

Roundtable

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Design and Planning Roundtable



John Gary



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Over time, all things change – including cemeteries. For cemetery operators, an integral part of that change is good design and planning. To find out about the trends, the impact of cremation and more, we turned to four industry experts: John Gary, vice president, JST Architects, Dallas; Blair Hines, principal, Blair Hines Design Associates, Brookline, Massachusetts; Gary W. Meisner, landscape architect and partner Meisner + Associates/Land Vision in Cincinnati; and William Toson, founder, The Tribute Companies, Hartland, Wisconsin.

If you were designing a cemetery from scratch today, what key elements would you include?

Gary: Assuming we are in a growing market with a medium size and mature population base, I would plan a full-service “mini” cemetery (30 usable acres) consisting of a funeral home with crematory, conventional and green ground burial areas, cremation garden and a starter mausoleum with a cremation niche component. This would be based upon a comprehensive master plan allowing for multiple development phases.

Hines: The development of the site should be designed to incorporate burial areas within a garden or natural setting that allows the cemetery to function both as a burial place and as a place for contemplation and respectful visitation by the public.

The strong inclination of the public toward cremation provides the opportunity to utilize less land for burials, especially if cremated remains are interred in columbaria. Interment of cremains in gardens and natural settings will be much less disruptive than full body burials are to natural systems.

The development should work positively with the natural systems on the site. This would include “best practices” design that emphasizes infiltration of stormwater and designs retention structures as aesthetic features and habitats.

Meisner: If the new cemetery site has natural features such as a water feature, wooded hillside or high point, I would emphasize them and build the master plan around those striking elements.

If the new cemetery site is open and without some natural element, I would consider creating an element such as a pond, carillon tower or a landscape feature that brings distinction and some critical mass that says, “this is a special place.”

Toson: There are at least five basic elements to include in the design of a new cemetery:

- Administrative office with private arrangement rooms, each containing product displays. Of course, the building would be ADA compliant

and equipped with the latest hard wired and wireless connections for computer and media systems.

- Maintenance facility to store and repair equipment; indoor storage for outer burial containers, possibly caskets and other products. A spray booth could be included for decorating vaults and equipment maintenance.

- Chapel to be used for visitation, committal and remembrance services.

- Cremation garden with in-ground burial and columbarium inventory.

- Cenotaph wall permitting memorialization when a body is not present.

How could a cemetery owner/operator integrate some of those key elements into an existing property?

Gary: I would suggest utilizing a cemetery design professional to review the existing property, identify opportunities and constraints, and then develop a comprehensive master plan and phasing plan to work the desired elements into the existing property.

Hines: I think the fundamental issue is to think of the cemetery as a landscape with “places” for burial. Mostly, the design of the cemetery is based on laying out graves as efficiently as possible and then applying “landscaping” by planting trees and shrubs. This creates empty and homogenous expanses of graves without differentiation. New sections can be laid out as landscapes with graves. The shift in thinking is to first consider how the cemetery can be developed as a sequence of spaces and places that together form a landscape that engages the mind.

Meisner: This is the essence of good master planning, either by taking full advantage of existing natural attributes and thereby “value adding” the space around, or create a new element or focal point and locate that appropriately to “value adding” the space around. Place-making is especially important to cemeteries because they endure for hundreds of years.

Toson: The cemetery site will dictate potential uses. Many areas unsuitable for ground burial because of soil conditions, vegetation, location within the property, topography and proximity to water may be well suited for cremation and/or aboveground burial. Of course, any capital expenditure needs to be financially justified. Generating sufficient revenue production typically requires a successful preneed and family service sales effort.

As we head into 2015, what are the most pressing issues (from a design and planning standpoint) facing cemeteries?

Gary: For existing cemeteries it is managing and maintaining existing infrastructure while updating and developing new inventory.

For new start-up cemeteries it is obtaining approvals to develop new start-up property in close proximity to urban areas and neighborhoods.

Hines: Meeting the increasing market for cremation disposition by creating cremation interment space in landscape settings that are attractive places to visit and offer contemplative settings is important.

Recognizing that cemeteries in urban areas play crucial roles as open space for nearby residents and as resting places for migrating birds is also important.

Meisner: A sound master plan and having a well-thought-out financial plan. They go hand in hand.

Toson: Today’s design issues and challenges are really no different than 50 or 100 years ago. Design needs to focus on two primary objectives:

1) To stay current, and provide inventory options dictated by consumer trends and making sure facilities stay fresh and project a positive image. Simple things can be done that don’t require a great deal of investment. For example:

- Remove and replace tired landscaping
- Repainting
- Power wash or sandblast stone facades and features
- Install new signage

2) Differentiate your cemetery from others – be unique.

How often should a cemetery revisit its master plan?

Gary: I would suggest updating your master plan at least every five years if possible, in order to sufficiently analyze what developments are successful in this ever-changing marketplace.

Hines: I think this depends on what changes are occurring at the cemetery in terms of types of burials and numbers of burials. If large areas are planned for full-body burial and the number of sales for full-body burial is falling and the number of cremation interments is growing, then it’s time to rethink how to create attractive places for cremation interment. Other factors that warrant rethinking the master plan could include significant changes in the ethnicity or religion of persons purchasing interment space.

Meisner: This is an individual choice. Both new and old cemeteries benefit from taking a fresh look at their future on a regular basis. Perhaps every five years at some level of detail. There are several different ways to revisit an existing master plan:

- A daylong site walk, analysis and workshop visioning session to stimulate ideas.

- A process that best serves the board’s available time, perhaps staged workshops over a three-month period.

- A detailed analysis approach coupled with a business/financial plan, a demographics assessment, a marketing update and options for new and infill development.

Having different perspectives on the future of your cemetery can open up eyes of the staff and the board of trustees to better management practices and new ideas. Discussing new options for the future does not mean you must change everything. Being a good steward of a cemetery means keeping an eye on the future.

Toson: Master planning should be based on practicality, affordability and flexibility. That said, the need to revisit the plan will be dictated, in large part, by how effective your

sales department is. Do you need more inventory? Do you need different inventory? These are issues that will drive the need to revise your plan.

Given that master plans are important, how important is it for cemeteries to also be flexible enough to respond to changes in the market?

Gary: A master plan should allow for flexibility and have possible contingency approaches built-in to allow for a change in a direction if the marketplace changes or existing product is not selling.

Hines: Plans are based on projecting current trends into the future. When the future starts to change from our expectations, then it is time to update the master plan.

Meisner: A cemetery often seems like it is locked in time. Once land is allotted and sold, or in the process of being sold there are binding responsibilities that cannot easily be changed. However, cemeteries age and with that aging process many issues can change that demand that the master plan be flexible. The flexibility must respond to demographics of the service area, the immediate neighborhood, interment preference, capital replacement costs, maintenance and operation costs and other changes.

A good master planning process elevates the thinking needed to identify options that respond to financial issues and the cemetery's physical master plan.

Toson: Let's focus on the primary reasons to even have a master plan. First, the plan is to establish management's vision of how the cemetery will look and function; essentially what products and services do you want to offer? Development of the plan should be a team event – get your staff involved so they have buy-in. Once a cost is estimated for each element of the plan, execution is then prioritized, keeping long- and short-term goals in mind. Changing consumer buying trends and the cemetery's cash flow will dictate any needed changes to priorities.

Do cemeteries need to consider out-of-the-box design and planning for hard-to-develop areas?

Gary: New design approaches can be utilized on unconventional sites, but we feel quality planning should still be the priority. If the site just doesn't work well and the design solution is too foreign to the client, it most likely will not be accepted well. Use those resources on a more productive site.

Hines: Yes. Working with unique areas requires responsive designs that are expressions of these unique places. Think of how often development obliterates an existing setting to create a monotonous and typical place – they are along every highway outside every town and city in America and they all look nearly the same. Cemeteries seem similarly inclined and miss the opportunity to be unique and do something special. I believe the public will positively respond to unique places because they are more interesting.

Meisner: Hard-to-develop areas by definition always require more care and thinking time. They often pose issues to be mitigated or worked around: drainage ways, desirable wooded areas, hillsides, flood-prone or high water table areas. Every situation is different, but this thinking time can lead to a more functional and interesting solution for the cemetery.

Toson: When planning a new cemetery or expanding an existing one, too often there is a tendency to do what was done in the past or to react to trendy new concepts. This is where a professional cemetery planner can help. Typically, cemetery designers visit and consult with many clients of different sizes and cultural orientation – each with their unique challenges. When brainstorming future development needs, cemeteries can benefit by having a planner look at the property with a new set of eyes.

What can we expect to see in the cemeteries of the future?

Gary: I feel cemeteries of the future will be smaller, be natural in appearance and function ("green"),

provide full service in one convenient location and make more of a transition toward "event" functions, offering a full spectrum of life celebrations as well as a vehicle for the preservation/discovery of family history/ancestry.

Hines: If I'm pessimistic, they will all look more and more the same with the same types of columbaria and mausoleums. If I'm optimistic, then cemeteries will start to see that they need to differentiate themselves. We praise individuality in people, but somehow when we develop cemeteries we think they all should be the same, like rows of soldiers.

Meisner: A few thoughts on what we will see:

- Cemeteries of tomorrow will respond to a more diverse spiritual community.
- The "stele" and stone markers of the societies of the past have become the monuments and tombstones of today. A new generation of monuments will bring more creative art and sculpture to the cemetery.
- Burial options of the future will respond to cremation interment options that are in harmony with the landscape, take less space and provide unique places within the cemetery.
- Landscapes will rely upon native plants and sustainable practices but bring eye-opening beauty and awe that respond to the seasonal change.

The cemetery of the future will be even more of a place that elevates the spirit, a place of healing and inspiration.

Toson: The design of new cemeteries is being pulled in two directions. Corporate, privately owned and progressive church cemeteries are being planned to allow more personalization, which includes everything from large estate lots to arboretums that accommodate burial of cremated remains. Due to the popularity of cremation, new cemeteries generally involve smaller acreage. Planning for tomorrow's cemetery needs to incorporate concepts that encourage frequent visitation by its lot owners, family and friends. •