the rural cemetery. Almost 30 years after the inauguration of Mount Auburn in Boston, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act, allowing for the seizure and capture of black people from free states like Massachusetts.45

Chapter 3: Prettifying Death (1850s - 1910s)

The third chapter in the story of American cemeteries begins with the country feeling, dare I say, pretty good about death. Rural cemeteries embodied the picturesque notion of the Good Death, which characterized death as a peaceful end to a virtuous life. Further, mortality rates had fallen across the nation: healthy Americans in the mid 19th century expected to survive into middle age. The unprecedented brutality of the Civil War shattered that sentiment, creating, in the words of Frederick Law Olmstead, a “republic of suffering.”46 In a book named after that phrase, Drew Gilpin Faust writes that “the war took young, healthy men and

43 Sachs, 213
45 Sachs, 213

rapidly, often instantly, destroyed them with disease or injury.”

The nation felt fatalities broadly, though unequally: in the South, mortality exceeded any country’s losses in the first World War. Faust estimates 50,000 non-fighting citizens died as civilian casualties. Death touched every household, a known neighbor to all Southerners and many in the Union. Its pervasiveness became “the most widely shared of the war's experiences.”

Burial remained front of mind for the war’s dying soldiers, who often articulated requests for burial with their last breaths. Of primary concern for them was the need to be “buried deep,” out of the reach of birds of prey and enemy soldiers. These men died far from home, sometimes lying dead on the battlefield for days before a ceasefire. The terrible consequences of the Civil War threatened Americans’ faith in the Good Death; how could families reconcile that hope with the arrival of their loved one’s decayed corpse in a faultily refrigerated box?

The use of embalming techniques solved some of the cognitive dissonance felt by the nation’s mourning families. Embalming is “the process whereby preservatives and disinfectants are injected into the arteries as a substitute for blood.” Europeans had practiced embalming since the 19th century; American scientists embalmed cadavers for medical dissection and study. Otherwise, embalming was reserved for transporting deceased, high-ranking officials. Widespread embalming began partway through the Civil War, enabling the transportation and preservation of the war’s dead and renewing America’s belief in the Good Death.

The societal consequences of embalming were manifold. First, embalming necessitated a professional presence in death management, opening the door for the emergence of the funeral director as the manager of all post-life concerns. Most Americans had died at home through the 1800s; their families conducted body preparation and viewing in their parlors. By the end of the century, families in crowded towns who lacked sufficient space for these rituals requested that the undertaker assume full responsibility. The displacement of mourning rituals from the home led to their formalization; the newly prevalent custom of wearing black to show grief resulted from this standardization process.

By the 20th century, the funeral director had taken on every aspect of body preparation, presentation, and burial. American families had exported even death from their homes — nowadays, it’s common for an American to die in the hospital under a doctor’s supervision.

Few archetypes must have garnered America’s wrath more than that of the 20th-century funeral director. In a best-selling expose on the American funeral director, Jessica Mitford demonstrated how this actor’s control over the burial process produced an extortive environment. Funeral directors profited off vulnerable mourners, most of whom had never facilitated the burial of a loved one. They had research-backed methods to sell customers caskets above their desired price points; consumers, on the other hand, had little choice when faced “with the necessity of

47 Faust, xii
48 Ibid.
49 Faust, xi
50 Faust, 63
51 Yalom, 50
52 Sloan, 118-120
buying a product of which [they are] totally ignorant.”53 Further, the consumer hesitates to risk embarrassing the deceased by opting for frugality. Expectedly, the cost of the funeral ballooned; Mitford calculated that, in her time, a funeral was the third largest of the American family’s expenses, after a house and car.54

Embalmimg and the funeral director share a common purpose at this juncture in cemetery history: prettifying death. The funeral director mediated the experience of grief for a population that had just undergone a decade of violent trauma. Accordingly, euphemisms abounded in his vocabulary; the corpse became ‘the deceased,’ burial lots: ‘residences.’ Embalming — itself is a euphemism for the processes a corpse might undergo to regain its old likeness — concealed any evidence of death by creating the simulacrum of a sleeping figure. The widespread desire to suppress death, coupled with the increasing secularity of society and its burgeoning distaste for the aesthetics of the rural cemetery, would be enough to unseat the rural cemetery as the de facto paradigm for American cemeteries.

The science-led abatement of illnesses in urban areas increased the secularization of society. Perhaps surprisingly, this secularization begot a new discomfort with death; religion had contextualized death for the early American — in a sense, familiarized them with it. With its decline as a framework for understanding death, a mystified nation tried its hardest to avoid it (especially, once again, after the war). In what Sloane calls a “retreat from sentimentality,” they distanced themselves from death, abandoning many of the ornaments that had embellished mourning rituals and cemetery landscapes.

By the late 19th-century, the very features of rural cemeteries that delighted their initial boosters had become nuisances to their detractors. Critics of Green-Wood and Mount Auburn complained of the crowdedness and artifice of these cemeteries. Decorative flower beds ‘cluttered’ the rural scene, threatening the careful balance of man and nature. Critics argued that rural cemeteries replicated the chaos plaguing their rapidly expanding cities and their beleaguered inhabitants; the City Beautiful movement, taking hold at that time, leveled similar critiques against disorder in American towns and encouraged efficiently mapped neighborhoods, urban parks, hierarchy, and order. The movement fought to contain the general “peril” posed by crime, economic changes, and technical advances.55

Olmstead, a City Beautiful acolyte, helped devise a new cemetery form in the late 19th century: the lawn park cemetery. In it, wilderness gave way to gardened beauty. These cemeteries were flatter: sparse arrays of smaller monuments dotted open grassy fields, creating an atmosphere more contemplative than theatrical. The increased professional presence in death management translated to a more formalist cemetery; cemetery owners developed rules about what foliage went where, revived the practice of sectarian burial, and banished ‘overlarge’ monuments to specific sections of the park.56 All in all, these new cemeteries

54 Mitford, 38
55 Sloane, 113
relegated evidence of death to the background; Sloane writes, “entering and enjoying a place of death and memory now held less attraction in a society bent on avoiding death.”

The Olmsteadian paradigm became law for cemetery development over the next century, and nearly every cemetery built since 1920 followed the principles he and his contemporaries laid down. The quartermaster general of the U.S. Army solicited input from Olmstead on the design of newly apportioned national cemeteries; Olmstead replied,

The main object [of our cemeteries] should be to establish permanent dignity and tranquillity [of the dead]...

Looking forward several generations, the greater part of all that is artificial at present in the cemeteries must be expected to have either wholly disappeared or to have become inconspicuous and unimportant in the general landscape.

This prioritization of natural elements in the planning process remained with Olmstead throughout his pioneering of the American public park.

One of the most famous cemeteries in Colma, Cypress Lawn, embodies many qualities particular to lawn parks, though it’s old enough to provide a historical record of the shifting memorialization trends throughout the past century. Cypress Lawn was founded in 1892 by Hamden Holmes Noble and a “group of civic-minded men” in response to the abject state of San Francisco’s cemeteries. Noble took inspiration from the rural and lawn park cemeteries on the East Coast, building his new cemetery (of 150 acres) to look like “a beautiful and serene garden.”

Cypress Lawn is also well known for the arboretum on its grounds, explaining why the cemetery has many more trees than one might typically find.

I had the chance to explore Cypress Lawn during my trip to Colma. After driving down from San Francisco, I entered Cypress Lawn via El Camino Real. Behind us, a large arrangement of flowers embossed the words “Cypress Lawn” onto the hillside in a giant font (Image 12). We immediately came across an imposing stone archway that also bore the cemetery’s name and year of incorporation (Image 13). The archway was wide enough for us to drive through. In fact, we were able to embark on a complete tour of the grounds without first leaving our car. Thus, the inclusion of main boulevards and thoroughfares emphasized accessibility in lawn park cemeteries; as we experienced, Cypress Lawn’s design prioritized automotive circulation over walkability within cemetery grounds. At roundabouts and forks in the road, the cemetery’s wide, paved roads consumed quite a lot of space; I tried to imagine how many graves in a denser rural cemetery would be sacrificed for this purpose (Images 14 & 15).

As I’d seen in other cemeteries, its sections had letters for names; signposts occasionally pointed us to different addresses within the cemetery. Some mausoleums had steps that went right up to the road and were so large that I had the impression of driving up to an ornate little mansion (Image 16). I think those entombed towards the beginning of the cemetery’s existence were

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57 Sloane, 43
60 Ibid.
Image 12
Drive Up & “Cypress Lawn” Flowerbed

Image 13
Gateway at Cypress Lawn

Image 14
Circular Road

Image 15
Fork at Section D
so notable that, on average, the monuments in Cypress Lawn are uncharacteristically big. We never lost sight of tombstones, but the copious trees had the effect of homogenizing the view such that evidence of death wasn’t foreground. In any case, the logo — a grouping of trees and the words “Celebrating Life!” — on the cemetery’s brochure told us how to approach death within the park.

Chapter 4: Sequestering Death
(1910s - Present)

The latest innovations of the American Cemetery Movement produced the memorial park cemetery, which brought Olmstead’s aesthetic principles to their conclusions. Olmstead had written, “…all that is artificial at present in the cemeteries must be expected to have … wholly disappeared;” the developers of the memorial park, led by Dr. Hubert Easton, literally flattened all traces of human presence into the ground. In the prototypical memorial park cemetery, Forest Lawn Memorial Park, developed by Eaton in 1906, a visitor needed to look beneath his feet to find any evidence of death. Instead of monuments, flat memorial placards stood as “silent reminders of the shortness of life.” These identical markers anonymized their residents. Further, the memorial park looked as much like a public park as its designers could manage without prohibiting burials. This vision accorded well with public sentiment about death; Forest Lawn became the model for American cemeteries within ten years of its establishment.

Eaton advocated for the prioritization of life over the remembrance of death — even euphemistic memorial markers (bearing words like ‘sleep’ and ‘peace’) ceased to proliferate in his cemetery. In his builder’s address, Eaton claimed, “I therefore know the cemeteries of today are wrong because they depict an end, not a beginning.” Eaton went on to say, “I shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different, as unlike other cemeteries as

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61 Sloane, 160

sunshine is unlike darkness, as Eternal Life is unlike Death.” A devout Christian, Eaton saw the spirit of Christ’s salvation — the promise of eternal life — in his park’s flat memorial placards, which offered “exemption from oblivion” through memorialization.63

Memorial parks exacerbated the segregation of burial, by and large excluding African Americans from their grounds. These cemeteries offered a community limited to white bodies; further, many of these cemeteries had racial-exclusion clauses in their founding deeds, precluding the possibility of desegregation. Evangelist cemetery developers like Eaton perceived homogeneity as crucial — and segregation as necessary — to convey moral values like patriotism, family, and Christian faith.

Eaton and his contemporaries transformed the cemetery into a standard commercial business; Forest Lawn made unprecedented overtures to the public, with experiences at its visitor’s entrance designed to entice funeral guests into buying pre-need lots.64 Additionally, customers purchased the right to burial in a lot and left perpetual management to cemetery staff. Unlike in previous cemetery models, the customer had no say in developing the grounds, the cost of which was offset by pre-need sales.

Even as memorial parks sprung up around the country, the turn of the 20th century saw open hostility directed at the cemeteries within America’s rapidly growing cities. First, many old cemeteries, planned at the perimeter of town or along transit corridors, had been subsumed by the city’s expanding radius — as we saw with Green-Wood in Brooklyn. By the 20th century, these peripheral sites occupied valuable real estate. Thus, neighborhoods were reluctant to incorporate new cemeteries into their fabric, and city planners saw this permanent, obstinate land use as a nuisance.65 Second, cemetery relocation was (and remains) rare. Relocation involves the disinterment of thousands of bodies, an enormous logistical task. Such a project also requires strong political will and economic incentives that rarely materialize. Third, cemeteries grew less and less sacred in the minds of average Americans; lacking an enduring connection between cemeteries and the city — between the living and the dead — cemeteries appeared as amenity landscapes rather than crucial infrastructure. Finally, the general disrepair that many of these once beautiful cemeteries had fallen into had diminished the incentive to preserve cemeteries as recreational sites.

As early as 1826, the matter of cemetery removal entered the courts. In Brick Presbyterian Church v. Mayor of New York, Judge Charles J. Savage issued a notable ruling siding with the defendant. Validating the government’s concern over public health, Savage wrote, “When the lease was made, the premises were beyond the inhabited part of the city… it never entered into the contemplation of either party that the health of the city might require the suspension or abolition of [the] right [to use these lands for burial].”66 Rulings such as these cemented the rights of the dead as subservient to the rights of the living.

The war between cemetery owners and the municipal government played out in a singularly dramatic fashion in San

63 Ibid.
64 Sloane, 168
66 Muckey, 164
Francisco, resulting in the incorporation of Colma, California. In 1896, the San Francisco Common Council, citing public health concerns, made an initial attempt to limit in-city burial. The Council authorized municipal police powers to prevent land allocation for cemetery development. The government’s portrait of the cemetery as a health hazard was likely a strawman for deeper economic motivations; over the intervening twenty years, courts legitimized the prioritization of land for use by the living as a valid legal position, and the pretense of public health concerns fell away.

A cascade of favorable court decisions laid the legal framework for the formal interdiction of burial within San Francisco. Mayor ‘Sunny’ Jim Rolph, an amiable personality, acknowledged the “honorable” purpose of burying the dead in 1914. He then declared that “the duty of government is more to the living than to the dead” and that the government “must provide for the expansion of our city; it must be a city of homes.” Council Order No. 2950 prohibited “the further purchase of lots for burial purposes within the city and county of San Francisco.”

The order read:

> Whereas, the unlimited burial of the dead within the city and county of San Francisco is dangerous to life and detrimental to the public health … the people of the city and county of San Francisco do ordain as follows:

Section 1. It shall be unlawful, after the passage of this order, for any person, association, or corporation to hereafter, within the limits of the city and county of San Francisco, purchase, acquire, sell, lease, or in any other manner dispose of, or make available, any land situated therein for the purpose of interring any human body, or any portion of any human body.\(^{67}\)

It wasn’t until 1930 that the Supreme Court allowed San Francisco’s government to deport the dead from within its boundaries.\(^{68}\) The order inspired massive public opposition, but the disinterment of approximately 122,000 began nevertheless in 1937 and finished in 1941.\(^{69}\) One article calculated that the land under San Francisco’s four most significant cemeteries would be 40 times more valuable if used for construction rather than burial. The repurposing of an estimated 162 acres of usable land yielded gains of $12 million for the city.\(^{70}\)

Disinterment is a notoriously messy process. Illegible or absent tombstone markings, coupled with incomplete records, frequently render old graves unidentifiable. Even when a body is named, there might be no next of kin to pay the disinterment fee. Many tombs unearthed from Laurel Hill, a San Francisco cemetery, went unclaimed, and these bodies were stored away for half a decade before being finally relocated. Most of those unnamed corpses ended up in Cypress Lawn’s five-acre “Burial Mound” — a mass grave for thousands of anonymous inhabitants.\(^{71}\)

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\(^{67}\) Muckey, 156


\(^{69}\) Muckey, 171

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.
Constructing Colma

There are more than a million bodies in Colma, California, a city about 2 miles wide (Image 17). The population density at about 450,000 people per square mile, 75 times denser than San Francisco. The catch: only 1% of those bodies are alive, many relegated to a small residential neighborhood beyond incorporated Colma. The rest, accumulated over a century of ceaseless burials, comprise the city’s population of “silent souls;” the area known as the City of Souls is America’s only necropolis. The term ‘necropolis’ derives from the Ancient Greek phrase for ‘city of the dead.’ Real necropolises are hard to come by, though the catacombs of Paris, whose winding tunnels mirror the city above, evoke a necropolis. Closer to home, the above-ground cemeteries in New Orleans have city-like qualities, with rows of ‘houses’ and gated ‘lawns.’

However, the use of the term necropolis to describe Colma is particularly apt: with burial grounds covering 75% of its land, Colma is, in plan and function, a cemetery operating at the scale of a small American city. We can find in Colma the culmination of the trends that defined cemetery evolution. I will use maps to identify the crucial cemetery-like features within Colma: physical isolation of death from the living, extensive road circulation, gateways and visual buffers, and carefully curated topological features like green space, signs, and trees. With these characteristics, the city-cemetery of Colma, California, fits neatly as the fifth chapter in the story of America’s cemeteries.

Chapter 5: A City of Death
(1924 - Present)

Colma appears on a map as early as 1899, tethered to San Francisco by the Monterey Line of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The metropolis to the north is many times denser than the gridded patch bearing the label “Cemeteries” near the San Bruno Mountains (Image 17). At the turn of the 20th century, at least 30 cemeteries operated in San Francisco — one in the exact spot where the famous Dolores Park is today; thus, the cemeteries depicted on the map probably serviced only the settlements dotting the Monterey Line. It wasn’t until San Francisco purged its dead that the relationship between the living and dead on the peninsula became one of estrangement.

Mattrup Jensen confirms in his autobiography that he meant Colma to be “unique.” He and his contemporaries established the town as a haven for the San Francisco Peninsula's dead, recognizing that public sentiment at the time had turned against cemeteries. Immediately after the town’s incorporation, Jensen set about excising the living from within the town’s borders to maximize real estate for the burial of the Peninsula’s then and future deceased. His actions mirrored that of the San Francisco City government; as one economic opportunity opened in San Francisco — the aggregation of the living — the opposite occurred in Colma: the aggregation of the dead.

“Colma is a real necropolis,” Jensen wrote. “A township consisting of a group of cemeteries, a few memorial, and florists' salesrooms. During normal times there is employment for hundreds of landscape architects, gardeners, diggers,” whose job is to “keep in shape the last resting place for hundreds of thousands in the cemetery grounds that still has space for that many more.”

The first businesses in Colma matched its raison d’être: cemetery provisioning and maintenance. Step inside the park (Colma proper) today, and the same seems true. A fleet of small stores stands isolated on one side of the El Camino Real. The wares of these shops include monuments, tombstones, and flowers — and not much else. Where markets in another town might set out baskets of fresh fruits, these shops display multicolored slabs of flat stone. Some of them — Boci and Sons Stone Carvers, Donohoe and Carroll Monuments — are family legacies, handed down through generations for over 150 years.

Colma’s keepers have always been on the defensive, tasked with maintaining the town’s purity of purpose and unique image. The authors of a recent town plan use language like “Colma is protected from intrusion” and focus on how “Colma is different” from other towns in San Mateo County. One directive from the same document mandates the “preservation” of Colma as a “city of cemeteries, historical significance and regional commerce.”

77 Jensen, The Condensed Autobiography
78 Smookler, 1-7
80 2000 General Plan, #5.01.201
The telling and familiar phrase here is “city of cemeteries” — not people. The living pose the most salient threat to the City of Souls; for this reason, Jensen envisioned limits on population size in the early 20th century, advertising Colma as a township with a population of less than 600. Another recent policy required the monitoring of housing sales and rentals to keep the population under 1500 by 2005. Elsewhere, planners explicitly prioritized detached single-family homes, not only for their suburban qualities but because they ensure low-density residential neighborhoods. Colma is not the smallest city in San Mateo County by accident.

While the living and dead are neighbors in Colma, precious few intermingle. Blue dots in this map represent the population of Colma that walks, talks, and works (within accuracy of a few hundred people, as best I could judge). The green portion is a roughly homogeneous landscape of graves (Image 18). The living reside mostly in one neighborhood, cordoned off by F street and Hillside Boulevard. Part of this neighborhood lies outside incorporated Colma; I’ve included a few blocks of housing above the solid line to indicate the density of urban settlement just beyond Colma’s borders. The voided middle section with some dots indicates Colma’s commercial core, which runs along Serramonte Boulevard. The densely dotted patch at the top of the core represents Lucky Chances restaurant and casino. Clusters of dots across the map, some in the green, denote cemetery offices, affiliated wares shops, and nursing homes.

It’s unusual to see a large swath of developable land completely devoid of settlement — especially in Northern California. Cemeteries, more than parks, justify this arrangement: human habitation and commercial activity threaten the isolation of the dead. (The next map demonstrates how foliage establishes a barrier between Colma’s commercial core and its cemeteries.) One perceives a tension between the two camps, coexisting in uneasy harmony; it’s hard to tell whether the green has displaced the blue, or if the blue slowly encroaches on the green.

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81 Jensen, The Condensed Autobiography

82 2000 General Plan, #5.02.233
This map depicts all the major foliage elements in Colma. The densest cluster of free-standing trees (in the middle of the map) indicates the arboretum at Cypress Lawn. Rows of trees form ‘walls’ (most visible at the extremities of the map), which create scenic enclosures between the living and the dead. These are especially prevalent between the voided commercial areas and cemetery land. The town also curates elements that might obstruct a visitor’s view, prohibiting signs and billboards along El Camino Real. Trees must be planted at least 25 feet from each other along that route. Further, infrastructure like power grids, transformers, and cables must be hidden underground.\footnote{2000 General Plan, #5.02.361}

I’ve borrowed an idiom from Colma’s 2000 \textit{General Plan – Circulation Element} to represent the designated views along Hillside Boulevard (a “scenic route”).\footnote{General Plan – Circulation Element. Town Council of Colma, Apr. 2000.} The northeastern portion of Colma is somewhat elevated; these positions are optimal for photographing Colma, as I did from the eastmost vantage point (Image 21). Colma is admittedly difficult to photograph, as the land is generally flat, and its interesting features — tombstones and monuments — lie low to the ground. If you look closely at the mid- and background here, you can see cemeteries stretching far in the distance, evidenced by open green patches nestled within trees.
Colma functions both as the receptacle for the deceased kin of thousands of people and as a scenic greenbelt, necessitating easy access by car. Colma’s developers followed the approach of Strauch, the pioneer of the lawn park cemetery, who sought to collapse the distance between the cemetery and city via automotive access. Colma’s main thoroughfares offer uninterrupted passage through the city, but dozens of off-shooting drives splinter into a fractal-like array of tightly coiled roads.

This map makes it easiest to recognize the different cemetery types within Colma. Serpentine collections of roads indicate the presence of rural cemeteries, while, elsewhere, rigidly ordered grids represent modern memorial parks. I noticed in my visit that cemeteries dedicated to servicing one ethnic group — the Japanese cemetery, the Jewish cemetery — followed the latter philosophy, emphasizing homogeneity with rows of identically designed tombstones.
Visual buffers and gateways emerged as prominent features of the rural cemetery. Colma’s planners directly address both element types; visual buffers (foliage and elevation) split the town into lower and upper halves, roughly halfway between El Camino Real and Hillside Boulevard. The town’s plan also lists nine gateways to the cemetery park, artificial and natural. I’ve indicated six of them on a map here (Image 23). My markings are representative of my experience travelling through the gateway areas in person or via Google Earth Street View.

The focal point of each marking indicates the acuteness of the experience of passing through it. With the gateways numbered 1 through 6, going clockwise from the largest one: the focal point of Gateway 1 — passage under the embossed overpass at F Street — is very sudden. You’ve arrived in Colma, confirmed by the outward expansion of the landscape; those driving from San Francisco will likely enter via this gateway. Gateway 5 funnels you in from the south through a tunnel of trees, while the curves in the road prevent you from seeing the town just ahead. Passage through Gateway 6, meanwhile, entails less of a dramatic shift in the landscape. This gateway and a few of the others are adorned with free-standing stones, which are a few feet wide and engraved with a flower. These elements signify passage from the city into green space, not into a world of the dead. The city didn’t put these stones in place to remind visitors of their mortality or to sell pre-need plots. The didactic quality of Green-Wood’s gate, or the new gate at Grove Street Cemetery, which reads “THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED.”, is missing here. Rather, the text on these rocks reads, “Welcome to Colma” (Images 24, 25, 26, & 27).

Despite containing more than a million graves, Colma has little to do with death — or so the President of the city’s Chamber of Commerce, Steve Doukas, would have you believe. He affirms that Colma’s land is ‘parkland,’ not once mentioning the word “cemetery” when profiled by the New York Times. “Park directors” manage the town’s green space. Its residents appreciate the privilege to live near so many parks. Doukas describes Colma’s land as “undeveloped;” some of “the last permanent open spaces in the Bay Area.” I understand why the head of Colma’s Chamber of Commerce takes this stance — he’s responsible for developing the city’s commercial core. His representation of the city echoes the branding ethos pioneered by Dr. Eaton: maintain a strong focus on life. All but deny any presence of death.

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85 Images Positioned Around Colma, Google Earth
Image 24  
View at Gateway 2

Image 25  
View at Gateway 4

Image 26  
View at Gateway 5  
(No stone present)

Image 27  
View at Gateway 6
Conclusion

Colma’s spent 100 years trying not to become a thriving city. In land-use policy directives issued in 2000, Colma prohibited the establishment of businesses that might’ve drawn “excessive” traffic rather than create initiatives to attract jobs and increase economic activity.\(^{87}\) The city government and its residents align on this issue, with the preservation of a “small town feeling” ranking among the foremost of the town’s Community Goals.\(^ {88}\) Colma also closely monitors noise within it, fearing that a bustling commercial center might threaten its memorial parks’ "tranquil atmosphere.” Jensen hoped that posterity would preserve Colma’s cemetery park and “never, never … mar its beauty nor endanger its stability.”\(^ {89}\) Until now, he’s gotten his way.

However, the changing landscape of death in America throws Colma’s future into question. The past decade has seen a significant uptick in the percent of the population electing cremation over burial, with further growth still forecasted: the cremation rate was 51% in 2020. It’s expected to rise to over 70% by 2030.\(^ {90}\) We can attribute this phenomenon to a few factors. First and probably foremost, cremation is a cheaper funerary solution than burial. Cypress Lawn offers direct cremation (no funeral service or visitation) for $3095, but an emerging ecosystem of venture-capital-backed startups markets cremation directly to the Gen X consumer for less than $1000.\(^ {91} \)\(^ {92}\) (The average cost for burial in California, meanwhile, is between 2 and 9 thousand dollars, not including a casket or cemetery plot.\(^ {93}\) Second, recent generations have weaker attachments to their cemeteries; death is no longer preceded by lifelong affinity with the cemetery and anticipation of residence within it. Colma is well positioned to store cremains (cremated remains) at high densities: many of its cemeteries have beautiful columbaria already operating. (Storage in a columbarium niche costs between $800 and $2000, urn not included.\(^ {94}\) ) Though Colma’s cemeteries are non-profits, it’s likely that the fees for cremation — already artificially inflated — might rise to compensate for the shift away from burial.

The biggest threat to Colma’s enterprise is a land shortage, and some of its cemeteries already feel the crunch. Cypress Lawn has about 7,500 lots left; Woodlawn Cemetery has only 1,000

\(^ {87}\) 2000 General Plan, #5.02.314
\(^ {88}\) 2040 General Plan
available lots. The director of Hills of Eternity Memorial Park predicted the cemetery has 40 years' worth of burial space left. One docent with the Colma Historical Association said, “Something is going to have to change in Colma at some point.” Meanwhile, Robert Gordon, the director of Cypress Lawn, took a defiant stance in an interview with the SF Chronicle: “To say we have five years left is not giving the right message to the market.” Gordon plans to head off the inevitable fill-up by developing non-cemetery areas of Cypress Lawn, such as the golf course. (The author of the Chronicle article notes that town residents have lobbied for affordable housing on that site.) Some commentators address the situation in Colma pithily as “another Bay Area land shortage” or the “punchline of a cosmic joke.” San Francisco was too crowded for burial in the 1900s; now, the same has happened to Colma.

In seeming acknowledgment of the existential threats to its enterprise, Colma’s municipal government authorized measures to boost the town’s commercial core. These actions bring Colma closer in line with mainstream American cities. City planners released a 2040 General Plan Update in 2014 that prioritizes commercial development along Serramonte Avenue; the Plan describes Colma as a “regional shopping destination” — a shift in tone from older appraisals of the town. Numerous car dealerships already operate out of Colma; Lucky Chances opened along Hillside boulevard in 2014. With its Spanish facade, the casino looks more like a retirement home than anything else — an intentional feature, no doubt.

Further, the 2040 plan calls for the establishment of internationally recognized hotel chains and the development of mixed-use commercial sites along El Camino Real. It’s no surprise that the town will heavily regulate development along that highway; planning directives already require setbacks of 30 feet from the road and mandate the maintenance of the town’s greenbelt theme. I anticipate there will be aesthetic and operational tension between the planned commercial development and Colma’s storied cemeteries, whose 200-year-old mausoleums stand in plain view of the street. As businesses in Colma diversify, I expect that land zoning will change, too. That said, any loosening of the tight lid on population growth might threaten the viability of cemetery operations within the town.

When Colma reaches capacity, we’ll have reached the end of the American Cemetery Movement. The establishment of Colma (the city-cemetery, the true necropolis) portends the theoretical exhaustion of cemetery expansion; short of launching our cemeteries into space (always an option), we’ll have trouble stretching the ratio of death to life beyond one city to one city. Besides, as with all businesses, there must be a market need — and the market need for large cemeteries, with the rise of cremation and constraints on burial, might soon evaporate.

Something will have to give for earthen burial to survive. Someday, burial in America might become impermanent;
European countries already practice a temporary burial system, wherein bodies are disinterred after as soon as five years to make room for the next paying customer. Perhaps the idea of the cemetery as one connected tissue of adjacent graves will fade, yielding the modularization of the larger cemetery form. Maybe, instead, we’ll inter solitary caskets in grassy niches throughout the city. Perhaps we’ll be buried in our backyards.

I anticipate that future burial spaces will drastically depart from traditional cemetery forms. This departure will also produce a correction, inspiring healthier relationships between the living and the dead; our current situation, in which cemeteries do all they can to obfuscate death, cannot stand. The Columbia University DeathLab sees opportunity in this contentious moment. The DeathLab’s statement of research purpose reads:

> Design, reinforced by research, reveals an urgent call to liberate city life from the burden of outmoded practices. A community’s need for sanitary and sensible disposal of corpses is intertwined with the need of survivors to organize meaningful rituals and to lastingly memorialize the deceased.

The DeathLab is well known for an unrealized design project called Constellation Park. Published renderings of the Park depict a network of bauble-like platforms suspended beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, mirroring the bridge’s rising and falling wires. The ‘constellation’ element derives from the proliferation of semi-spheres containing chemically treated human remains; these containers are illuminated, powered by the “bio-energy latent within the corpse.” In aggregate, these “mourning lights” physicalize an image of community that vanished when the memorial park flattened its tombstones into the ground. Projects like Constellation Park put our terminology to the test: neither ‘cemetery’ nor ‘burial ground’ nor ‘graveyard’ describes this arrangement of bioluminescent human remains. ‘Memorial’ comes closest, but even that term evokes a site of memory, not preservation or decay.

Since storage is only part of the picture, the DeathLab also studies different methods of reducing the human corpse to particulate matter. These alternatives to cremation include resomation (alkaline hydrolysis, a.k.a. chemical cremation) and promession (which freezes and vibrates the corpse into ash). The lab describes embalming: “To provide a desirable last image for the bereft, the corpse is disinfected, and its eyes and mouth are set, stitched, or sealed … while blood from the corpse is drained into the municipal sewer.” Like Jessica Mitford did 50 years prior, the Lab offers a vivid description of embalming as an implicit argument against it; perhaps an upside of the diminishment of earthen burial will be the decline of a process whose very explanation is enough to sour one on it.

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The shortage of burial space is a global problem, and innovators worldwide are finding new ways to treat, store, and memorialize human remains. Many of these alternative methods, though unusual, speak to a truth about fragility and remembrance that America’s death-defying cemeteries don’t articulate. For instance, the Koukokuji Buddhist Temple in Tokyo, Japan, combines art with technology to honor an individual’s memory within a columbarium of spiritual neighbors. The sanctuary contains 2,046 Buddha cenotaphs, each a few inches tall and made of glass. When a visitor swipes her card, all the statuettes light up, but the Buddha that represents her loved one turns a different color than the rest. A person’s ashes are stored in the sanctuary for 33 years before they’re removed to an underground chamber.

Light, it seems, plays a significant role in modern memorial spaces. The qualities of light make it attractive for memorialization: light illuminates darkness and brings transparency. It is ephemeral. I think these fixtures (the illuminated Buddha, the bioluminescent bauble) permit the remembrance of a loved one’s being without apologizing for their death. Burial may soon cease, but this moment of change provides an opportunity to let in the light.

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