

SEP 2015 / VOL 105 NO 9
US \$7 CAN \$9

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN
SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



PFS STUDIO

Modern campus, classical frame

THE VIRTUAL DEGREE

Studio education moves online

TEACHING EQUITY

A need to diversify and engage

THE AFTERLIFE OF CITY CEMETERIES

Austin makes a plan for the future



LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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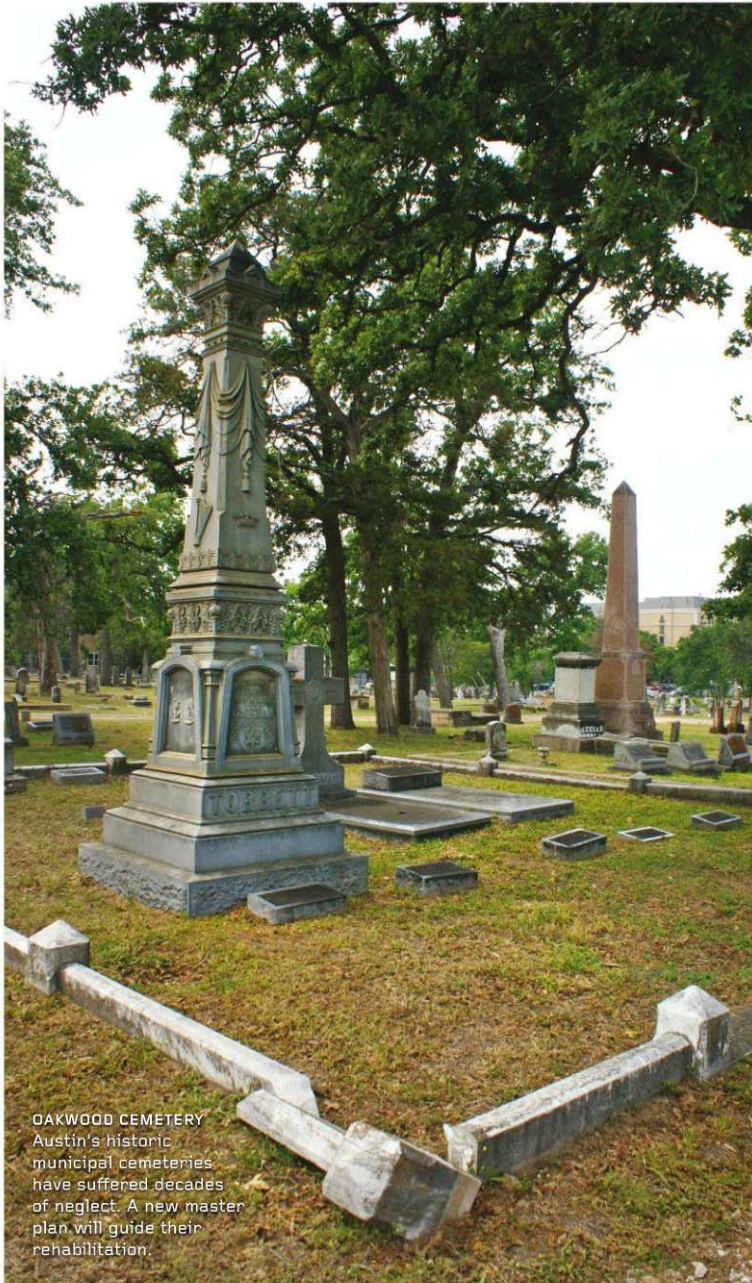
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OAKWOOD CEMETERY
Austin's historic municipal cemeteries have suffered decades of neglect. A new master plan will guide their rehabilitation.

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

**HOW WE CHOOSE TO LIVE—
AND DIE—HAS SERIOUS
CONSEQUENCES FOR OUR
CITIES' PUBLIC CEMETERIES.**

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

Last November, the historic preservation consultant Stephanie McDougal was walking through Evergreen Cemetery in Austin, Texas, with the city's former planning commissioner, Sandra Kirk. Kirk's mother, Willie Mae Kirk, was one of Austin's most celebrated civil rights leaders and is buried, along with Kirk's father and a number of other family members, in Evergreen Cemetery, a historically African American burial ground founded in 1926.

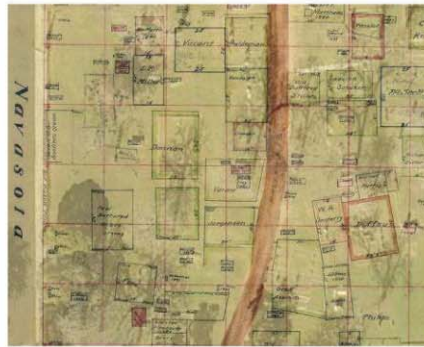
McDougal is the owner of McDoux Preservation and was working at the time as part of an interdisciplinary team on a master plan for Austin's municipal cemeteries. She had met up with Kirk to identify some of the other prominent African American men and women buried in Evergreen. At one point, Kirk gazed across the cemetery grounds. Even from a hundred yards away, it was impossible to miss the brightly colored flowers adorning many of the grave markers in the cemetery's southeast corner. There were garlands of marigolds and, had they walked closer, rings of votive candles, framed photographs of the deceased, and a bevy of wildly painted skulls made from meringue and sesame seeds.

Kirk wondered aloud why these graves were decorated so exuberantly. McDougal, who had spent the past eight months researching Evergreen's history, including the increasing number of Latinos

MCDOUX PRESERVATION



OAKWOOD CEMETERY



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

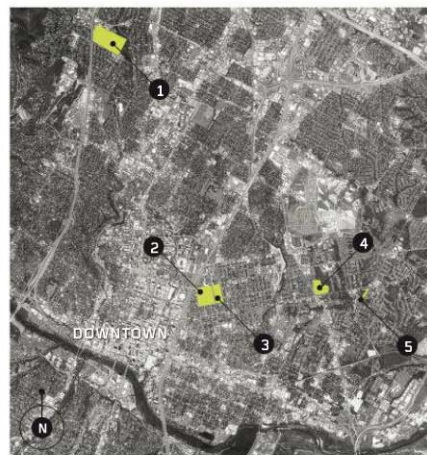
A hand-colored lithograph from 1873 shows the location of Oakwood Cemetery, Austin's oldest cemetery; an undated photo of Oakwood Cemetery Annex; and a 1911 map of Oakwood is overlaid atop a current aerial photograph.

buried there, said it was in honor of Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, a holiday celebrated across Latin America as well as in innumerable Latino communities around the world. Austin's Latino population has boomed in recent years, while the African American population has continued to decline, and Evergreen Cemetery was bearing witness to this shift.

McDougal says Kirk's comment was not one of judgment or disparagement but one of cautious curiosity, the way a longtime Austinite might have regarded the city's suddenly crowded streets in South by Southwest's early years. *What's going on over there?* But Kirk and others in the black community are concerned about Evergreen losing its identity as an African American cemetery. Evergreen was founded two years before Austin adopted the 1928 City Plan, which was successful in segregating the city and barring African Americans from living anywhere but East Austin. As in many other parts of the country, blacks in Austin suffered discrimination in housing, jobs, and even in death. That disenfranchisement continues today, McDougal says, making the legacies of Kirk's mother and other civil rights activists all the more important.

AUSTIN MUNICIPAL CEMETERIES

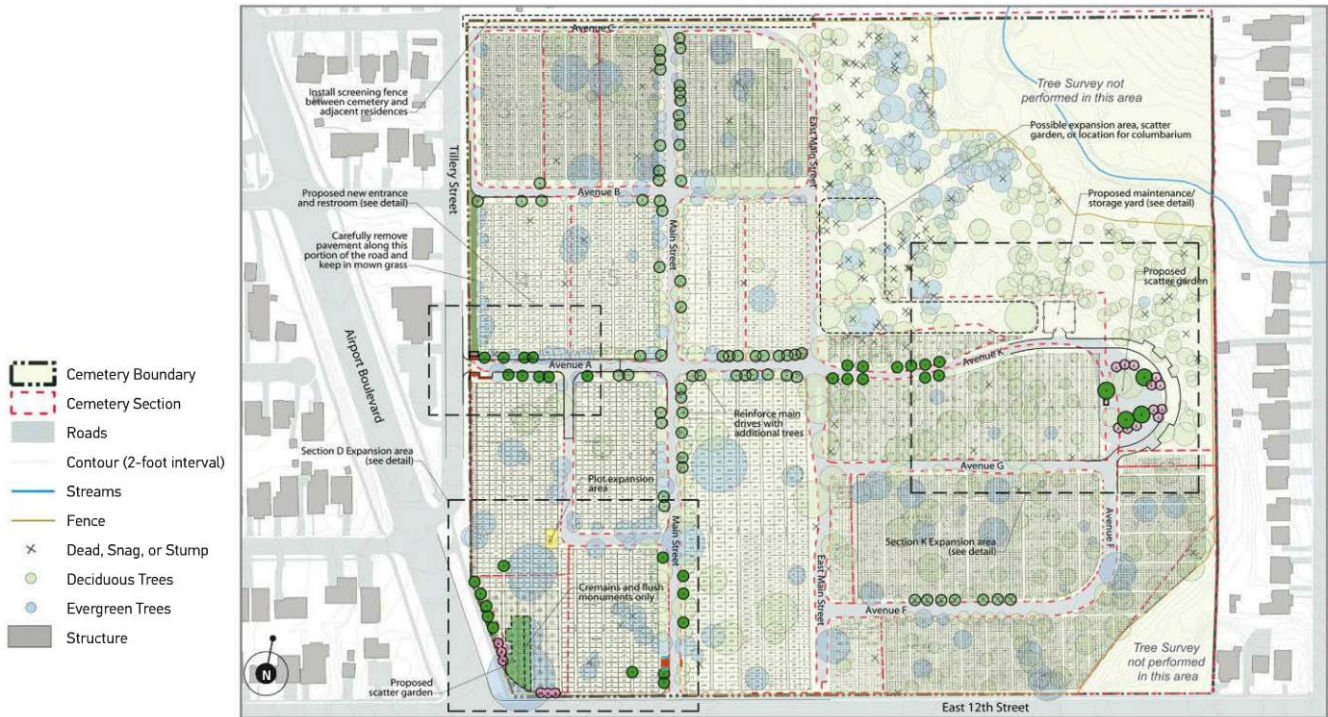
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In developing Austin's cemetery master plan, which was completed in spring 2015 and outlines a framework for the continued care of Austin's five municipally owned cemeteries, McDougal says the team continually "ran into quite different cultural expectations for how people relate to death and dying, and what kinds of relationships different cultures have with their ancestors. We saw that throughout the cemeteries."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; PICA 03146; AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER; AUSTIN PUBLIC LIBRARY; AMATERIA ENVIRONMENTAL; GOOGLE EARTH

EVERGREEN CEMETERY TREATMENT PLAN



ABOVE
The treatment plan for Evergreen Cemetery includes a location for a columbarium and scatter garden to accommodate increasing cremations.

The scene at Evergreen reflects broader changes happening in the United States, many of which have significant implications for municipal cemeteries. These changes were highlighted in 2013, when, after 20 years of outsourcing cemetery management and maintenance to a private contractor, the City of Austin decided to return both responsibilities to the Parks and Recreation Department.

Some of these changes, such as shifting demographics, present cultural challenges as municipal governments engage communities about the future of their cemeteries. This is especially true in Austin, a majority-minority city in which no one ethnic group makes up more than 50 percent of the population. This diversity is, in part, what draws people to the city, but the Hispanic population, according to some estimates, could assume a majority by 2050.

Other changes—newly arising questions about ownership, evolving attitudes toward burial, and all-but-dried-up funding streams—are more pressing. Some even threaten to obsolesce historic cemeteries altogether, condemning them to a future of disrepair.

There are more than 130,000 cemeteries in the United States, according to Histopolis, a cemetery database that aggregates information from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Census. Many historic urban cemeteries, hundreds of years old and hemmed in by development, are at capacity. From a financial perspective, once a cemetery is full, it becomes a liability. Without burial plots to sell, there is no revenue stream, and city officials are left trying to figure out where the money for maintenance or tree care is going to come from. Today, only Austin Memorial Park Cemetery, on

JMA

EVERGREEN CEMETERY SOIL AND TREE CONDITIONS



- Cemetery Section
 - Roads/Paved Surfaces
 - Cemetery Boundary
- Soil Type**
- HsD Houston Black soils and urban land
 - LeB Lewisville soils and urban land
 - TuD Travis soils and urban land
 - UvE Urban land and ferris soils
- × Dead, Snag, or Stump
 - Deciduous Trees
 - Evergreen Trees

the far north side of the city, and Evergreen have enough space to accept regular burials.

A city's historic cemeteries are especially invisible to newcomers. Approximately 110 people move to Austin each week, and few of them have familial history here, says Kim McKnight, a preservation planner and cultural resource specialist for the City of Austin, who spearheaded the master plan project for the city. These transplants have little reason to visit the city's cemeteries. At the same time, some of the families whose lineage does extend back through Austin's history have moved away, lured to another part of the country by new opportunities. "We're a mobile society now, so we just don't stick around," McDougal says. Other families have died out altogether.

Given the complexity of the issues at play, the city recognized a need for a document that could help it navigate a landscape that had changed significantly since the 1990s and was, at the material level, deteriorating. Grave markers, roads, walls, and mausoleums needed repairs. The vegetation had been devastated by a decades-long drought. "Basically what we have is a lot of weeds and sandburs and fire ants," says Laura Knott, ASLA, a principal landscape architect at JMA (formerly John Milner Associates) and part of the master-planning team. (The final team member was Mason Miller, a senior archaeologist with Austin-based AmaTerra Environmental.)

Austin isn't the first city with a cemetery master plan on the books. Boston, for instance, developed *Preservation Guidelines for Municipally Owned Historic Burial Grounds and Cemeteries* in 2000, and Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey worked with the city of Sacramento on a master plan for its historic city cemetery in 2007. But it is still rare, says Knott, who is the regional director of JMA's Charlottesville, Virginia, office. Austin hopes its plan can become a model for other cities.

Over the course of a year, the team conducted a thorough site analysis and engaged key constituencies, which they identified as the families and friends of those buried in the city's cemeteries, residents living nearby, and members of community organizations such as Save Austin's Cemeteries, which has been active in the city since 2004.

The outreach efforts ranged from online surveys to stakeholder interviews and signage in the cemeteries. McKnight says that despite the appeal of online tools, it was important that some of the communication methods be old school. "I still get calls from widows or widowers who don't have access to e-mail or to the website," she says. The team posted flyers in senior centers and libraries and even printed out information and mailed it to concerned residents or dropped it off in person. "That's something we were really proud of," McKnight says.



Treating Austin's municipal cemeteries like a collection of outdoor museums is a big part of the plan. "One of the really brilliant ideas that has come out of the plan is the idea of really taking seriously the idea that these are historic sites and, like many historic sites, will require a level of programming to really connect with the broader community, as well as potential heritage tourists," McKnight says. Ideas include architectural tours, interpretive signage, and digital kiosks

that would allow visitors to look up where their ancestors or historic figures are buried. Such programming could provide Austinites a reason to visit the city's historic cemeteries and the city a way to fund future preservation projects.

It's not a completely novel idea. Historic cemeteries around the country have attempted to engage the public with horticultural tours, holiday events, and lectures about the lives of historical figures buried there. One cemetery in Buffalo, New York, even dropped the word "cemetery" from its name, in hopes of rebranding the cemetery as a park as well as burial ground, a shared identity that was common in the 19th century, when city dwellers would promenade and picnic within a cemetery's quiet, green expanse.

The idea also is not without controversy. Although the team's recommendations are sensitive to the historic and personal nature of cemeteries—restricting any "active" programming such as tours to cemeteries no longer hosting burials, for instance—some Austinites bristle at the image of a digital kiosk next to a historic mausoleum, or flocks of bird-watchers cluttering up a place they see as sacred.

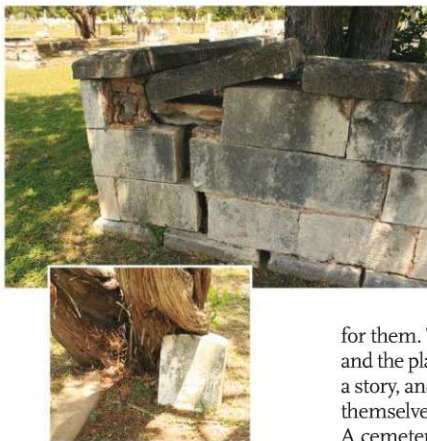
"It's always a balance because you want to respect the needs of the families whose loved ones are buried there," McDougal says. "But at the same time, you don't want the cemetery to just be a sterile place that no one goes to. We have folks who

In March 2015, the team completed the final master plan, *City of Austin Historic Cemeteries Master Plan* (available for download at austintexas.gov/cmp), a 500-plus-page document (not counting appendices) that provides a history of each of the five cemeteries, guidelines for their rehabilitation and maintenance more generally, and specific recommendations for each space. It was familiar territory for Knott, who's completed historic cemetery projects in at least five different states and who spent 25 years in Austin before relocating to Charlottesville. She also had developed a cultural landscape report for Oakwood Cemetery, the oldest of the cemeteries, during her time as a lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin in 2005. (McKnight, McDougal, and Knott all are graduates of UT Austin's historic preservation program, though none of them overlapped.)

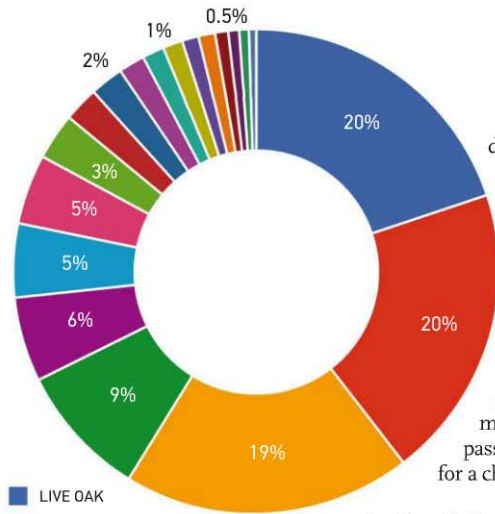
Knott says her interest in cemeteries began during childhood. "One of the fun family things to do was to go to the cemetery," she says of growing up in Birmingham, Alabama. "I've always been fascinated by the stories that are there if you know how to look

for them. The grave markers tell a story, the trees and the plants that people plant in cemeteries have a story, and then there's the histories of the people themselves and their connection to a community. A cemetery is, in a way, a museum that tells the story of a community."

ABOVE AND BELOW
Oakwood Cemetery has experienced substantial deterioration, and in some places, historic trees and grave markers are in conflict.



**COMMON TREE SPECIES
IN AUSTIN'S CEMETERIES**



- LIVE OAK
- CEDAR ELM
- CRAPE MYRTLE
- PRIVET
- PECAN
- ASHE'S JUNIPER
- POST OAK
- ARBORVITAE
- TEXAS RED OAK
- TEXAS MOUNTAIN LAUREL
- HACKBERRY
- CHINABERRY
- CHINESE TALLOW
- SHUMARD OAK
- YAUPON HOLLY
- BUR OAK
- ITALIAN CYPRESS
- ARIZONA ASH
- MEXICAN WHITE OAK

don't want anything at all to happen in cemeteries, and we have people who [say] anything goes. Obviously, there is a middle ground."

Although, "trying to find a middle ground on something that people are very passionate, and in many instances *disparately* passionate about—that made for a challenge," Miller says.

Another challenge emerged at the outset. According to the city's GIS maps, Austin's cemeteries didn't exist. The city knows the location of every building, curb, storm drain, and utility line in its boundaries, but that information was never logged within its cemeteries. "These cemeteries are essentially giant digital holes in the ground," says Miller, who was in charge of filling in those holes. He mapped every road, ditch, and sprinkler head—10,000 data points in all.

At the same time, Ama-Terra and the Davey Tree Company conducted a survey of the cemeteries' 5,685 trees—living and dead. The drought, including the driest year on record in 2011, had turned the cemeteries into arboreal graveyards. "A lot of trees had been super stressed from these ongoing conditions and then really took a beating in 2011," McDougal says. "By the time we showed up in 2014, we were seeing, to some extent, just the leftovers that hadn't been removed." Oakwood was hit hardest of all. Once characterized by post oaks (*Quercus stellata*), crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*), Ashe's

juniper (*Juniperus ashei*), and pecans (*Carya illinoensis*), Miller's team found at least 40 percent of its trees dead.

Tree loss in this context is not just an aesthetic issue, or even an environmental one. Many of the species that characterize Austin's cemeteries are historic in and of themselves—most notably post oaks, which are native to central Texas, but also crape myrtles and eastern red cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*), which often were planted to represent eternal life. Oakwood's location was, at least in part, chosen for the grove of post oaks already growing there. Because of this, post oaks are considered part of Oakwood's historic character, Knott says, as much as its grave markers and mausoleums.

The master plan takes great care in outlining what to do if a tree is interfering with another historic element. "Usually the knee-jerk reaction is, 'Well, let's just cut the tree down,'" Knott says. "Well, [that's] not necessarily always the best solution."

Questions need to be answered, she says. Was the tree planted in memoriam? Is the tree protected by city code (which protects historic trees with trunks larger than 19 inches in diameter)? Is it representative of the period of significance? According to the master plan, even newer trees not present at the time of the cemetery's founding should be saved if they are representative of the conditions found at that time.



The master plan also includes recommendations for how to address some of these cemeteries' most basic challenges, including funding. One

way to boost revenue is to build a columbarium, an aboveground structure where cremation urns can be interred. From a land-use perspective, columbaria are incredibly efficient, but they also are in high demand. In 1998, just a quarter of those who died were cremated, according to the Cremation Association of North America.

RIGHT
Post oaks, common in Austin's cemeteries, are native to central Texas but have been stressed by drought conditions.

RIGHT
A formal allée of trees in Evergreen Cemetery, a historically African American cemetery that has seen a growing number of Latino burials.



By 2013, that number had nearly doubled, and by 2018, it is anticipated that a full half of the American population will choose cremation over a traditional burial.

Austin may be only slightly behind the national average. According to an analysis by Thomas Longoria, a professor of political science at Texas State University, the rate of cremation in Austin likely will exceed 50 percent by 2019 and 70 percent by 2029. This is good news for the city's budget. A 500-space columbarium like the one recommended for Austin Memorial Park could net the city up to \$600,000, according to the master plan.

A columbarium most likely would be accompanied by a scatter garden, landscaped areas designed for the scattering of ashes. These, Knott says, can pull double duty if designed intelligently. "At Evergreen, we've identified two locations where there might be scatter gardens," she says. "These are areas that have not been sold, and they're under trees that need to be protected. [Siting] the scatter gardens here will protect the trees from excavation and compaction from equipment and cars."

Important questions remain. Many grave markers are in need of repairs, but it is unclear whether the city has the right to fix them. Cemetery plots

are privately owned, which means each plot is the property of the family that originally purchased it. If that family can't be reached, does the city have the legal right to intervene? Right now, Knott says, it's a gray area. "There are still a lot of question marks out there that haven't been fully resolved yet," she says. (Municipalities in Texas currently have the right to make repairs only if they pose a threat to public safety.)

How we live, and how we die—and how we are honored once we do—have changed dramatically since Austin was founded in 1839. We can no more easily know what Austin will look like in a hundred years than past generations could have predicted the city's current form. But we do know that its transformation, demographic and otherwise, will play out in its public cemeteries. "I think it's probably going to continue to be the biggest issue the city of Austin has to deal with over time: finding some way to balance these very different cultural expressions of grief," McDougal says. "Because what some people find absolutely unacceptable is very traditional for other people." ●

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JMA