

# URBAN CEMETERIES IN BEIRUT

## RE-QUESTIONING THE LANDSCAPES OF DEATH

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Throughout history there have been extensive examples of the moving of cemeteries from town centers to the city outskirts, allowing them to be redesigned and re-conceptualized as parks for leisure as well as places of bereavement. The Mount Auburn and Père Lachaise cemeteries are examples of the rural cemetery movement, which looked at burial grounds as green spaces, respectful and appropriate for the dead as well as attractive to mourners and city dwellers alike (French, 1974). They are primarily designed with intentions beyond their role as spaces for burial, and perceived as green spaces with botanical value allowing for recreation and education opportunities, in addition to their traditional role of burial and bereavement. Today, they have become points of attraction for residents and tourists alike, and have developed into unquestioned city landmarks.

In Beirut on the other hand, cemeteries remain undervalued and neglected entities of the urban fabric. They constitute some of the few remaining green and open spaces in the city. They are most often located in



Figure 1

prime locations, enclosed with high walls and hidden from the public eye. Since cemeteries are often perceived primarily as places for burial and landscapes of death, evoking negative feelings as dark, fearful and unhealthy spaces, they are undermined as urban spaces and often forgotten or erased from memory as urban entities and important spaces within the city fabric. Today, with densification and real estate development, these spaces have become threatened and face an uncertain future and an unclear present. Historic cemeteries such as Al-Sintiyeh have already been destroyed. However, cemeteries in Beirut possess a rich history and provide the city with some of its few remaining green patches, and hence need to be recognized.

This study will argue in favor of redefining cemeteries as conservation sites, critical to urban dwellers, nature and the city. It will look at cemeteries not only as remaining spaces within the city, but also as places of “remains”: they are main “grounds” for the conservation of memory, unfolding social, cultural and historical layers. They are also potential grounds for the conservation of native and canonical species, protecting and preserving natural, ecological and environmental urban landscapes.

## CEMETERIES AS GROUNDS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF MEMORY

Cemeteries are perceived as cultural landscapes in multiple ways: they represent the community's beliefs and values, they provide an ordered relationship between the living and the dead, and their material artifacts “help maintain the on-going individuality of the dead and allow them a place in living time and space” (Francis, 2003).

Urban cemeteries in Beirut are places of transition, frozen in their present state. They are places that allow one to lament the past, experience the present and wonder about the future. They thus act as “conservation sites” for memories of the city, its history, its narratives, its heroes and its residents.

Beirut's cemeteries are grounds for the conservation of the memory of the city. They serve as landmarks for



Figure 3

mapping city growth and old urban fabrics. They highlight road networks and city boundaries and hint at old urban relations and forgotten spatial features that were once critical to the survival of its people. They are also grounds of conservation of a more natural urban identity that once revolved around an extensive pine forest, lost over time to deforestation and urban encroachment.

Beirut's cemeteries reveal, through their terrain, identity and name, historic facts and narratives of remarkable events as they hold the power to transform their grounds to respond to the socio-political context. Heavily influenced by wars, violence and anthropogenic disasters, their grounds have had the capacity to transform into battlefields, memorial sites and places of commemoration, honoring the dead and celebrating martyrdom.

Cemeteries are also reflections of society as socio-cultural relations and of the important personalities that have influenced it. Through monumentalization and spatial and architectural form, they hint at social hierarchy and social relations. They highlight political affiliations and cultural and religious beliefs through tombstone design, religious and political markings, as well as introduced objects that animate their grounds. They lastly solidify belonging and family ties, and render immortal family identities and social belongings.

Finally, cemeteries conserve the memory of the human being, the person and the individual narrative, through their engraved tombstones, photographs and personalized objects and interventions. They also conserve an unbroken bond between the living and the deceased by providing a place for encounter and continued interaction through prayer and offering.

## CEMETERIES AS GROUNDS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF HABITATS AND SPECIES

Cemeteries mirror people's relationship with nature. Their landscape reflects society's interest in plants that stems from different reasons, including their aesthetic, cultural and ideological values. While some cemeteries, namely those influenced by international trends in cemetery design, tend to be highly managed and maintained, others portray a variety of maintenance levels. Different management approaches and intensities are key to species richness, habitat heterogeneity and conservation (Kowarik, 2016). Moreover, cemeteries limit human impacts on their wildlife, making them havens for birds and plants.

With rapid urbanization, cemeteries have thus become increasingly valuable for biodiversity conservation. They act as habitat islands for some native species. Their role in urban biodiversity conservation is often linked to their size, habitat heterogeneity and habitat continuity (Kowarik, 2016). They also provide ecosystem services,



Figure 2

including climate regulation and combat of pollution and the heat island effect, and contribute to general public health and well-being (Shanahan et al., 2015).

In this study, the potential of cemeteries as conservation sites for native and canonical (native and non-native) plants will be investigated. Plant species abound in the canonical texts of world religions, some of which not surprisingly appear in cemeteries. Although several scholars have attempted to identify and understand the symbolism of these plants, some publishing prolifically on the identity, lore and significance of holy flora, the ex-situ conservation of such vegetation, particularly in/by religious communities that cherish them, has rarely been addressed (Musselman, 2007). This may be attributed to the fact that most biodiversity conservation programs are based on secular “western” conservation sciences, and therefore seldom take into account the importance to local people of plants of holy and religious writings (Al-Zein et al., 2005). Though many people may argue that plants of Muslim and Christian Holy Scriptures are not rare, threatened or endangered per se, the conservation of their genetic diversity remains a major issue, particularly in the case of agriculturally important crops (wheat, barley, onions, date palms, lentils, etc.). We also evaluate the feasibility of incorporating native and non-native plants of the Bible and the Quran, as well as other canonical Islamic and Christian texts, in the landscaping of these grounds, as an alternative method for circum-situm conservation of these plants.

## CONCLUSION

As rapid urbanization continues to threaten and compromise natural and built heritage in cities like Beirut, cemeteries, “places of remains”, have proven to be resilient “remaining places”. They therefore constitute excellent examples of neglected and underestimated sites for the conservation of memory, habitats as well as species. Thus, we will be redefining the landscapes of death and places of life; socio-cultural and ecological spaces that are key to the health and well-being of the city.

## FIGURES

**Figure 1.** Photo by E.Karaan – Copyright Nayla M. Al-Akl

**Figure 2.** Photo by E.Karaan – Copyright Nayla M. Al-Akl

**Figure 3.** Photo by J. Souaid – Copyright Nayla M. Al-Akl

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**Mohammad S. AL-ZEIN** was born in a small village in the Lebanese mountains, to a family that cherishes books, gardens and nature. It was only natural that he ended up specializing in plant biology and ecology. He is interested in the diversity and conservation of plants and their associated insects, in addition to the history of natural history in the Levant. He currently teaches at the Department of Biology, American University of Beirut. In the past, he taught at several universities in Lebanon and abroad and conducted and still conducts fieldwork in several countries in Southwest Asia and Arabia. He has authored/co-authored more than fifteen papers, book chapters and technical reports.