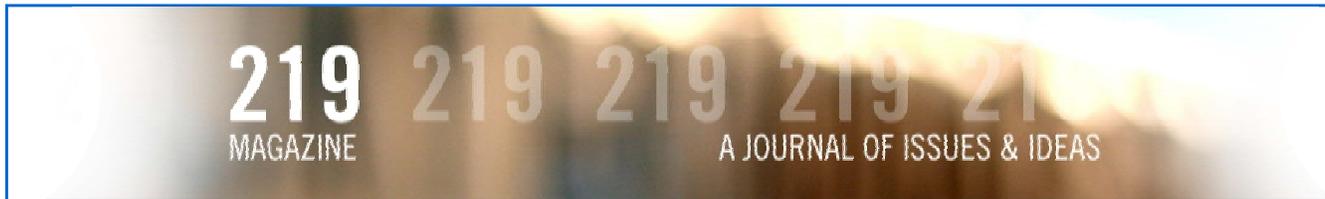


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New York Cemeteries Face Grave Shortages

By [Robert Voris](#)

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By Robert Voris

You are going to die. Of the more than 8 million people now alive in New York City, all will be dead, eventually. That's a lot of bodies: 44 million feet of cadaver when laid end to end, assuming average height. And in New York City, where space is always at a premium, there's not enough earth to grant them all eternal rest.

Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn has interred almost 600,000 bodies in its 171 years of operation. As its graves have filled, it has followed one of the tenets of good planning, build up, and developed large community mausoleums, which it markets on its website as "a choice once reserved for the wealthy, is now available to our families at prices comparable to that for in-ground burial."

The price for in-ground burial has gone up, too. A single, non-premium grave at Green-Wood now lists at \$11,000. The miscellaneous charges for burial, the foundation for the stone, having the funeral after 4 p.m. or on a Saturday will add an extra \$2500 or so. Gravestones, which the cemetery does not supply, cost anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on the size and intricacy of the marker.

Richard Fishman, the director of the New York State Department of Cemeteries, said that the prices reflected more than supply and demand. The cemeteries are heavily regulated non-profits and have to charge more as their capacity shrinks in order to keep themselves financially solvent in perpetuity.

"It costs \$5 million a year to keep Green-Wood going as it does," Fishman said. "And it's not as though those being served with that money can be charged."

No, indeed. So those now dying have to pay more for the upkeep of those who died before, just as those to die in the future will pay a premium for the upkeep of those now paying. The similarities to a pyramid scheme are stark, though necessity rather than criminality is the source of the creativity.

While the department only has jurisdiction over non-denominational graveyards, those run by religious organizations have many of the same

concerns. St. Patrick's Cathedral runs Mount Calvary Cemetery in Queens, the most populous cemetery in the city with over 3 million permanent residents. They're almost done, said Lyndon Roche, a spokesman for the diocese. He said that St. Raymond's, another Catholic cemetery in the Bronx, would have room for at least another 20 years.

"You look on either side of the Cross-Bronx, because St. Raymond's is all around you, and there's still plenty of space," Roche said.

The nightmare scenario can be found in Ozone Park, at Bayside Acacia, a small Jewish necropolis. The Upper West Side congregation, Shaare Zedek, doesn't have enough money to pay for proper maintenance, and the cemetery has gone to seed.

Vines grow over tombs, headstones are toppled and broken, crypts and even coffins have been opened. Calls to the Rabbi were not returned.

At Mount Olivet Cemetery, which has been pressed for space for a number of years, there haven't been any issues of abandonment, nor have they dramatically increased their rates, nor are they completely full. It's just more of the same at Mount Olivet, said David Gigler, the superintendent. They have been tearing up roads to make room for more graves and, like Green-Wood, has developed a large community mausoleum, which includes more and more niches for cremation urns. Gigler said that there weren't other reform options available.

"Maybe in 25 years, they'll come up with something," he said. "But by then, I'll be retired."

In some crowded places around the world, they have come up with a broad array of somethings. In Great Britain, where burial grounds are most often small, ancient churchyards, the government has permitted the reuse of graves that have been untended for more than 75 years. The tiny nation-state of Singapore allows interment for 15 years, followed by mandatory exhumation and cremation.

Cremation is not allowed under Islamic law, which is why burials are still in demand, despite their impermanence. The Italian Catholic Church, which had long opposed cremation as heretical, recently began allowing Mass for people whose remains were to be burned. But cremation can be dangerous to the environment, as mercury from fillings is borne on the smoke. So Sweden has permitted the use of a new method, promession, wherein the body is frozen in liquid nitrogen, shattered and then thawed, allowing the body's water weight to evaporate and leaving a small amount of residue that can be safely recycled into the earth.

Will New York City allow these, or other new developments in the disposal of dead bodies like burying coffins upright? Absolutely not, said Fishman, from the Department of Cemeteries. He said there were plenty of cemeteries in Westchester County, Connecticut, New Jersey and Long Island that had room and land to expand.

As in life, so in death: when the city gets too crowded, move to the suburbs.

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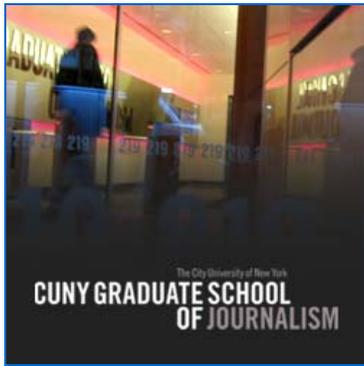
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