

GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

SACRED SPACES, COMMON PLACES: THE CEMETERY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CITY

THOMAS HARVEY

When considering a topic for a tribute to Wilbur Zelinsky, I immediately thought of cemeteries. The first meeting of the Association of American Geographers I attended was in 1973, at which he presented his work on cemetery place-names, later published as “Unearthly Delights” (1976). His enthusiasm for cemeteries as objects of geographical study made an impression, and in a landscape seminar at Pennsylvania State University in 1975, I spoke on the topic. Now, I return to the subject with a look at the cemeteries of Portland, the largest city in Oregon—not their internal form but as urban land use and as places in cities. My perspective in this essay derives from recent news stories about the city’s cemeteries. Cemeteries have historically been seen primarily as sacred spaces, and that aspect should not be forgotten; people are, after all, laid to rest in them. However, ordinary urban cemeteries are increasingly viewed as amenity landscapes that provide historic, scenic, and ecological values to the communities that surround them (Jackson 1967–1968; Howett 1977; El Nasser 1998). The population of the five Oregon counties in the Portland Metropolitan Area, in northwestern Oregon, grew by 27 percent in the 1990s, but suburban expansion has been constrained by an urban growth boundary (UGB).¹ Over the same decade the city of Portland’s population grew by 21 percent, although a little more than half of that was through annexation (Edmonston, Pepos, and Stewart 2003). The recognition of cemeteries as protected open spaces in the urban landscape may be particularly felt in such a rapidly growing, but bounded, area.

At the time of their establishment, old cemeteries were typically a fringe-belt land use in American cities. Established on what were, at the time, the outskirts of the built-up areas, many cemeteries are now surrounded by urban development and have become intimate parts of the urban fabric through annexations of outlying territory. Aside from small churchyard burial grounds and family plots, cemeteries were seldom planned as an urban land use. In “Unearthly Delights,” Zelinsky wrote: “In few of the many maps and drawings of nineteenth-century American cities that I have recently examined is the cemetery an integral part of the initial plan. When the cemetery did come into being in plan or in actuality, it was obviously an after-thought” (1976, 172). As William H. Whyte, writing about new towns of the twentieth century, had noted earlier, “In no new town plan that I have seen is there space allotted to a cemetery” (1968, 240). David Sloane pointed out more recently that “new cemeteries are usually unwelcome in the neighborhoods of America” (1991, 243).

✦ DR. HARVEY is a professor of geography at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon 97207.