



Renovate, Remodel, *Refresh*

*Cemeteries Facing
Societal Change
Turn to 'Staging' to
Stay Relevant*



Rendering of the
Saint Peter Paul
Cremation Garden

by Zach Rasmussen and Christine Toson

STAGING. CURB APPEAL. These are terms we typically associate with the residential real estate industry. The National Association of Realtors (NAR) says “49 percent of buyers’ agents believe staging affects most buyers’ view of a home. And 77 percent of them say it’s easier for people to visualize a staged home as their own.” Those numbers make staging a home even more important to the sale of the home. Staging is a strategic move for home sellers. It, too, is a strategic move for today’s cemeteries. Just as staging a house—arranging furnishings, refreshing belongings and décor, landscaping, and making repairs—can make a house look its best while selling, doing the same can help sell your cemetery.

Cemeterians have a tendency to focus on curb appeal—their maintenance and care of the grounds. This is understandable because families we serve expect standards of care on the grounds of a cemetery. Grounds can be managed through proper landscaping, horticulture, pesticides, and training connected to lawn care preservation. Cemeteries have their own brand and their own market, and often this dictates what level of maintenance and care the grounds will get.

But what happens when the buildings on the grounds start deteriorating? Some can be patched together and repaired just like most buildings. In the long term, however, the costs of maintenance and renovation are more substantial than ongoing lawn care. Yet, all too often, cemeterians believe mausoleum buildings do not require the same maintenance as the grounds; unfortunately, after years of neglect, they can reach a point of no return and require a complete renovation or tear down/rebuild.

When it comes to mausoleums and chapels, the problems are exacerbated by the fact that they contain deceased bodies and often the facilities are used regularly. The complexities of disinterment and re-entombing deceased bodies are vast; some jurisdictions are much stricter than others when it involves moving human remains, and the process of approval can take years.

In most cases, Public Enemy Number One is water. Like elements in the natural world, almost all breakdown and decomposition are assisted and accelerated by water. In cold weather, water infiltration can be especially problematic due to the freeze/thaw cycle. When evaluating and prioritizing preventive maintenance of your structures, start at the top of the structure, with the roof, and move down from there. Most long-term damage begins with a leak in the roof, which may go years without being detected. Once the damage is noticed, the results may be significant since the leak could easily spread behind crypt fronts, between broken seams, or within plenum chambers. If left unrepaired, the necessary restorations could cost significantly more than the initial fix.

Staging Is for Cemeteries

In almost every industry, perception and appearance are paramount to making a positive first and lasting impression on your clients. Poor short- and long-term maintenance of cemetery buildings and grounds can sour the opinions of the families who are visiting loved ones, which in turn will result in complaints for your cemetery office staff as well as reduce future opportunities to serve those families.

It is also important to maintain a minimum of care within your cemetery buildings for the dignity and respect of those who rest there. It is our responsibility as cemeterians to maintain the quality of the structures.

The most significant consequence of poor maintenance of cemetery architecture is the potential hazard to the public and cemetery staff. When mausoleum buildings and chapels reach the point of deterioration due to neglect, poor construction, or failing product, it causes significant safety concerns.

Mausoleums and columbaria are designed and constructed using several modular, individual, and removable elements



IA Mausoleum Glass Niches

consisting of individual crypt and niche fronts that can cause danger since they are connected as pieces rather than one secure wall. These are also removed at least once for entombment and inurnment procedures, which if replaced incorrectly could lead to unsafe conditions, offensive odors, decomposition fluids, and crypt fly infestation. Consistent and periodic inspections of crypt and niche fronts, closure panels, hanger systems, plenum chambers, roof vents, trim, and overall construction are critical for mausoleum buildings.

If an existing mausoleum or columbarium structure has reached its capacity, that's no reason to neglect it. Know that it could act as an "anchor" for future development. Family heritage contained within our properties is a strong draw to attract the next of kin searching for their final resting place. Pictured in this article is a mausoleum with glass niches; the resurgence and rise of glass front cremation products can be a tasteful addition to otherwise filled buildings. If designed and incorporated properly, this additional revenue source can support maintenance and repairs to older structures.

Cremation Gardens Are in Bloom

Historic mausoleum structures, and even contemporary designs, can be a beautiful backdrop for future development. The land around existing mausoleums is often a prime location to integrate cremation gardens, community columbaria, or ossuaries. With the right design assistance, these gardens can incorporate similar design and material traits to the existing infrastructure, resulting in a holistic appearance.

Repurposing the “Chapel”

Chapels are a gathering space and this might be all that some visitors know of the cemetery’s operation. Generally, individuals will only be in the facility once or twice, and if the only impression they have is that it is musty, outdated, and stale, they will think the entire operation is the same. Chapels must remain relevant with their usage as well as their décor. Remodeling will keep it fresh, orderly, and in style. This will ultimately help with image as well as resale value.

As current trends dictate, cemetery and funeral chapels are being repurposed. Even the term “chapel” is quickly being disposed of due to its religious connotation. Many people are “un-churched” or hold adverse feelings toward organized religion.

According to Patheos, 43 percent of Americans are “un-churched” (have not gone to church in the past six months) and 34 percent are “de-churched” (former active churchgoers who have not attended church in the past six months). As we are already floundering in our profession to help society understand the importance of ceremony and memorialization surrounding death, maintaining outdated terminology because of a misplaced sense of tradition is not helping to attract future customers.

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Updating carpeting, paint, and lighting are simple ways to keep the space fresh. However, there are many other enhancements that can add tremendous depth of value to the families you serve:

- Hospitality spaces, including kitchenettes, bars, or ample space for caterers
- State-of-the-art audio and visual equipment
- Charging stations for mobile phones and devices
- Reflection rooms to allow for solitude and a moment of peace when needed
- Child spaces
- Coffee and refreshment spaces
- Lounge areas




Appetizers served in the FHMP Chapel



An open bar and hors d'oeuvres menu in the FHMP Chapel

Finding the Right Contractor

When considering a team to help with renovation, remodeling, or refreshing, keep in mind that your choices must understand the long-term aspects of your construction relationship consisting of generations of maintenance. Having cemetery operational experience is tremendously important, but be sure to check for relevant experience before hiring anyone to help with these sacred buildings. Implement daily, monthly, and annual checklists and have a crew that is passionate about the preservation of the grounds and facilities to help you stay on track.

As properties age and overall perceptions change toward burial, entombment, inurnment, and religion, we must find creative ways to attract clients and customers to our cemeteries. Although it can be a daunting task, it is extremely important for decision-makers and operators to pay close attention to maintenance of their properties, as it can affect the health, safety, and perception of the public and staff. With assistance of a reputable consultant, cost-effective evaluations can be completed and recommendations for action reported before they get out of hand. 

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