The City of the Dead: 
The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery

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ABSTRACT Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland is more than a place of rest and reflection. It is a place of environmental and cultural sustainability and an expression of an attitude toward nature and environment unique to African-American culture. Through the more than hundred-year cultivation of an African-American cultural overlay, the Cemetery has been transformed from graveyard to a unique burial ground. Founded in 1872, Mount Auburn Cemetery is the last remaining African-American burial space in Baltimore, and it celebrates this transformative layering. Holding the remains of some 43,000 Baltimoreans, the cemetery represents the paradoxes of a culture defined by a century of interaction with the sacred as defined by rural experience, and that has favored the urban landscape as a necessary post-slavery gesture. In addition to its cultural and historic burial functions, Mount Auburn creates an ecological balance by providing designed green spaces, a cultural connection to nature and landscapes of memory, and a respite from the urban setting in which it is consciously located. This paper proposes that the African-American expression of form visible in Mount Auburn is marked by improvisation and an often superficial, chaotic appearance. This expression of form contributes to the sustainability and preservation of this unique environment. In contemporary American life, past African-American symbolic expressions of death can easily fade into the background as inconsequential final statements when examined next to European representations of memorializing the dead on the American landscape. The “rural cemetery”—like other expressions that foreground a culturally specific history of dominance and ownership—belongs to a New World need to link the dead and the living in a continuous cultural endeavor to reconstruct the meaning and refigure the shape of the land through spiritual practices that justified ownership, use, and signification. The African-American cultural overlay provides a lens to not only state the existence of a hidden African-American life, but more importantly to disrupt the continuum between life and death by beginning to comprehend the complexity of constructed landscapes that purposefully omit as much as they explain.

KEYWORDS cultural overlay, rural cemetery, environmental attitude, sustainability

MOUNT AUBURN, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Originally laid out as a traditional rural cemetery, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland, was built and owned by African-Americans as part of the United Methodist Church (Sharp Street United Methodist Church Archives n.d.). Over time, in addition to its designated cultural and historic functions, the cemetery served to preserve the environment by providing organized green and open space. Through an overlay of African-American cultural practices, a connection to the land and nature and to the now and hereafter, an orchestrated disconnection from the cemetery’s urban setting has evolved. African-American expressions of form, use, and practice, which are marked by improvisational applications of design that often appear chaotic, constitute a cultural overlay in Mount Auburn Cemetery and contributes to the sustainability and preservation of the natural environment and human society (Parker, 1999).

Historical Background and Significance

In 1732, landowner Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland, purchased lots and consolidated them into a 2,600-acre plantation that covered the present day neighborhoods of Westport, Mount Winans, Morrell Park, and Violetville in Baltimore, Maryland. The following year Carroll deeded the Westport tracts over to the Baltimore Iron Works Company. The eventual closing of the iron works in the early 19th century opened up the land for subdivision. In 1872, the Reverend James Patrick of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church in Baltimore purchased a 32-acre parcel. Here, the church established the first, and at that time only, burial ground for Baltimore's African-Americans. The cemetery, originally called the “City of the Dead for Colored People,” was incorporated with its urban and rural roots by an Act of the Maryland State Legislature on January 4, 1882. Perhaps to establish a line of design legitimacy comparable to the Green Mount Cemetery in white Baltimore, the cemetery was officially renamed “Mount Auburn” in 1894 by the leaders of the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church. On March 10, 1886, the General Assembly of Maryland sanctioned the Trustees of Sharp Street
Memorial United Methodist Church to erect a small chapel on the corner of the property establishing the "Sharp Street Mission" which provided a place of worship for the adjacent Mount Winans Community. The deed for the Chapel was transferred to Mount Winans United Methodist Church on June 8, 1886 (Sharp Street United Methodist Church Archival Center n.d.).

The cemetery, still owned by Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, was entered into the National Register of Historic Places on September 7, 2001. Before that, the site was designated a Baltimore City Historic Landmark by the Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation on December 12, 1986. The cemetery grounds are of national significance, as they preserve and sustain history by revealing the past ancestors who experienced slavery, the civil rights movement, and had the vision to secure a future for a people engaged in centuries of struggle. Many people important to African-American life are buried there, including John H. Murphy, who founded the Afro-American newspaper; Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson, the NAACP leader whose career of nonviolent civil-rights campaigns began in 1931; Joe Gains, the world lightweight champion from 1901 to 1908, and the first African-American to hold the title; William Ashbie Hawkins, the first African-American to run for the United States Senate in Maryland; Dr Louise Young, the first African-American doctor in Maryland; and unnamed freed slaves who contributed untold sacrifices towards the improvement of the human condition (Sharp Street United Methodist Church Archival Center n.d.).

Community Context
The 33-acre site of Mount Auburn Cemetery is located within the city limits of Baltimore, Maryland and is accessed by State Highway 295 (MD295, the Baltimore/Washington Parkway) and Interstate 95 (Figure 1). Mount Auburn Cemetery is an integral part of the Mount Winans, Lakeland, and Westport neighborhoods, which began as small farms outside of the City of Baltimore. Development in Westport consisted of a farm estate and 11 small row houses. After World War I, Baltimore City annexed Westport and the surrounding neighborhoods. The extension of the City streetcar line followed and development accelerated. As new bridges and rail lines drew industrial business into the area, residential communities formed in small semi-isolated pockets separated by rail lines and industrial tracts of land. The community's economic survival depended on the proximity of industrial activity. The Consolidated Gas, Electric, Light, and Power Steam Plant, the Carr-Lowery Glass Plant, the Westport Pacing Brick Company, Apex Wood Products, and Maryland Veneer and Basket created employment, spurring prosperity and growth within these communities. Subsequently, between 1970 and 2000, the middle-income neighborhoods of Westport, Mount Winans, and Lakeland lost jobs (City of Baltimore Department of Planning 2005). The loss of middle-income jobs and housing changed the physical and social demographics of these neighborhoods.

Today the neighborhoods surrounding the cemetery are comprised of row houses, low-income apartments, public housing built after World War II, scattered commercial and retail offerings, and several industrial and manufacturing sites. New market rate housing is an emerging force in an area along the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River. Mount Auburn Cemetery sits adjacent to the Middle Branch providing 33-acres of permeable land that contributes directly to the Patapsco River watershed. There are also well-established community institutions surrounding and defining the cemetery. These include the Westport Academy School, Lakeland Elementary and Middle School, Wegworth Park, Paca Park, and the Westport Light Rail Stop. These communities and institutions have a strong connection to the cemetery that serves as another sense of place for thousands of friends and family centrally located among these neighborhoods.

Cultural Context
Those who used Mount Auburn Cemetery transformed it into a unique place. The use or actions of those to whom the cemetery belongs leaves a cultural imprint or overlay which shapes the land. Exploring how the

Culture is defined as a group of people who think and act in similar ways, and implies that behaviors, values, beliefs, and attitudes distinguish the group from other external parts of society (Parker 1999). Culture, as a way of being, affects people's view of the world, organizing shared histories, and influencing and creating shared values. Subculture theory, however, proposes that as a unique culture within the United States, African-Americans have different environmental views and behaviors than Euro-Americans despite their shared environment (Parker 1999). African-American life functions in and around a profound history of African slavery, the global organizer of the cultural and economic fabric of at least three continents for hundreds of years. This is important in grasping the cultural overlay applied to landscape: deciphering the cognitive order that enslaved people constructed in the environments which they shared with their enslavers (Gunsburg 2007, 38).

THE RURAL CEMETERY FORM

The original name, "City of the Dead for Colored People," reflected the obvious segregation of American institutions in both life and death during the late 19th
Century. The owners of Mount Auburn in Baltimore followed the trend of the times laying out a rural cemetery typical of the period (Figure 2). Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts is the forerunner of the rural cemetery movement and is characterized by curvilinear forms that relate to the site's topography (Figure 3). Mount Auburn in Baltimore has a simpler, less dramatic form representative of many of the rural cemeteries of the period.

Less clear than form was the identification of a rural place as a functional urban entity—a city of the dead. This is of particular significance, as the growing concern

Jones  229
for eternal salvation and health became prevalent, cemeteries abandoned traditional urban forms and locations by taking on aspects of the country or rural form to create pure and sacred space. In the early 18th century popular opinion connected urban cemeteries and churchyards to the spread of communicable diseases and epidemics. Urban cemeteries and churchyards were viewed as unsightly and unsafe for the mourning of the dead. Rural cemeteries were usually located on large tracts of farmland outside the physical boundaries of the city. They were created to mitigate some of the complexity of urban life and became a “landscape symbol” for both city and country (Sloane 1991, 13).

Several forms of burying the dead in America were prevalent before the development of the rural cemetery movement. They included:

- Clumps of graves situated on family property or the family farm as a personal gesture.
- Churchyards and private vaults as more communal or civic statements.
- Potter’s fields; this included any gravesites for the destitute as socially responsible activities.
- Pioneer graves, which were isolated, located near the place of death as statements of preservation.

These forms of burial often posed health and real estate difficulties, and became socially impractical to maintain. Many family graveyards, particularly on southern plantations and farms, did not receive attention and were eventually abandoned. Churchyards were becoming difficult to maintain due to the value of property as commercial and industrial growth spread rapidly through the Northeast. Headstones were rare during this period and many family graveyards lost meaning from one generation to the next, weakening arguments for continuous maintenance, which led to abandonment. In the cities where accessible land was very valuable, subterranean vaults were considered an excellent use of space, but eventually caused problems. For example, in New York City in 1807, the city ended internment in vaults due to odors of decay and consequences to public health (Sloane 1991, 37).

Americans eventually became more willing to consider the environment in which they buried their dead. They were looking for a place that did not evoke the city’s density, pace, and hardness. As David Sloane states, “Only when cemeteries abandoned traditional urban forms and took on aspects of the country did they become rural. Only when Americans embraced mid-nineteenth century rural values did they discover a new burial place” (Sloane 1991, 43).

Mount Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts was the first rural cemetery designed in the romantic style (Pregill 1998, 456). As in New York, Boston in the 1820s was in an environmental crisis. Questions arose as to whether the interment of the dead in city burial grounds or town commons was healthy, if burial in vaults was discriminatory in a democratic society, and whether the city government could provide safe and appropriate burial places. Concurrently, citizens began to have a new attitude toward nature and wanted their cities to appear more naturalistic. This was critical to the establishment of the rural cemetery movement.

Cambridge’s Mount Auburn Cemetery was founded in 1831. Jacob Bigelow, founder of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, invited business and civic leaders to discuss the development of an ornamental cemetery to be located approximately 10 miles from Boston on a parcel of land known by local residents as Sweet Auburn. The new cemetery would be an example of place-making based on European landscape gardening. It would also be the beginning of a movement of physically locating the dead away from the living within a naturalistic setting (Sloane 1991, 46). The new location offered a healthy, spacious, secure, and celebratory environment for the interment of loved ones.

Mount Auburn in Cambridge began as a joint effort of urban reformers and horticulturalists; its design was strictly planned. The designers of Mount Auburn established the American idea of cemetery as a multi-layered institution steeped in the meaning of a unique and sacred space for the dead in society. Designed by
Henry A. S. Dearborn and Alexander Wadsworth, the cemetery was composed of narrow roads conforming to the contours of the land. There were formal and informal plantings, small ponds, and pavilions and sites for ornamental tombs designed into the cemetery's landscape. Typical of rural romantic cemeteries to come, Mount Auburn in Cambridge was located just outside of the developed urban area on a site with distinguished natural features, set against the density and activity of the nearby city landscape. The designers encouraged visitors to reflect upon nature by making contrasting statements between the structure of urban life ending in death, and the ethereal and cerebral environment of life ever after. Distinctive natural areas were given descriptive names, such as Laurel Hill and The Dell for those visiting and for those at rest, whereas paths and roads were named after plants.

In general, the rural cemetery movement responded to the physical and psychological needs of an evolving urban society, creating secure, permanent, and attractive burial places. Rural cemeteries provided both instruction and pleasure by allowing visitors to enter in a state of possible anxiety and deliberate purpose, and hopefully depart calm and contemplative. Rural cemeteries not unlike Mount Auburn in Cambridge, with their carefully designed romantic landscapes, were also an important part of the development of a group of landscape designers who were the forerunners to landscape architects in America (Sloane 1991, 63).

THE RURAL CEMETERY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL OVERLAY
The African-American Attitude Toward Environment

The rural cemetery movement spread throughout the country, especially to the cities of the Northeast (Sloane 1991, 58). Mount Auburn in Baltimore holds a unique position common to both the Southern and the Atlantic Coast adaptations of the ideas of the movement, mainly because of its topography, microclimate, and subtly designed picturesque layout. As a cemetery owned and developed by African-Americans, Baltimore's Mount Auburn combined the vision of these designers with a unique way of reading and negotiating the American landscape: a cultural overlay that not only altered form but also greatly shifted the meaning of cemetery as place. These overlays were not readily sanctioned, nor seen as part of the discipline of landscape architecture or cemetery design, but were essential for defining place.

The Africans who were transplanted to North America came predominately from West Africa. The countries of West Africa had diverse religions with differing sensibilities of life and death, many of which taught that spirits occupied the world, and these spirits could be pleased with sacrifice and ritual. African slaves combined their own spiritual beliefs with newly imposed Western traditions within a sense of place in the new world to create a unique view of American landscapes. To start, C.L.R. James stated about slavery in Haiti, “Life was hard, and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa” (James 1938, 15-16). James continues with an exploration of plantations and death, particularly through suicide and homicide, as perceived relief from slavery. Toxic plants were the means for trans-continental travel back to Africa, “poison was their method” (James 1938, 16). In death, they could travel home. There was a plant knowledge base, either transported from Africa or inherited through working the land, that allowed slaves to negotiate life and death.

Slavery and landscape are inseparable lenses in the African-American creation of place. The right to own land, to harvest one's own crops, explore a forest or stream, or the self determination to create landscape, was tied to connecting possession of the land with possession of one's self (Smith 2007, 66). The political, economic, and social status of slaves was by definition controlled, as was their eternal relationship with nature. The slave system controlled space and the slave's right to move about in it. Spatial discrimination defines and racializes institutions and practices within the conceptualization of place (Liptszit 2007, 16). The burial itself was one such institution. To this day, contemporary
users of Mount Auburn Cemetery state, “I can appreciate the reason that the cemetery was established. It was our burial ground when no one else would accept us” (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009).

The exclusion from land and nature, even though slaves were connected to the soil by the system of bondage, caused a conflicted relationship to the land. The moral and aesthetic relationship of humans to nature was distorted. For slaves, green trees, golden fields, gently sloping hills, and running streams were things of beauty, yet this pastoral beauty was tied to the human misery that took place upon these fields. The system created contempt for agricultural labor that would conflict with ideas of stewardship and the beauty of nature, yet these ideas would become very important to African-Americans in terms of their place in the world. Labor upon the land should have been a source of pride, but was directly connected to subjugation. Still, the slave formed a strong bond with the soil. The master may have owned the crop, but the slave felt that he had created it (Vlach 1993). Slaves on their own, at a small scale, also engaged in cultivating the garden, hunting, and gathering roots and herbs. These activities helped slaves form another kind of attachment to the land. A mastery of roots and herbs, and knowledge of the local vegetation created some sense of social and spiritual power. Being knowledgeable in the ways of nature conferred a degree of independence to the slave, particularly related to matters of life and death.

During slavery, one's position in the world was determined by how and where one lived on the land. The plantation was designed in a hierarchical fashion to reinforce status. The big house, occupied by the plantation owner, was usually near the main road or means of transportation. The slave quarters were nearer the fields. The small structures of slave living quarters were located away from the high ground of the big house. Slaves knew they were being "put in their place," but this location afforded them some control of their immediate environment. Away from the direct observation of the master, the slave took an active role in claiming his or her territory and defining space. The slave's sense of place was expressed by thought, deed, and physical act (Vlach 1993). Shaping the landscape made captivity bearable. The creation of a special landscape was a reactive measure to a slave's position in the world and an inverse response to that of the master who sought dominance over nature and other humans. Slaves made subtle changes to their living spaces and sought to create an undetectable sense of place. These landscapes where often viewed as insignificant or unrecognizable by outsiders, but they were deliberate and possessed distinct features. The slave landscape was part of a secret world through which enslaved people navigated by a set of signs undetectable to the master (Ginsburg 2007, 37). These traces gave evidence, not only of the African-American occupation of the land, but of the shaping of the landscape. Most significantly, these landscapes possessed an ethereal quality defined by few boundaries or fixed sites. They expressed a desire for freedom and an environment that was boundless and characterized by movement and flexibility. Exploiting opportunities to assert their interests through secret practices was another way the environment afforded slaves a sense of control. Secret practices were key elements of survival for people without power or money, and fundamental to the emerging cultural overlay.

Another distinct element of the slave landscape was its informal quality. When slaves were allowed to locate their dwellings, for example, they would arrange them in what appeared to be random placements among the trees at the edge of cleared fields, or set a row of cabins at odd, irregular angles to one another. On the plantation, burial plots were also arranged in this manner. Slaves were often buried on marginal property that the plantation owner was unlikely to use for other "productive" purposes. Burial places have been described as "ragged patches of live-oak and palmetto and brier tangle which are a sign of graves within; graves scattered without symmetry, and often without headstones or headboards or sticks" (Chicora Foundation 2007). To European American observers the African-American system of place making, which embraced the unordered
and free-flowing quality of the natural world, appeared sloppy and unrefined. As John Vlach states “the loose ad hoc schemes of preferred paths and gathering places was created incrementally by a series of improvisational responses to the given landscape rules of white masters” (1993, 13). This improvisation may have evolved from the clandestine way slaves had to operate, without time, resources, or freedom, but it became a deliberate response to white culture, and it is the substance of much African-American forms of dance, music, and visual art.

Kimberly K. Smith notes that, “[s]laves occupied a sacred landscape that included both material and spiritual beings” (Smith 2007, 38). The landscape had spiritual meaning interpreted in many of the songs sung by slaves. Vernacular landscape features had religious meaning. Mountains were the heights one had to overcome in life, and valleys were the depressions and symbols of despair. The wilderness and the landscape itself often represented a place of spiritual seeking. The wilderness was where freedom awaited.

Many free Blacks and fugitive slaves established farming communities in the United States and Canada as a way to establish control over the natural environment. They wanted to occupy the world from a position of political and social equity. What African-Americans wanted most from emancipation was pursuit of the agrarian dream (Smith 2007, 51). It was thought that possession and productive use of land would prove Blacks equal and worthy of citizenship. Control of the land allowed them to develop a concern for good stewardship and establish a sustainable and morally beneficial relationship to the natural world. It made way for the development of new agricultural methods, including crop rotation and increased use of and new ways of applying fertilizer, which would help in creating a healthy relationship with the land and in healing the abuse upon the land caused by slavery.

Views about sustainability and protecting the land also grew out of religious and spiritual beliefs held by African-Americans. Humans, it was interpreted, had a natural calling to cultivate the earth. Their duty, as ordained by God, was to be steward over the animals and plants of the earth, turning the wilderness of creation into a flourishing garden. The fulfillment of this duty would yield the elevation of the soul and the preservation of morals and integrity (Smith 2007, 43). This emerging environmental attitude was critical in demonstrating the connection between physical and human nature, the tie between nature and human kind, and the strong belief African-Americans held that both people and land must be free.

Long after slavery, the idea that racial injustice affected the human relationship to the natural environment prevailed. Arguably, African-American culture embraced ideas and movements centered on preservation, urban reform, and conservation. Conservationists were concerned with prudence in the exploitation of natural resources. Preservationists were interested in the spiritual, recreational, and aesthetic value of the pristine land (Smith 2007, 68). Urban reformers were interested in the elimination of pollution and redesign of the urban landscape (Smith 2007, 73). Large numbers of African-Americans, while not visibly formal participants in these movements, understood their meaning related to environmental justice and culturally based environmental agendas (Smith 2007, 97). African-Americans historically have been inclined to participate in efforts to shape environmental behavior if there is a clear difference on issues of equity to be made through these actions. This inclination also includes a strong belief in the delicacy of nature and living in moral, spiritual, and physical harmony with nature in order to survive. The uneasy sum of these aspects of an environmental attitude creates the fabric of a complex cultural overlay.

The cultural overlay that transforms the landscape, in particular at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, is based on a framework derived from the African-American experience. This framework includes a specific knowledge and use of plants, communion with the world beyond and the ancestors related in spiritual practices within the landscape, improvisational manifestations of creative ideas and physical form, and an
inherited responsibility to protect and free nature. Through use and habitation by a unique cultural group, an overlay is imprinted upon the landscape. The resulting place, in this instance Mount Auburn Cemetery, is one that sustains culture and environment.

Site Design within the Cultural Overlay

Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore holds a wood frame structure housing an office, workshop, garage, and a vault house of brick and metal with historical significance, in deteriorating condition and in need of stabilization. Nevertheless, these and other markings (sometimes fugitive) within the cemetery grounds hold the key to its history. The grave markers, inscriptions, and location of gravesites and epitaphs reveal a working knowledge and strong attitude about life as it existed, life as it passes, and life as it continues.

A chain link fence surrounds most of the site. There is an approximately 30-foot long retaining wall of varying height on the north boundary of the site. Buildings on the site include a receiving vault (Figure 4) and a maintenance building. Asphalt roads divide the site into sections with section names including “Baby Land” and “Saints Rest” as descriptive and telling narratives (Figure 5). There are family plot markers, obelisks, monuments, and sculptures throughout. The types of markings located at gravesites include a variety of plants, wooden boards, statuary, dolls, photos, fabric, and other utilitarian items. This variety is very much related to African ritual and culture and is common at African-American gravesites throughout the Americas. “Marking the graves was important. The predominance of temporary items—plant and wood and planks, for example—suggests that it wasn’t particularly important for future generations to know the location of any specific grave” (Chicora Foundation 2007). The variety and ethereal quality of grave markings suggests that marking a grave may have been more an act of ongoing ritual than simply long term remembrance. The temporary and flexible nature of markers is also thought to be a way to ensure that there will always be room to bury additional family members.

The Mount Auburn Cemetery site is very overgrown, and full of both native and invasive plant species. The “naturalistic appearance” of the site can be explained as the lack of perpetual care, which those purchasing a site in the cemetery held unevenly, and the consequent personal responsibility for upkeep of the plots. More significant is the attitude toward nature, the land, and environment that is particular to African-American culture. The rural cemetery is formalized to be park-like or deny the reality of place. The romantic cemetery, as Mount Auburn in Cambridge exemplifies, is intended to create a serene reality, a “heaven on earth” (Pregill 1998, 457). Through the use of controlled planting and topography, aesthetic treatment, and grand monuments, the...
Figure 5. Mount Auburn Cemetery Site Map (National Association of Black Engineers, University of Maryland, Baltimore County 2002)

Euro-American design often denies the fact that this is a place for the dead. Once overlaid by African-American culture, the cemetery becomes “uncontrolled” as exemplified by Mount Auburn in Baltimore. Cemeteries in which African-Americans were buried often had grave depressions and mounded graves that signified the resting place of the dead. Grass growing over graves is not of great importance, and the use of specimen or symbolic planting is not often employed. Simplicity in planting and design is the common element in these cemeteries, with formalized planting often seen as an intrusion that would disturb the dead and the grave itself. Baltimore’s Mount Auburn Cemetery thus started as a growing and complex city within the context of a rural setting—a City of the Dead.

Ritual, Custom, and History Expressed through an African-American Cultural Overlay

The naturalistic design, random appearance, and pattern of graves and monuments in cemeteries overlaid by African-American culture are often viewed as a sign of neglect as compared to the mowed lawns and tidy rows of graves seen in Euro-American Cemeteries. This view often negates the value to culture and environment held in these places. These cemeteries express the importance of ritual and ceremony over form and related Euro-American concepts of perpetual maintenance.

The historical relationship of slave to master strongly influenced the elaborateness of the burial ceremonies. Many pre-Civil War gravestones of African-American slaves have not been found, but evidence to substantiate the desire to ensure their right to a funeral exists (Sloane 1991, 13).

The cemetery also exists in African-American culture as an important aspect in preserving community. “It represents the cultural, historical, religious and social customs of African-American people, the historical nature, location, history, and current participation,” and “I think on the markers. For instance, a marker indicates ‘slave’ at a site,” are statements expressed by Mount Auburn users reaffirming a place connected to people (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009). Slave burial grounds were traditionally community gathering spaces rather than family plots. The slaveholding society’s constant need to strip African-Americans of family ties and relationships gave slaves the desire and need to protect any areas, such as community grave sites, in which they could express a sense of family and community (Sloane 1991, 15).

As expressed in the Mount Auburn Cemetery site, the African-American cultural overlay is an example of non-interference with nature. This lack of intervention breeds a place for human creativity and opportunity.
The design and modification that takes place upon the landscape provides an opportunity to unite creatively in the continuation and completion of the human experience. Sacred spaces such as cemeteries are spaces of connection. They help make the connection between the now and the hereafter. Communion with the ancestors is an important component of these sites (Barrie 2010, 14). Therefore, the cemetery becomes an essential venue to express and preserve culture.

Since owners are responsible for the maintenance of their individual gravesites, many forms of cultural expression occur. A unique example of this expression is the Holsey Plot (Figure 6), located in a northeastern portion of the site. The monument is shrouded in a colorful, patterned fabric. Ribbons, plastic flowers, and water jugs hang from the tree behind the monument. The malleable environment and lack of rigidity in the cemetery encourages a diversity and freedom of expression and the opportunity to partake in one's own history and traditions. To some this expression may seem like chaos when juxtaposed against the geometric order of most rural cemeteries, but it provides a forum to display unique cultural and spiritual beliefs. When asked if the cemetery made them close to nature and how they felt when they were there, people using the grounds responded, “I feel a certain connection with some who have shaped our history and on whose shoulders we are standing,” and “I feel close to God and those who are laid to rest.” Another person on the grounds replied, “The cemetery reflects my African-American heritage and the importance of preserving history” (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009).

The lack of structures and undisturbed ground not only assists in the preservation of culture, but also in environmental preservation. Improvisation is a char-
acteristic of the natural environment, manifesting constant renewal and growth. The African-American cemetery form works in concert with these ideas about nature and the preservation of a natural order. One user of the cemetery reinforced these beliefs stating, "I enjoy a surprise. Occasionally, I'll see a hawk, myna bird, and rabbit. There is an ecosystem. At that moment, I feel enraptured." Others stated, "Yes, because of the plants and animals, in other words, fox, pheasants, and rabbits," and "It does bring me close to nature. I like the trees" (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009).

Environmental Sustainability expressed as result of the African-American Cultural Overlay

Mount Auburn overlooks Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and sits on Middle Branch of the Patapsco River (Figure 7). The Middle Branch functions as both an industrial and recreational resource. Endowed with a wooded shoreline, fertile marshes, and waters abundant with fish, the Middle Branch became an active recreation area that attracted a number of resorts in the 1800s. The completion of the Hanover Street Bridge connecting the downtown to Westport in 1916 spurred increased residential and industrial growth. During this era, the City zoned practically the entire waterfront to the M-Category intended for heavy industry and manufacturing. Eventually the Middle Branch became silted and less useful for shipping, and industry began to use the waterfront in this area for storage of goods. Few recreational facilities remained, and the Middle Branch was forgotten as a recreational, environmental, and ecological resource.

In 1978, the City of Baltimore published The Middle Branch Plan. An existing storage yard was moved to the south side of the Patapsco River and Waterview Avenue was relocated away from the shoreline creating the Middle Branch Park. It was envisioned as a green counterpart to the intense development of the Baltimore Inner Harbor. The Middle Branch Park, including the Water Resources Center and Rowing Club, offers the greatest expanse of open space on the Baltimore Harbor. Today, demand for waterfront development sites and revitalization projects are putting pressure on open space in the area, including the possible elimination of Mount Auburn Cemetery.

At 33 acres, Mount Auburn Cemetery is one of the most substantial "green spaces" in the Patapsco River watershed. The elevation across the site ranges from 53.5 feet to a highpoint of 112 feet. The steepest slopes are 15 percent or more. The soils on the site are terrace gravel, which is a combination of clay and sand. The site is well drained and lends itself to a variety of vegetation. The vast majority of the site is heavily vegetated. There are mature trees consisting of oaks, willows, black walnuts, apples, and pears, as well as many native and invasive species on the site.
Mount Auburn Cemetery's existence contributes to the protection of the Patapsco River watershed. Located in an area with transit access, views of the inner harbor, and new housing proposed, the land that the cemetery sits upon would be a prime development site if not for the existence of Mount Auburn. Instead of additional buildings and paving creating 33 acres of impermeable space that would increase water runoff and pollution to the Patapsco River, the cemetery provides 33 acres of recharge area. Water can infiltrate the site's surface and percolate downward to the underlying water table, decreasing runoff and putting water back into the hydrologic cycle. In addition, the cemetery site benefits the ecosystem by providing space for a variety of trees providing shade, blocking winds, stabilizing the soil, promoting infiltration on the site, producing oxygen, and taking up carbon dioxide.

Mount Auburn has also aided in the preservation and creation of new habitat. There has been a lack of plant maintenance in the traditional sense. There has been little mowing, weeding, and sowing of seed, which has resulted in the overgrowth of both native vegetation and invasive species not usually recommended for planting in the region. Yet, this overgrowth has created areas of natural habitat for wild animals including rabbits, fox, and deer. The cemetery has become an oasis in a highly developed and developing area. Wild birds of many species have migrated to the overgrowth of vegetation. Occasionally a peacock has been sighted within the cemetery.

The cemetery has also become an oasis for the living. When asked what they do in the cemetery some replied, “I meditate on my ancestors; the landscape holds great possibilities;” and “I admire the fitness among grasses, bushes and trees; visit and pray;” and “I remember the past, think about what I can do to support the efforts to restore the cemetery” (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009). The weeds and tilted monuments of the grounds of Mount Auburn convey an underlying beauty; a spirit of poetry, imagination, and discovery. Views to the harbor, the hills and contours of the land, and the winding paths, which create mystery and relief, give additional meaning to a city landscape often too simplistic to comprehend.

CONCLUSION

If the cultural overlay has transformed Mount Auburn Cemetery into a new form, then what does it mean in terms of continued preservation, restoration, and maintenance of place? This discourse argues not for neglect or lack of maintenance, but for a certain improvisational aesthetic inherent in the African-American Cemetery, and the connection of this particular landscape form to cultural and environmental sustainability—to landscape architecture seen anew. This place calls for preservation and restoration processes that incorporate aesthetic rituals linked to functional and meaningful design. It is not enough to preserve the physical entities,
such as roads, head stones, and vegetation. Cultural meaning must also be preserved by creating and retaining spaces for memory, nature, and ritual to shape the land (Figure 8). New strategies must be employed to preserve landscape meaning, and promote both environmental and cultural sustainability equitably.

Baltimore's Mount Auburn Cemetery has all of the cultural and much of the environmental infrastructure of a resilient city of the dead. When questioned about what activities should take place at the cemetery, some users replied, "family reunions, anniversaries, memorial celebrations," and "worship services and tours" (Interviews conducted by Diane Jones in Mount Auburn Cemetery in 2009). The survey, research, and examination undertaken support the idea of the African-American Cemetery as a living and growing place established not solely for remembrance, but also for the preservation of and participation in ritual and nature. The African-American cemetery not only memorializes the dead, but also expresses the continuum of African-American environmentalism and culture. The cemetery is a place to sustain land and custom. This is an essential tenet of African-American living and dying. There are social, cultural, and spiritual customs uniquely expressed in the African-American cemetery. These, whether intentional or intuitive, lead to the sustainability of the landscape upon which the cemetery rests.

NOTES

1. A survey was conducted to gain an understanding of the connections to and attitudes regarding the cemetery of those who use and visit it. Subjects were recruited from among the congregation of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, after consent from the church's leadership was obtained, and approval from the Morgan State University Institutional Research Board was granted.

REFERENCES

Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church Cemetery Archival Center. n.d. Baltimore, MD.


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