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**ICCFA MAGAZINE
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C E M E T E R Y S A L E S & D E S I G N

It used to be that when Mom died without prearrangements, you went to the cemetery and picked out a grave like those of your grandparents. But today's baby boomers are shoppers, and they don't just do what their parents did. They want choices, and want shopping to be as pleasant an experience as possible.

A cemetery can offer that with a sales garden.

Creating an outdoor showroom that's also part of your cemetery's inventory

The funeral and cemetery business is changing rapidly these days. People—especially baby boomers—are asking for more choices, and this poses some challenges for cemeteries.

Offering the diversity and choice the market wants can involve a lot of up-front investment, whether it's developing a new garden; installing lawn crypts, a mausoleum or columbarium; or experimenting with allowing new types of memorialization.

As a landscape architect, I am of course a big fan of master planning and phased development, but I've recently been recommending cemeteries consider what I call a "sales garden." It's a type of merchandising you could perhaps equate to a funeral home's selection room. It's an outdoor showroom designed to respond to our culture's desire for selection.

Those baby boomer shoppers

Baby boomers like to make their own decisions about things, and they like to be able to make those decisions based on a lot of options.

When we buy a car, we don't just go to the Chevy dealer, we go to the auto mall, and we cruise up and down and look at everything. We no longer just head to our favorite clothing store on Main Street, we go someplace where there are several shops, and we look around.

It's a mentality that's taken over our culture, the "have it your way," Burger King mentality. This applies both to individuals and to groups, as well. Muslims want to be buried facing east, Asians are asking for gardens planned with *feng shui* in mind and the green burial people are asking for very specific criteria.

It's become a marketplace that's driven more and more by the consumer asking the cemetery if they have what they want or can accommodate what they want.

To be successful, cemeteries need to show the marketplace that they have the options people want,

or are willing to create them. But a cemetery doesn't have enough capital to build new sections without testing the market.

One solution is to show people the options in a condensed area, in an attractive and uncluttered way. Normally, the salesperson might drive people to five or six different locations in the cemetery, and say, "Here's our columbarium, here are our family estates, here are our garden crypts, here are our single-depth uprights," and so on.

What if you could show a significant portion of your options, or options you are thinking of introducing, in a small area with its own sense of continuity and context, i.e., a sales garden?

Making use of land near the office

I've found that sometimes it is possible to put a sales garden right by the cemetery office. A lot of cemeteries have left land around their sales area undeveloped, perhaps because they wanted the open space around the office, or maybe they didn't think they should be doing burials right by the office.

But I think it's different if you develop the area as a garden setting, even as a place with a meditative feel, a place people would want to spend some time in while trying to make a decision about memorialization, or where family members not directly involved in making arrangements can wait if they don't want to stay inside the office.

Of course, a major advantage of placing a garden showcasing various options by the office is that everyone who goes to the office will see it. If they see a very attractive columbarium, they'll say, "gosh, what is that?" Or, "What is that place over there, that place with a hedge around it?" referring to a family estate.

So this gives the cemetery a chance to show and sell additional options to people who come in with a preconceived idea in their head about what they want and who would resist being shown other

options, being “sold to.” If they see something they like while taking a garden walk and “browsing” and ask you about it, the whole dynamic is different.

This also gives the salesperson insight into what the potential client is attracted to, making it easier to decide what other options to present.

It can also be helpful to ask people to step outside the office into the sales garden and take a look at what the option they’re considering looks like. Outside, with a nice view and vegetation, the selection becomes more of an emotional one and not just a “how much does it cost?” one that can be the case when you’re inside the office looking at photos or marker displays on a wall. People need to see, touch and experience before they buy.

By placing a sales garden in a prominent place, you will also promote memorialization to visitors, people who are coming to the cemetery only to find a friend or relative’s grave, or to attend a committal service. This gives you a chance to interest people who otherwise would just go to the grave site and then leave.

Keep in mind that the sales garden is not intended to be just a display, it’s an actual garden with inventory. The idea is to make the space a direct revenue-generator as well as a sales tool and a litmus test for new offerings. It allows you to test the market without an oversized investment in any one offering.

I’ve had cemeticians tell me, “We have no market for garden columbariums/garden crypts/family estates.” When I ask, “Do you have them?” they say no. Or maybe they do have them, but the sales staff is still most comfortable with selling ground burials, so they don’t promote the new options.

What I’ve seen is that you have to train your salespeople to sell something that is different from what they sold yesterday, or is not something they would choose for themselves. If people start asking about an option because they’ve seen it in your sales garden, it helps the salespeople get comfortable talking about something people seem to want. It helps your salespeople take a step sideways, out of the rut they may have gotten into.

If your sales garden includes a handful of

private estates and those sell well, that tells you the market is there for a more ambitious private estates area. If you include a particular type of columbarium and it sells well, you install more of them in the cemetery. It allows you to plan new developments with some realistic guidance from the market.

In terms of selling within the sales garden, not everyone will want to be in a garden near the office, but some will. There are people, interestingly enough, who want to be visible. There are always people who want their lots right at the corner, where everybody can drive by and see them, so there’s a market for people who want to be where the action is.

For those who want something in a quieter section of the cemetery, you say, “We can offer you this in another area of the cemetery that’s more private.” Some people may say, “I like that concept, but I want a woodland setting,” so if you don’t have that option available yet, you go back to your master plan and look for a good spot.

I do think it’s good when a cemetery is willing to develop a sales garden in the context of a master plan. The advantage of



Case study 1: Above, a bird's-eye view of the sales garden built between the office and parking lot, incorporating a variety of inventory options. Below, a ground-level view of part of the garden, showing the columbarium court and walled family estates.

doing it with a master plan is that when the sales garden tells you what will sell, you can go back to the master plan to figure out what your next move should be.

Because of the compact size of the sales garden, your per-square-foot endowment should be pretty high; high density does generate a good endowment. So as you sell the garden, the endowment will help with maintenance costs.

Of course the actual design, size and product mix will depend on a lot of factors individual to each cemetery. This is not a “one size and type” garden fits all. Your sales garden will need to be tailored to your market and your site.

Case study 1: Cash flow needed

This cemetery had a modest office building, sort of standing alone on a hillside. They thought they might build a new office someday, but needed to generate some cash flow before considering such an undertaking.

The cemetery officials, their consultant (Dave Hepburn, States West Cemeteries Services, Huntington Beach, California) and I came up with a plan to put in inventory near the office while enhancing the area.

The curving walkway was necessary



because the cemetery had built a new mausoleum and the city ruled that if the mausoleum did not have a restroom there had to be handicapped access provided to the office. So the walkway is basically a long ramp to provide access for the handicapped, designed to look like a nice pathway rather than a ramp.

The problem was, it was a long pathway through nothing. We turned it into an experience, a restful and attractive walk through a set of features, including the water feature

that would come down the hillside. It hasn't been done, but we even considered some discreet memorialization on the rocks by the water.

The walkway was a necessity, but we tried to turn a lemon into lemonade by making it more like a meditative walk. A lot of people need that when they come to a service, need to sort of get away and just walk.

The deck outside the office gives people a way to take a break outside, to look out over the garden, to see their choices—a

columbarium, family estates, urn burial along the pathway, memorial benches.

We did not put in any traditional ground burial; we felt we needed to leave the lawn open; burial options are tucked into the perimeter. People also can see some of the cemetery's ground burial sections, as well as the mausoleum, from the deck. So you could virtually sell every option the cemetery has standing on the porch.

They get all of the enhancement to the entry area paid for by the adjacent inventory. They are generating revenue while enhancing aesthetics.

Case study 2: Ethnic sales garden

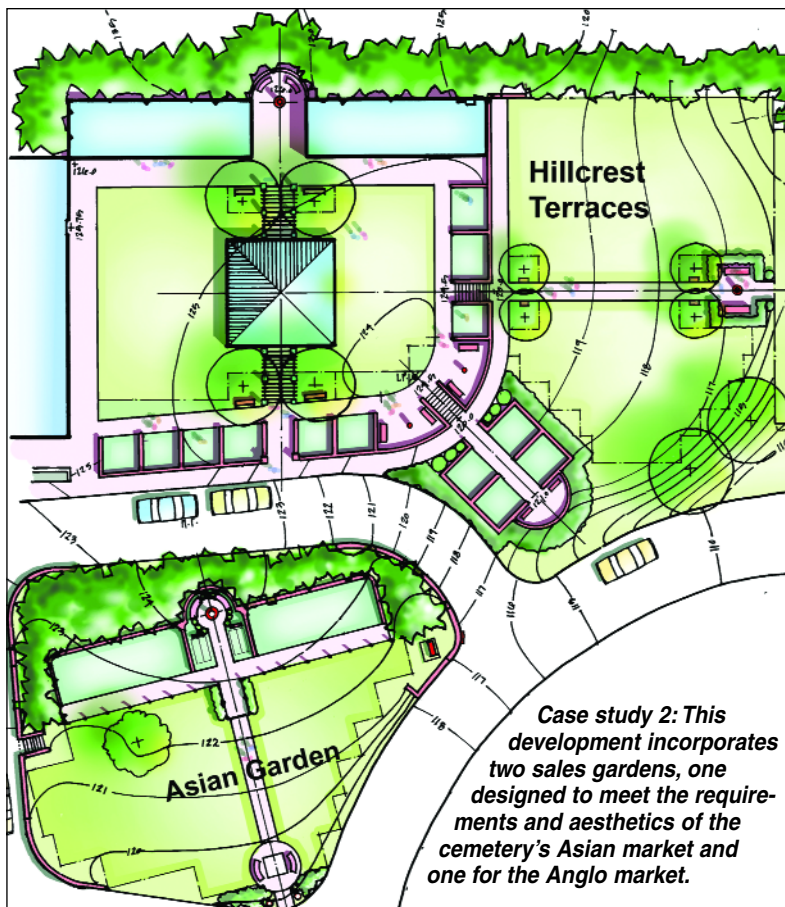
This cemetery changed management, so I'm not sure if these sales gardens were actually built, but two were designed, one for the Asian market and one for the Anglo market.

In the area marked "Hillcrest Terrace," instead of just grading the site for ground burial, I suggested a retaining wall that could be a columbarium, family estates on the upper level, a committal court with ground burials (flush markers) inside, cenotaphs and niches inside near the committal shelter, garden crypts plus some ground burial. So in this one small area, you get a full diversity of options, and it's adjacent to parking.

The Asian garden was angled for proper *feng shui* and includes family estates in the back with protective structural and vegetative elements at the back, again following *feng shui* principles, with views down the hill, the central *qui* line.

Case study 3: Adding new inventory

This Oklahoma cemetery didn't have a lot of different inventory to show, so a simple, low-budget sales garden provided an opportunity to put a number of different options in a single outdoor showroom. There was an open lawn by the office they weren't using in part because it had a drainage problem. The land also is



there are openings to keep the area visible, particularly to people who come in to the cemetery.

They had no garden columbariums whatsoever, and felt they needed some, so there are two columbarium areas included. One is in the center of the space and bracketed by the office and garden mausoleums, which are on opposite ends of the lawn. There is room in the center of the circle columbarium for placement of a feature. There is room for lawn burial, and the side opposite the road has small family estates.

People who come to the cemetery now have this garden to walk past or through on their way to the office.

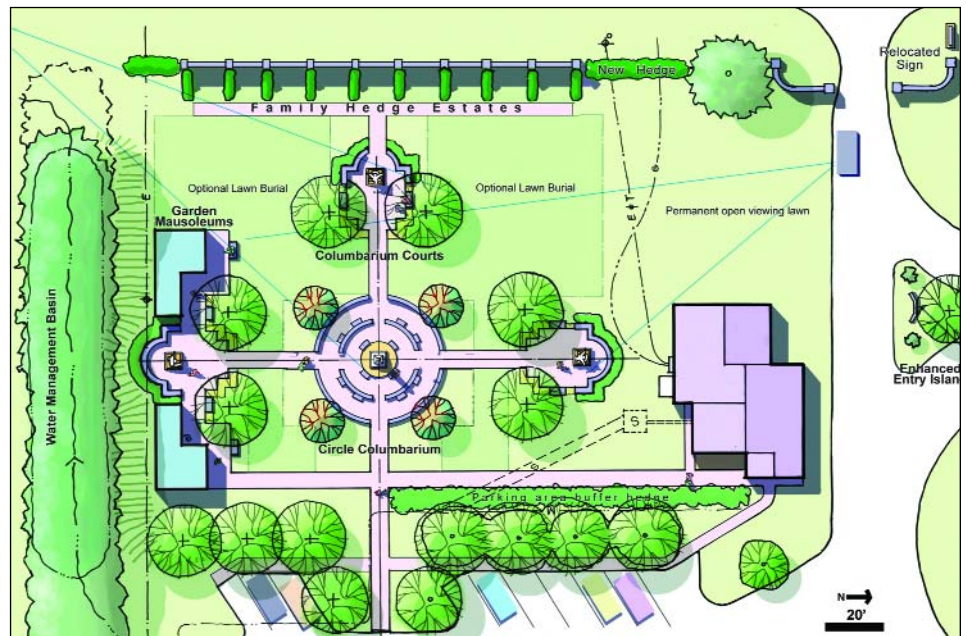
This particular garden has been built and the cemetery is very happy with it. Sales in their first garden mausoleum are going very well.

What was a leftover area that

exposed to a busy road along one side.

We were able to resculpt the land and create a water management area, dewatering the rest of the lawn. There's a vegetative buffer against the noise of the road, but

that said nothing to the public about what the cemetery offers is now productive land, potentially their showpiece, located in the area the public sees the most.



Case study 3: An unused and wet area near the cemetery's main gate was adapted to be a mixed inventory development in a courtyard setting that is visible from the public road and by all arriving customers and visitors.