

Why Thanatopolis?

(3/15/10, revised 5/31/10)

The seed for Thanatopolis was planted in 1983. It was an emotional response to the frustration of I-Park's founder with the available options offered by the cemetery, funeral home and monument dealer upon the death of a loved one. There had to be a more fulfilling way to honor a special individual in one's life upon their passing. And, it was felt, there needed to be a greater role for creativity and personalization in this process.

The traditional cemetery has heavy responsibilities. It must at all times be respectful of the dead; it's an entity committed to carrying forth in perpetuity; it assumes the burden of historical witness; it must ingratiate itself into the fabric of its community in a neat and discreet way. It is by its nature a deathly conservative institution.

But if you put aside the abstractions and think about it in personal terms, the workaday role of the cemetery is actually quite simple and immediate: it's the place we go to say our final goodbye. This activity is very much about the present and, to some degree, the near future. It's about facing the dreaded loss of human connection – with, perhaps, some vague inkling of a strategy to maintain that connection in some way. For the individual and for family and friends, it's about a single day, and maybe, just maybe, the next 2 or 5 or 10 or 20 or 50 years after that day.

If you could unshackle the cemetery from the rules and regulations that confront you at its imposing gate, and lighten up on the historical and cultural imperatives and the obsession with eternity, could you then perhaps shift your focus to the plight of those in grief, in the moment? What might happen were you to grant broad permission to the surviving generation to say goodbye, or render its salute, in its own way? What kinds of responses might you get were you to unleash the noblest instincts and great passions of this generation while bringing to bear its ingenuity and economic might? Would cosmic havoc ensue?

With all due respect to the keepers of tradition and to the curiosity of future generations, what about we the living? Could we perhaps have a voice in creating an alternative space that is, in its way, more relevant to our time?

What about the individual driven to commemorate a life? Might it be reasonable to expect, or at least possible to imagine, that this new type of cemetery could play a role in the evocation and nurturing of memory and mightn't there be certain types of imagery and other sensory effects that could facilitate the process? Could a sympathetic architecture and landscape/garden design serve to create a comfortable, familiar – or, alternatively, a disquieting, distorted – space that aids one in releasing locked memories – or a space that ennobles the spirit and gives one courage to try? And what if these professional designs were just the starting point, a suggestion – that would be periodically re-imagined by artists and other creative thinkers in response to changing individual and cultural longings?

When the moons are many and our pain and recollections have begun to fade, when our hearts and minds have finally begun to fail us, where do we go to re-connect to our memories? We think we don't, but we do, need a place – a site, a setting, a field where we can convene: for the interment, for a well-considered one year anniversary memorial service and, perhaps even, for a boisterous annual cultural gathering, like the Dia de los Muertos.

How to evoke memory? With granite and marble tablets, immaculately manicured grounds, a perfectly imposed order, including silence? Where organic monument/sculptural materials are shunned because they will not survive the Armageddon, where plant and garden options are highly regulated and where virtually all the textures, sounds and imagery of human existence have been sanitized – where all indicia of the complexities, disorder and ironies of life and relationships, and death itself, have been eliminated?

And is memory merely a question of re-living the past, a sad exercise of repetition and diminishing returns – and the memorial park a dusty repository for 'remains?' Yes, here we come to bury things and put them to rest, but might we also recognize that here there are new things to unearth and grasp? With the passage of time and the balm of reflection, our wisdom deepens, our perception shifts – yielding new interpretations of old information. In turning the earth, our excavation is now the scene of an exploration or investigation. As the warm, organic structures of life as we knew it begin to gently decompose and fade into oblivion, new growth appears, understandings become richer, sensations stronger.

And as for the ongoing search for appropriate ways to mark the loss of life when it occurs on a mass scale? Might it not be useful to have grounds where we can work out the issues that relate to this dilemma, where experimentation and innovation are encouraged and celebrated? While our cynical age has struggled earnestly and mightily with this challenge, most would probably agree that the results, while heartfelt, have been mixed, at best, and, more often than not, somehow unsatisfying: awkward, maudlin, overwrought, empty – with the initial spirit smothered and burnished by timidity and group-think.

Our times call for a new memorial, or memory, park.

And because this will be a 'home' to many, we might think of it as a city – diverse, dynamic, fragile, at times messy and a work in progress. We will no longer come to visit out of a sense of guilt or obligation, but because we're drawn here, as we would be to any rising city. When we're here, we feel a deep comfort and stimulation – we want to linger. And it's a place we'll want to return to, if not often, at least one more time, we swear, before we take our own final journey – this profoundly sacred place that is ours, that's real and that's . . . alive: Thanatopolis.