

Cover Story

By Brian Johnson

Master Planner Roundtable

3 top companies share their insights

Any cemetery project starts with a master plan, so cemeterians need to keep up with the latest trends in cemetery design. One of the most popular design elements that have popped up in cemetery expansions in recent years are cremation gardens, which are picturesque settings that incorporate attractive columbariums and/or scattering gardens for cremated remains. To find out what's new in cremation garden design and master planning in general, we asked representatives from three top companies to give us their insights. The master planners involved in this discussion are David Ward, president of Grever & Ward; Chad Wright, director of planning and design, and Benjamin Erdmann, project manager, of Tribute Design Systems; and Chris Fultz, principal at SMBW Architects.





This page: An inviting cremation garden at River Bend Cemetery in Westerly, R.I. (Photo courtesy of Grever & Ward) **Left:** A conceptual design for Valley Lake Mausoleum at Rose Hills Memorial Park in Whittier, Calif. (Photo courtesy of SMBW Architects)

What are some examples of projects you've done recently?

Grever & Ward: The most active areas of our work recently have been in master planning new cemetery developments, including 109 acres in Henrietta, N.Y.; 36 acres in Glenpool, Okla.; and two cemeteries of 103 acres and 30 acres in Milton, Ontario, among others.

Cremation garden planning is also very active with an emphasis on phased implementation. Recent projects include gardens in Westerly, R.I.; Chicopee, Mass.; and Buffalo, Syracuse, Queens and Flushing, N.Y.

Tribute: Three recently completed master plan projects were initiated based on very different needs of each cemetery.

St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery in Appleton, Wis., was faced with the need to increase ground burial and mausoleum inventory, plus update its administrative and maintenance facilities. The board of directors faced conflicting priorities that needed to be defined in terms of capital expenditure and return on investment. Tribute was engaged to define the needs of the cemetery, recommend alternative land uses and develop board consensus as to priorities and timing of capital projects.

Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Union Grove, Wis., is a state-owned, federally funded, 110-acre veterans cemetery. When the cemetery was started in 1996, Tribute was engaged to develop a master plan that showed construction in several phases. As each phase is completed, the master plan is updated to anticipate future changes in interment trends, infrastructure needs and service requirements. Thus far, four phases of construction have been completed, which represents 11,384 single and double depth lawn crypt spaces, nearly 3,500 cremation niches and more than 1,600 in-ground cremation spaces.

The Gardens at Olive Branch in Greenwood, Ind., is a new cemetery that required a master plan that defined the owner's vision for the appearance of the cemetery, alternative burial options that would distinguish this property from others in the community and the various phases of construction. Initially, the cemetery was to consist solely of mausoleum crypts and niche inventory but soon evolved into a full-service property as the preferences from the public were identified.

SMBW: We recently completed conceptual work for a 3,000-crypt mausoleum on the West Coast.

Primarily, our work during the economic downturn has been in the public sector. Additionally, we have worked with a few regional municipal cemeteries and veterans cemeteries in a master plan development capacity in order to maximize the highest and best use of remaining land resources and available interment inventory.

What features are usually being incorporated into these projects and what are cemeteries asking for in planning these days?

Grever & Ward: The ability to expand facilities in phased development through an overall plan is especially important to most cemeteries in the current economy. This is obviously a desire to manage development costs, but at the same time, they recognize the importance of the ultimate developments being coherent, efficient and attractive. The solution is comprehensive master planning with phased expansions.

Specific requests for planning include features that establish cemetery identity and a high variety of interment products. Cremation choices are definitely front and center in that.

Tribute: Cemeteries are responding to

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demands by the public for choice, multiple price points and individualism. Tribute has seen a growing trend to incorporate pet gardens either within or in proximity to human cemeteries. In some cases, “pets and people” sections are being offered that allow burial spaces to be adjacent to one another.

Semiprivate estates involving walled areas and/or heavily landscaped lots creating sanctuary areas are being incorporated in an increasing number of plans. This option is obviously insensitive to price and is sold on the basis of perceived value.

Reclamation of previously unusable property is increasingly important as the available land diminishes. Wooded areas, sites on rock or near wetlands may be suitable for walking trails and burial of cremated remains.

Developed sections that are considered sold out may be able to increase inventory availability by permitting double-depth burial within a single space or the burial of cremated remains on previously used spaces. This allows for increased land use density and the sale of “second rights of interment.”

SMBW: Due to shrinking land resources, we are consistently being asked to consider columbaria and mausolea as a means to both shape the cemetery and increase inventory. By



Photo: The garden mausoleum at The Gardens at Olive Branch in Greenwood, Ind., designed by Tribute Design Systems. (Photo by Don Reynolds)

shape the cemetery, I mean provide formal structure in public cemeteries that traditionally have limited financial resources to properly maintain their land. Built forms, such as mausolea and columbaria, provide an architectural means to reimagine and reshape the marginal areas of a park’s outer boundaries and undeveloped areas.

Have you seen interest in cremation gardens picking up?

Grever & Ward: Cremation gardens are definitely a strong interest and have been for several years now. We see cemeteries deciding to build gardens in advance of the public’s request. That is the main difference. Until people see a well-landscaped cremation garden, the

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option probably doesn't cross their minds. It's a small leap of faith on the cemetery's part, but unless it's ventured in at least a small way, cremation remains a liability to the cemetery.

Tribute: Absolutely – while it seems obvious that interest in cremation gardens will rise with the increasing rate of cremation, this is not always the case. An increasing percentage of people are opting not to use any cemetery following a cremation. Therefore, for cemeteries to maintain their relevancy, they have to enhance the value of their services by offering appealing memorialization options, multiple levels of pricing and/or add-on features, such as record retention and assistance with genealogical studies.

How can a cemetery maximize the value of cremation gardens?

Grever & Ward: Probably the biggest mistake that cemeteries make in

providing cremation options is to shortchange the environment around them. It's been common for a cemetery's first venture into cremation facilities to be the purchase of a small, "out-of-the-box" columbarium and set it in a piece of lawn as an object to view from the road. I recently heard someone describe these as appearing that they fell out of the sky. It's a good description.


Columbaria and other cremation products are a financial commitment to be sure, but the quickest way to guarantee their failure is to not provide the supporting landscaping, pavements, benches, etc., that make them into a destination that people feel they want to visit and remain in for a while.

The second most important factor is, in our opinion, the garden location. Just as in retail business property, a prominent, highly visible location can be a key to promotion and value.

Finally, education and advertising

can be very important in maximizing the value of a cremation garden. Perspective renderings of a garden, pre-construction, are very helpful in promoting cremation gardens when the potential purchasers have never seen one. These perspectives also help our clients visualize what they are developing.

Tribute: Cremation gardens have evolved from simply dividing an adult-size grave space into two or three cremation lots to a garden that incorporates columbariums, in-ground burial, art features, benches and heavily landscaped settings. One such example is found in Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum in Dayton, Ohio. The cemetery wished to add cremation inventory to a site set on a steep, rocky outcropping. In order to enhance the value of the columbarium, an observation tower and committal plaza were designed into the site. A road previously surrounding the location was



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removed in order to create a walking trail that is adjacent to newly created family estates and natural cremation gardens.

Pinelawn Memorial Park in Milwaukee had removed an aging fountain that was the focal point in a prominent garden. In response to lot owner requests, an 18-foot cascading waterfall was designed to take the place of the fountain. In order to offset the cost, a plaza surrounded by columbariums that incorporate 432 cremation niches was constructed.

Perceived value is often the result of a good plan followed by quality construction. Contrary to (popular) belief, cremation with memorialization is seldom selected because of low price. Rather, lack of pressure to make the burial in a timely manner and the multiple memorialization options that are available make cremation memorialization the option of choice.

What have you found is the prime location for a cremation garden in a cemetery?

Grever & Ward: A prime garden location is one that is seen by the greatest number of people and presented in a very positive way. Sites that occur along a cemetery main entrance road or in a well-visited location such as a mausoleum courtyard fit these criteria. Many cemeteries have land that was left undeveloped near their frontages. Since the gardens require very little space, those areas can be prime. The exception is if they are too close to a noisy highway.

Within these well-traveled locations, we also try to locate the gardens on an elevated piece of ground. Just as with conventional burial sections, people like to have their interment and memorial sites on high ground. It implies a dry site and also creates an uplifting feeling when the garden is approached.

Closeness to the cemetery road is a positive site factor, but the garden should be far enough back from the road to provide a quiet, somewhat private atmosphere.

Tribute: Prime location for a cremation garden, like development of any other burial option, is dependent on topography, accessibility and general desirability of the site. A master plan needs to take in the space requirements of each burial option and project future demand. That said, we do find a high degree of acceptance for cremation gardens that are incorporated within traditional interment gardens or within immediate proximity to them. This method of planning allows for family members with different preferences to be buried within the vicinity of one another.

SMBW: This varies widely and is site specific – each cemetery is unique in its challenges and potential for development.



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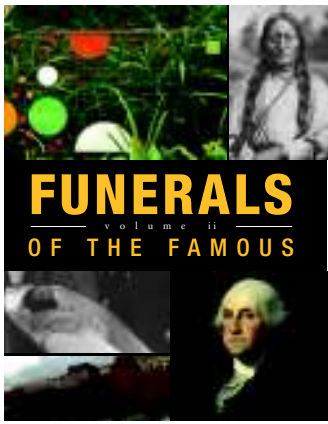
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Has the cost of a cremation garden increased in recent years?

Grever & Ward: The cost of the gardens on a square-foot basis probably has risen, but that's mainly because of the greater use of above-ground structures – columbaria,

niche walls and other options. We designed our first cremation garden back in 1978. They were not that common back then, and most of the plans were for ground inurnment surrounding a single, small columbarium as a centerpiece. Most of it was devoted to urn burial and flush memorials.

Above-ground structures involve more expense, but they are a critical component of most gardens. To counter the additional development costs, we recommend a garden master plan for the ultimate build-out, followed by construction of a relatively small part of that. This minimizes the initial costs, but it should include a variety of options to serve as a trial balloon. If people gravitate to a specific option, it is much less expensive to adjust the master plan than to build things that are not saleable.

Tribute: The cost of designing and constructing the average cremation garden has increased over the years simply because 1) the complexity of designs has increased; 2) there are a greater number of memorialization options and 3) value-enhancing art features and landscaping details are being incorporated into the plans.

SMBW: We haven't noticed an increase, certainly not one exceeding typical annual inflation.



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What are some new trends in columbariums?

Grever & Ward: From what we've seen, the main changes to columbariums seem to be generally larger units, varied shapes with more detailing and, most recently, single niche fronts versus scored panels of two or more niche fronts.

Alternative interior structures (versus traditional precast concrete) are also common now. This seems to be done for ease of installation and/or economy. Whatever the choice for interiors, quality and design life will be key to the long-term success of those systems.

From the standpoint of landscape architects, we have been very excited about the flexibility of the new interior structures, including smaller

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Photos: A cremation garden at North Burial Grounds in Bristol, R.I. (Photo courtesy of Grever & Ward)

precast concrete components, as well as the other materials. It allows us to plan niche walls that are very flexible in shape and height. They can be tailored to each individual site, and the results are much more varied and attractive than the stand-alone rectangular units that were common years ago. If a niche wall can define the perimeters of a garden, it can become an outdoor room that is comfortable, exclusive and more valuable as a result.

Tribute: New trends in columbarium design are often reflected in the type of cemetery the columbarium is located in. State and national veteran cemeteries are constructing columbariums involving thousands of niches (usually four to six levels high) in each phase of construction. The character of these columbariums is gained by their sheer size and uniform appearance. Columbariums in other types of cemeteries often feature several styles of niches, including side by side, double depth, oversized and individual. Within recent years, more manufacturers have entered the market with prefabricated columbariums, often imported from China, to compete for a low-price option.

Where do you see planning trends going in the future?

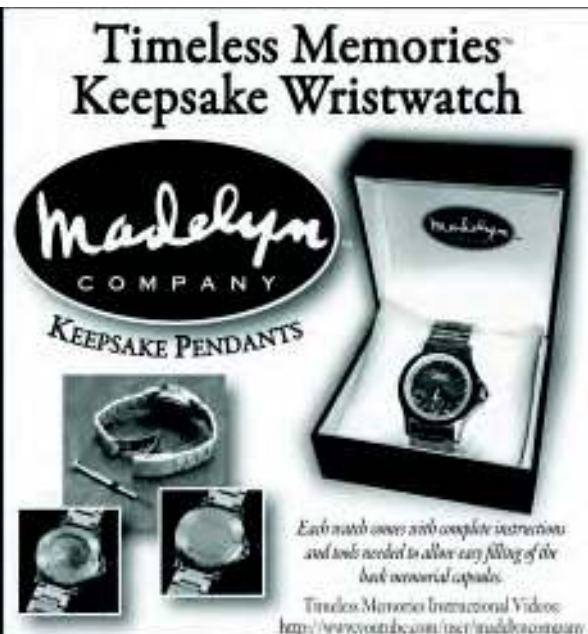
Grever & Ward: It is a difficult time to predict planning trends, other than the obvious increase in cremation. It feels to us that many cemeteries are in a wait-and-see mode right now, as are many other businesses. The

danger in this is that the length of time needed to prepare for expansions also seems to grow every year due to local and environmental requirements. The combination of these factors may cause some to fall behind in providing inventory. We've seen that firsthand, and the results are probably very painful, financially.

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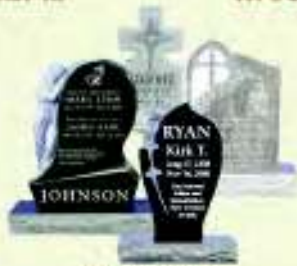
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Photos: A design for a waterfall columbarium plaza at Pinelawn Memorial Park in Milwaukee. (Photo courtesy of Tribute Design Systems)

Long-range planning and cost estimating can counter these problems at a small fraction of the cost of the physical development. It can provide a cemetery board or manager with the time and information needed to make sound development decisions.

Future planning will have to provide an even greater variety of cemetery options but not ignore the fundamentals. Those include the nuts and bolts of how the cemetery is maintained and serviced, as well as the physical realities of terrain, soils, drainage and supporting facilities. At the same time, the fundamental beauty of the property, especially the landscape, cannot be tossed aside. Landscaping of a property can be done in a much more manageable but attractive way with careful planning and selection. The public supports the cemetery development in the end, and it's clear that the beauty of the property is a driving force when they select their sites. Recognition of these basics will hopefully shape planning trends; time will tell.

Tribute: Cemeteries of all sizes are embracing the need and benefits of developing a master plan. Recent advancements in cemetery record-keeping and digital mapping are increasingly important. Master plan creation, site planning and digitizing systems are activities that can and should be done in parallel with one another.

The size of construction phases, and corresponding capital expenditures, has seen a reduction in recent years – a trend that is bound to continue. Generally speaking, pre-construction sales and marketing activity has also slowed, which has reduced the size of new projects.

SMBW: In the near future, I see a more frugal approach to spending by maximizing existing undeveloped land inventory. Our culture is becoming more sensitive to sustainable practices that use land thoughtfully in the form of columbaria, mausolea and ground interment vaults. Driven by aging baby boomers' desire for self-expression and an appreciation of a unique "sense of place," we see cemetery design trending toward a more custom design model in order to create an authentic intervention that is inspired by each cemetery's landscape. In other words, structures that are designed in harmony with the site – a unique sense of place as opposed to the typical prefabricated, out-of-the-box model. ❖