



Published by the Boston Society of Architects  
52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02130  
617.951.1433  
bsa@architects.org  
www.architectureboston.com

**November/December 2006, Vol. 9 No. 6, "Winter"**

"Life, Death, and Real Estate"

Pages 13-15

# Life, Death, and Real Estate

**The place:** Mount Auburn Cemetery, on the border between Cambridge and Watertown, Massachusetts. Founded in 1831, Mount Auburn is the oldest of America's "garden cemeteries" and an icon of historic landscape design. Horticultural connoisseurs wander the 175 acres of trees, shrubs, and perennials. Birdwatchers come for thrushes and warblers. Architects gaze at the Egyptian Revival gate and the tombs of Charles Bulfinch and Mary Baker Eddy. Couples move slowly, holding hands or pushing strollers, using the place as the beautiful park it is. But then: a hearse, followed by car after car, crawls up a hill and down again, winding along the green avenues before finally disappearing from sight.

**The president:** Bill Clendaniel, who has directed Mount Auburn for 18 years. Among his many responsibilities — finances, curatorship, public education — is the challenge of keeping Mount Auburn going as an active burial place. Space is running out. Recent years have seen innovations: walls with inscriptions, a "condominiumized" obelisk carved with the names of the people whose remains surround it. Classic single or family gravesites are quite rare — and stunningly expensive — nowadays. As Bill says, "We only sell this land once."

**10:05** Driving a jaunty little electric vehicle, Bill stops beside a shady bank where exploratory digging is going on, supervised by one of the cemetery's two salespeople. Several gravesites are available in this little glade — but there are pipes running beneath the bank. Once the digging has pinpointed the pipes' location, slim gray mock-up headstones will be nestled into the greenery to mark the available gravesites and give a prospective client an idea of the final effect.

**10:17** Bill stops his vehicle near a small forklift that's nosing the ground, peeling up a neat rectangle of turf. A grave-liner, which resembles a gigantic lidded cement shoebox, waits by the roadside. "This for tomorrow?" Bill asks.

The gravedigger nods. "We got two full burials, and three cremated."

Grave-digging, pruning, mowing, and other noisy landscaping activities are carefully scheduled at times when there are no burial services taking place.

**10:40** Back at his office, Bill checks messages. He notes down details about a concert that will figure in the cemetery's year-long 175th-anniversary celebration and leaves a message for a developer working on a housing project adjacent to the cemetery, who wants to discuss the purchase of a sliver of land.

**11:05** Bill shakes hands with an assured, beautifully dressed woman who has come with her daughter to look at seven of Mount Auburn's most idyllic — and costliest — available gravesites. They chat for a few moments, and then climb into



one of the little electric vehicles and drive off for a private tour.

**12:55** Carrying his lunch salad, Bill joins an in-progress horticulture meeting. The staff is planning the construction and planting of an area to be called Birch Gardens, along a section of the cemetery's perimeter. The design, by Halvorson Design Partnership, calls for both casket plots and smaller plots for cremated remains, with all the inscriptions appearing on communal granite walls — a model which, in real-estate terms, increases density, building an apartment complex rather than a neighborhood of single-family houses. (And, as one might expect when comparing apartments to fancy houses, the purchase price here will be significantly lower.)

The right mix of trees and shrubs will be crucial, both to create a particular garden "identity" for the area and as a visual and acoustic screen from the nearby public roadway.

The staff briefs Bill on the discussion: "We're debating fall versus spring planting."

Fall would suit the conifers called for in the design, but some of the specified trees — beeches and elms — are spring-dug.

"If planting is delayed till spring, you're going to have a big bare wall for another six

months. And it's not going to be easy to sell a big bare wall."

Bill: "We can't make plants do what they don't want to do. And we're not going to sell much in the late fall or winter anyway."

**1:14** The group critiques planting plans submitted by the landscape architect, beginning with trees. The conversation is technical, cryptic, passionate, and very fast. "I'd like to replace this group of three Doug fir with white fir."

"OK, this umbrella pine — let's specify 'Wintergreen' as the cultivar, if we can find one of any size. It's something we don't already have."

"Hmm, this heptacodium. It's going to require a lot of maintenance and pruning to get it to be tree-like. We need something upright. Let's put in a magnolia as an alternative. Or throw a prunus in there."

**1:35** "Are we done with trees?"

"No, wait. I'm concerned about size. I don't think we need five or six calipers of anything. We could go down to three-and-

a-half or four."

"We'll specify a mix of sizes, to look more natural."

"And it'll be cheaper, too."

"Listen, the cost of landscaping here is nothing, compared to the granite."

"Peanuts."

"Budget-dust."

**1:42** Shrubs. More rapid, rabid discussion.

"Sixty rhododendron 'Gumpo'? No. I question the hardiness. Give us 20 of them, and 20 each of two other things, and I'd feel better."

"And these deutzias are going to grow slowly. They're spaced too far apart."

**1:50** Bulbs and perennials.

"*Anemone sylvestris*. They've specified 88 — but they're invasive."

"So really we only need 22."

"*Anemone blanda*. 4,000 bulbs. Anyone have a problem?"

"I do. They die out."

"But they buy you time while other plantings fill in."

**2:37** Another meeting begins, the goal of which is to figure out how to divide up and sell the burial plots and inscription space of Birch Gardens. Drawings are unrolled on the table: plans of the graves and elevations of the granite walls. A patchwork grid of variously sized squares and rectangles. Silence. "I don't quite get how the wall relates to the ground," someone finally says.

The project manager explains: urns and caskets will be placed in the ground, with corresponding inscriptions on the wall.

"But where? If my dad is in the ground over here, where will his place on the wall be?"

**2:44** Everyone is still peering at the drawings. The conversation is frank: not disrespectful, but not overly sentimental either. This is a business meeting, a gloves-off airing of issues that need to be resolved.

"I'm just trying to understand — see, the way you have this divided up into rectangles and squares, it looks like space for a family of four."

"That's right."



Cape Cod Lumber is a supplier that understands architects...offering engineering services, kitchens, millwork craftsmen, outstanding customer service and knowledgeable sales people in state of the art showrooms featuring Marvin Windows and Doors.

Visit our website at [www.cclco.com](http://www.cclco.com) or come in and see one of our showrooms and you'll understand why **Cape Cod** is so *much more than* Lumber.

**Homescapes**  
AT CAPE COD LUMBER  
...your showroom is open.



**CAPE COD LUMBER**  
A NAME YOU CAN BUILD ON!

**403 Bedford Street Abington, MA**  
**80 Hampden Road Mansfield, MA**  
**800.698.8225**

“But two would have to be buried, and two cremated?”

“That happens,” one of the sales reps puts in. “People within the same family can want different things.”

“Yeah, but isn’t that awfully specific? You could wait a long time before that particular family walks in.”

**2:50** “You seem to be assuming that the big burial spaces correspond to the big inscriptions on the wall. But what if a cremation person wants to buy space for a big inscription?”

“Then we have to find a casket person who wants a small inscription.”

**3:10** One of the sales reps clutches his pocket, which has started to buzz, and grimaces. “Who’s calling me now?” He goes out of the room to take the call. In a minute he’s back. “Sorry, I have to leave. Someone’s here wanting to buy a bench or a tree.”

**3:12** The other sales rep peers at the plans. “One-and-a-half feet by one, for two sets

of cremated remains? You can’t do that.”

“We might be able to go even smaller, if we just dig deeper.”

The sales rep shakes his head. “Not good.”

“But is it possible? Could they fit?”

The sales rep shakes his head. “You need to leave room to dig around. Some margin for error. You don’t want to accidentally hit—”

“What if we install cement liners?”

“This is Cambridge. People here want earth to *earth*.”

**3:20** “What if we do one foot square, and require an urn?”

“We’ve never required an urn. Some people just want a cardboard box.”

“The real issue is retrieval. People move and want to take the ashes with them. If you use cardboard, we can’t guarantee we’ll get ‘em all.”

**4:05** The meeting has adjourned; the discussion will be continued.

Driving back through the cemetery

to the office, Bill stops at a corner where two men in safety glasses are attending to an ancient, enormous beech. The tree was damaged several years ago during a heavy April snowstorm and developed a debilitating canker. It’s looking ravaged. “Time for it to go?” Bill asks the arborists.

“Probably.”

Bill glances across the road, where a similarly beautiful, but healthy, beech shades an empty gravesite. A couple is interested in buying it, but only if Bill can promise that the beech will remain. Of course he can’t: natural catastrophes happen, living things age and die. The landscape, carefully and sensitively preserved as it is, changes.

The couple, Bill suspects, will be anxious when they see that the other beech is gone. “But we’ll figure out something beautiful to plant in its place. And they might well be reassured, watching how we respond to the loss.” ■

Joan Wickersham is a writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

## Put Reality on Your Desktop!



Quantapoint 3D Laser Scan (Not a Picture)  
Each Point is a Measurement



Quantapoint 3D Laser Model (Not CAD)  
Put Reality on Your Desktop

Do your project team members have access to accurate and complete as-built dimensions?

Are clashes or interferences due to incorrect dimensions causing rework?

Is construction rework adding significant time and cost to projects?

Quantapoint PRISM 3D™, winner of a prestigious R&D100 award, is the most advanced, cost effective technology available for managing, sharing and extracting dimensional and other information from as-built laser scanning.

PRISM 3D™ can help you reduce your project design time by 50% and rework by 80% by:

- ❖ Eliminating remodeling of existing facilities
- ❖ Visualizing changes for constructability reviews
- ❖ Advanced clash detection and management
- ❖ Directly extracting measurement information
- ❖ Sharing easily across the entire team
- ❖ Integrating with CAD models

PRISM 3D™ delivers complete and trusted as-built laser documentation in an intuitive format for use during all phases of a project—from fabrication through construction.

Call us or visit our website today. Don't forget to sign up for FocalPoint, our architectural newsletter!

www.quantapoint.com

info@quantapoint.com

+1-412-653-0100

Pittsburgh ♦ Houston ♦ Mexico City ♦ Lagos  
Cairo ♦ Johannesburg ♦ Caracas ♦ Kuala Lumpur

