

Turning the Corner on Cremation

— by David G. Ward

Cremation, for many years, was seen as an economic threat to cemeteries. Some still view it that way. Quietly and steadily growing in the percentage of cemetery services, inurnment was seen as the low-cost option that erodes a cemetery's income. The practice of cremation, which was accepted (if not preferred) in Catholic cemeteries, brought very little to the table in terms of income or attractive interment options. Across the spectrum of all cemeteries, a majority of cremation services never even concluded in those properties.

When we began designing “*cremation only*” sections or gardens about 30 years ago, they were few and far between. No longer the case, cremation gardens are now a part of most of the cemeteries that we serve. Most importantly, they are often being highlighted and promoted instead of being quietly

tucked away in some obscure, leftover site that is otherwise unusable.

The Income Potential of Cremation Gardens - Promoting is Important

If cremation gardens are to become an important part of the cemetery, the choices that they offer must be openly presented to the public. Aesthetics, landscaping, features, visitor comfort and memorialization options need to be a fundamental part of each design. If the acceptance of cremation alternatives in cemeteries has been hampered by anything, it is obscurity and treatment as a “second tier” choice.

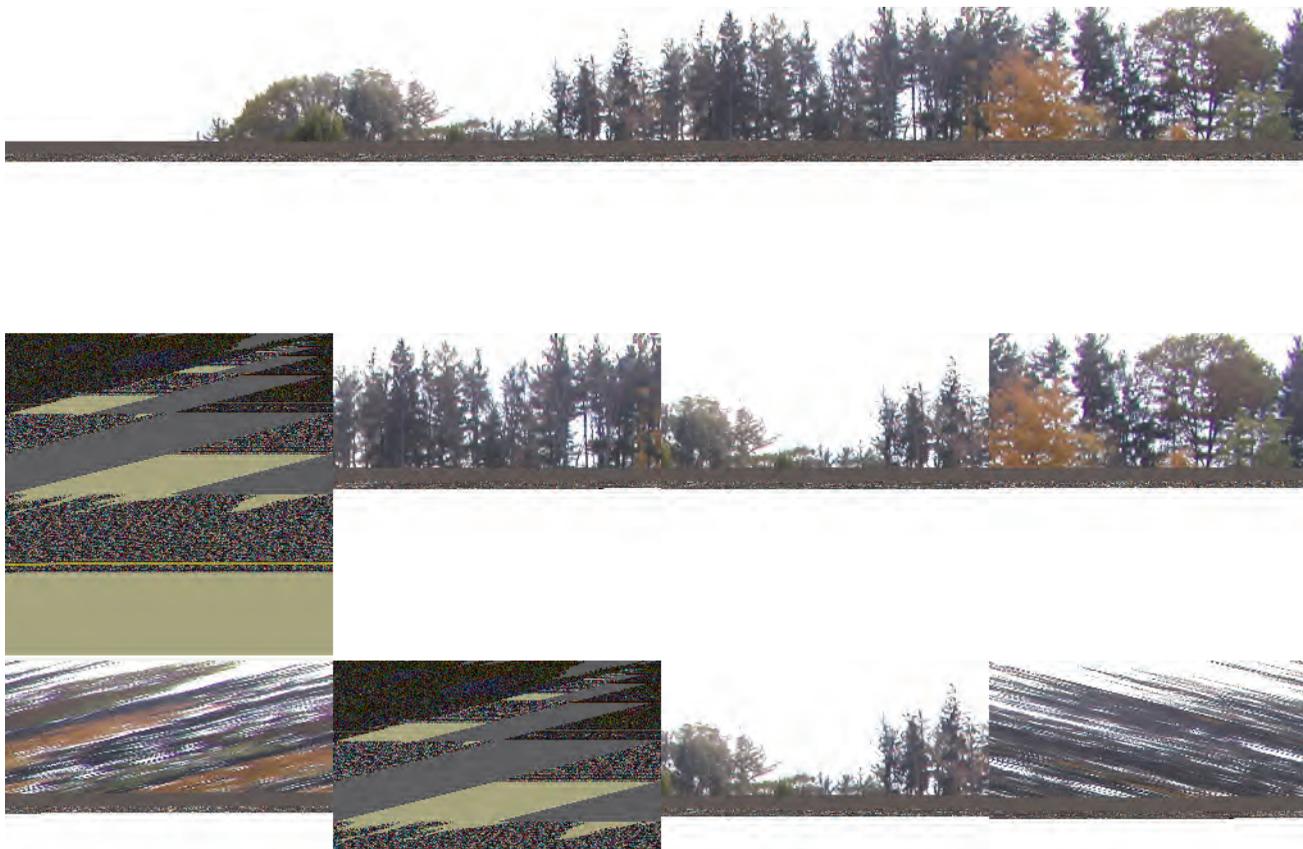
The income potential of cremation sections has been underrated since the beginning but is now beginning to catch up. To be sure, some individuals choose cremation as a lower-cost alternative to

full burial services, but the cost savings are more pronounced in the funeral end rather than in the cemetery products. Cemeteries are now committing more deliberately to the development of attractive gardens and the support of rational pricing of those facilities. The goal isn't profit for profit's sake, but the continued viability of the cemetery as traditional service numbers decline.

Very recently, we began to gather cemetery cremation product prices from our clients in an informal way, including the unit prices (niches, ground plots, etc.) and accompanying service costs. These were not just wishful numbers for those products, but current prices that were being realized in sales every day.

Greater Income with Cremation Gardens than Traditional Burials

With some surprise, this polling revealed that cremation gardens easily had income values that are two to four times that of regular burial sections, in terms of revenue per acre. Couple this with the fact that cremation areas require less labor and maintenance than traditional burial sections, and the implications are clear.



Cremation is an Option that Can Help Long-term Cemetery Economics

Cremation is an option that can help, not hurt, the long-term economics of the cemetery. More subtle but critical advantages of gardens include the need to develop five to six times less land to accommodate the same number of families. Reduced development and maintenance costs, land conservation and higher acreage revenues are all welcomed qualities at a time when so many cemeteries are struggling. By extending the “life” of the cemetery through space efficiency, cremation choices also postpone the need for acquiring land or simply having no more space to offer.

Admittedly, many cemeteries still charge extremely low prices for the interment of cremated remains, but usually not when a dedicated, attractive and prominent garden is involved. As with most products, a threshold of quality and distinctiveness is needed to realize prices that can support the cemetery’s services. If the only cremation-related option is burial in a full size grave, none of the efficient land use or attractive qualities of a designed garden are realized.



Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery, Niskayuna, NY
(1997) 0.10 Acres 462 Inurnments

Despite personal or other preferences, it seems clear that cremation choices are here to stay, and dedicated sections will be key to the economic health of cemeteries. Many already recognize that and have responded. Outside of cemeteries, others already have also taken advantage of the changing public preferences. Cremation gardens and niche developments are cropping up as a part of funeral home properties and church structures, among other locations.

The real risk to cemeteries is that the public begins to view cremation as the alternative to cemeteries and not simply one more option within the cemetery. By taking the lead in developing modestly sized, expandable and adjustable cremation gardens, a cemetery can commit to a stronger future with them, than without.

David G. Ward is president of CCC Supplier Member Grever & Ward, Inc. He may be reached at 800.952.0078 or info@greverandward.com.



Swan Point Cemetery, Providence, RI- Cremation Garden
(1984) 0.4 Acres 1,018 Inurnments