

Planning for Cremation Interment

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Cremation has been rising over the past several decades, with rates currently around 25 percent nationwide, varying greatly between states but nonetheless growing continually. The Cremation Association of North America (CANA) projects almost 50 percent of future deaths by 2025 to result in cremation in America. Because of this, many cemeteries are competing to offer creative choices and options to inter and memorialize individuals and families. Industry suppliers today are producing a wider variety of products for both indoor and outdoor locations. Since many people prefer to be buried outdoors because of personal preference or limited finances, cremation gardens have been increasing in popularity, offering a mix of products and interment types.

Planning for cremation, whether it's a dense garden area or spread throughout the cemetery grounds, needs the same design consideration as a new interment section or even a new mausoleum. Sound, early land and financial planning for cremation interments will make optimal use of often-limited cemetery burial ground, solidify the financial components of the project, and better serve the community by offering a variety of interment options and pricing. An integrated approach is optimal, one that combines financial analysis and projections, land planning, and design in developing a new cremation area.

Basic Business Planning Process

Planning begins with evaluation of a cemetery's overall mission and role in the community, as well as prioritizing goals and objectives to best meet that mission. Communication is critical in order to establish relationships with local funeral homes and maintain awareness of interment preferences within the local community. Analysis of immediate and future local market trends and demographics then needs to be considered, in light of the space available for burial. Once the target market has been identified, the next step should include analysis of competition, products offered and their relative success.

Business decisions now need to be made, determining the desired investment return to make the project economically feasible. The

Cremation garden integrated around a renovated building which now serves as a cremation center and chapel.





Character sketch showing a medium density cremation garden maintaining the existing memorial park style of the cemetery.

quality of the design features, products and infrastructure needs to be weighed against achieving the financial returns and meeting the established goals.

Financial planning components involve establishing project development budget, product-pricing strategy, long-term capital projections, development and perpetual care costs, as well as projection of annual sales to meet short-term revenue goals. Marketing, management and maintenance decisions need to be made, analyzing options for marketing strategies, pre-need sales forecasting, management policies, and maintenance staffing impacts.

Design & Planning Considerations

Until recently, few outdoor cremation areas were carefully planned and integrated within the overall cemetery. Many were lacking the design detail that creates a unique sense of place in these garden areas. Others have paid attention to aesthetics but have failed to achieve market potential due to lack of sufficient analysis or a variety of other reasons.

Early planning enables cemeteries to properly plan for cremation interment and study the property holistically, analyzing available land for burial against interment trends in the local community. Then design goals can be established, determining if a cremation area wants to be a focal point, a distinct separate area from older sections, or blended in throughout the cemetery to maintain the existing character. A number of factors should be considered in choosing the optimal site(s) for cremation, including evaluating site opportunities and constraints such as drainage, slopes, circulation, noise, access, views, visibility, aesthetics, security, etc. For example, a site feature such as a pond, wooded area, or a hilltop with great views may become the logical area for a higher density cremation garden, allowing these premium areas to serve more people, extend the active life of the cemetery, and generate more revenue.

Consideration of density and product mix strategy logically follows site selection, ideally stemming from market research and pricing. Various densities can achieve different balances between development costs, maintenance impacts, sales, and overall yield per square foot. The highest density

can come close to 1 interment per square foot, meaning a modest, 1/4-acre garden could eventually have over 10,000 interments. Clearly, significant revenues are possible. However, these higher density gardens often require more capital investment to achieve that density, such as incorporating niche walls, ossuaries, cenotaphs, etc., and aesthetics are sometimes compromised. In some cases, dense interment areas are necessary to extend the active life of the cemetery due to limited expansion areas. In other cases, lower density gardens can achieve more reasonable development and maintenance costs while maintaining a more open, landscaped garden setting.

New cremation gardens, regardless of density goals, require careful integration of product offerings with site and landscape elements to maintain the scale and character of the cemetery. Cemeteries are often viewed as parks and gardens, and the challenge is to achieve a balance between density and aesthetics, perhaps in a design style unique to the region or community. There is no single component that will determine the density of a cremation garden area; rather each cemetery must prioritize the important issues and achieve the most logical balance of goals.

Bearing in mind that cremation rates and product offerings are continually evolving, an overall master plan for cremation interments demands flexibility, both in terms of product and pricing options as well as size and expansion. Flexible plans can develop only a certain portion of the planned garden with a wide variety of products available. Phasing and mixing these products and prices will demonstrate which products are successful and fulfill the community's need. As the garden needs to expand, the plan may change to reflect certain products' popularity and perhaps a new preferred density, thus responding to the changing market. For example, a higher-density niche wall may replace some lower density cremation products such as upright granite markers and boulder estates. A fountain memorial may offer a higher demand product than the planned ossuary and cenotaph based upon sales. Allowing room for

Continued on page 55



Low maintenance landscape softens interment offerings in this dense cremation garden

Cremation Internment

Continued from page 27

expansion and change will better serve the community and allow the cemetery to remain competitive.

Maintenance is a key issue in planning for cremation. The increased short- and long-term costs involved are often overlooked initially. Depending upon the infrastructure constructed, the costs may only involve increased staff time pruning and cleaning a garden area. Landscape materials may be selected for ease of maintenance and water use to minimize these increased costs. If desired, drought-tolerant plants can become cost-effective solutions for areas with restrictive water use and limited maintenance budgets. Greater capital will need to be allocated to perpetual care with increased infrastructure such as niche walls and outdoor garden mausolea. Conversely, distinct higher maintenance garden areas may be planned and contracted annually, with the outside maintenance cost included in the price of the product.

Basic Design & Planning Process

Concurrent with business planning, site analysis identifies opportunities and constraints within the existing cemetery and expansion areas, identifying areas with potential for higher density burials based upon available space and occupation of cemetery. A questionnaire completed by the cemetery is critical, often outlining development goals and integrating operational, maintenance, and business planning components crucial to the development of a cremation area.

Several plan alternatives are then prepared that respond to key issues identified in site analysis and programming. An overall master plan for development or redevelopment synthesizes optimal components from these alternatives, determining size, scale, phasing, and construction cost projections for the design in order to meet density and revenue goals. Construction drawings can be completed

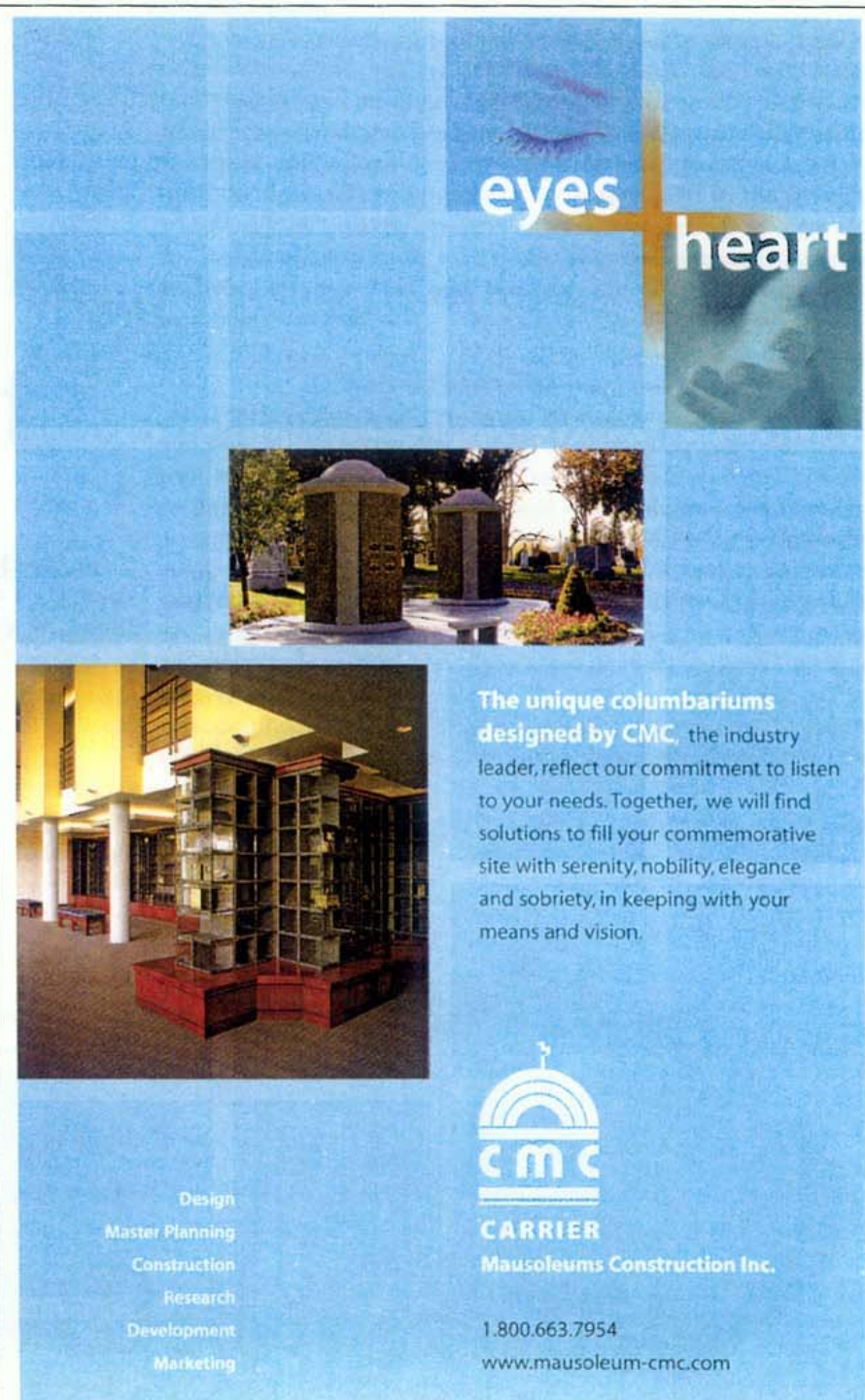
for a first phase development to a level determined by the cemetery's capability of construction and management.

Planning for cremation interments should be considered as much as other methods of disposition as it has already or will soon outpace ground burials in many parts of the country. Planning and integration of outdoor cremation products and gardens is a relatively new issue, often requiring a thorough analysis of the cemetery and operations. If cemeterians engage the



basic process outlined here, they can enhance the cemetery's aesthetics, image, revenue, and service to the community, while most importantly providing a dignified place of rest.

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