

Surrogate Stones: The Development of Nonce Ritual in Odd Fellows Cemetery

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Surrogate Stones: The Development of Nonce Ritual in Odd Fellows Cemetery addresses social and architectural strategies that support contemporary mourning and commemoration in public places. Focusing on abandoned landscapes, including historic American cemeteries in urban contexts where the identity of the sacred is compromised due to neglect and vandalism, the study explores models that support active public engagement, both spontaneous and through the employment of nonce ritual, that foster and strengthen the sacred identity of place and encourage the conscious act of remembering and grieving. The narrative concludes with personal research being undertaken with the Odd Fellows Cemetery and Potters Field Rehabilitation Project in Knoxville, Tennessee. This is an ongoing outreach and rehabilitation project that addresses issues of the sacred and attempts to reaffirm worth in the land and community through themes related to the *surrogate*. The material gathered in this study bears direct influence on developing design proposals that engage the public and reinforce the community's yearning for the sacred in this forgotten landscape.

Surrogate Stones begins with a question about relevancy and the limited potential for a text and media based society to understand or *read* conditions of the sacred in secular spaces. Without text or identifying marker, society finds an impressionable absence. Historic cemeteries, imbued with memory and spiritual ceremony, often suffer a similar misreading because they are disassociated and do not support an empathetic response that would perpetuate an identity of the sacred within their limits. They are disassociated through a separation of time, by an absence of identifiable sacred indicators, and because they no longer support active spiritual grief or reflection.

How does society focus attention toward active memory when presented by a void or dearth of information stimuli? A design model that addresses this question is the surrogate marker, a tangible element that is linked to a place through a ceremonial act and serves to provide a physical reference for grief or memory. Designed to promote displaced mourning, surrogate stones serve the role of the cenotaph by acknowledging a loss when the object of the loss is not present. Yet the surrogate stone distinguishes itself by action. The process of making or placing it holds greater potential for sensory perception and engagement because it involves active participation and is spatially oriented. It relies on haptic associations and includes a social ceremony or nonce ritual to imbue the familiar with sacred identity. This in turn permits spontaneous grieving by participants and witnesses.

It is a human impulse to engage and mark, to individualize, associate, and empathize. Surrogate stones embody these desires. They are contemporary *memento mori*, both symbolic and ceremonial, that allow us to consider our own mortality and place in life. To inform this argument, we look at examples that personalize and sensitively commemorate public spaces. Briefly outlined, two of the case studies herein analyzed are examples of previously banal or forgotten places that have been transformed to a sacred status by ceremony or nonce ritual. The third serves as a model for how active mourning may be performed by persons not related to the deceased, but may still produce the relevant prospect of memory and respect.

Descansos, or roadside memorials, illustrate how a simple act of marking the site of an accident becomes culturally significant. The minimal shrines are impressionable as anomalies in the secular context of the roadway. Public in nature, they cast the passive viewer in the role of the mourner, a spectator at a funeral.

The Arlington West Project, a living memorial designed by Stephen Sherrill and executed by veterans and volunteers, has been instilling the sacred into the recreational sands of Santa Monica every Sunday since 2004. The crosses and makeshift coffins that mark the land create the illusion of a military cemetery. Though no burials are present, the reaction of family and members of the public is no different – these surrogate markers elicit spontaneous mourning, questioning, and reflection.

The Adopt-A-Grave program at Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial speaks to the promise that active engagement has for cemeteries when visitation by direct relatives is not possible. Often these gravesites, abandoned by the communities that surround them, reflect the signs of neglect and lose their sense of sacred identity. This example shows how generations of French men and women have become *surrogate mourners*. They stand in for the American families who may rarely if ever make the pilgrimage to the cemetery. These French mourners form a psychological bond to the deceased. They visit, maintain the graves, and express deep respect for the honored soldiers.



Odd Fellows Cemetery

Studies such as these inform how we may approach neglected landscapes and reinforce the potential for the sacred that serves to strengthen society's sense of spiritual place and worth. My own exploration has focused on Odd Fellows Cemetery, a dedicated African American cemetery in East Knoxville, Tennessee. Established in 1880, it has suffered nearly a century of growing disassociation. In the 1930s, the organizations that founded it disbanded and left it affectively

without ownership, though active burial continued through the end of the century. In the 1970s, the communities that fed into it were displaced as a result of urban renewal and very little visitation is evident today. Opportunities for contemporary mourning are further limited because of the lack of commemorative markers. There are no documented plot records. Grave stones have been vandalized, have deteriorated, or in some cases were never erected. Further disassociation arises from the visible voids in the fabric of the above-ground landscape. People have knowledge that a family member is buried in the cemetery, but they do not know where. They seek a place to pay respects, to mourn contemporaneously. In their devotion, they seek a point of focus, a totem of grief, a *surrogate stone*.

Actively involved with the research and design development for the rehabilitation of the cemetery, I am working with the community to explore a number of strategies that will help to foster this sense of commemoration and to assist with the ongoing desire to grieve for and honor family members and friends that have passed. I am also exploring ways that newer generations, most of whom may have no known personal ties to the interned, may gain a sense of belonging and ownership of the land. Much of the study involves proposals that address the rehabilitation of the physical grounds, but through the process I seek opportunities where ritual may be layered with the tangible and where memory of the engagement can be embodied in the intervening form.

Ritual in the context of the everyday

We recognize that every action we take in the cemetery holds opportunity for memory. Over the past several months we have worked with local volunteer groups and work service organizations to begin to map the area. This action began as a response to a community member who asked us to help her find where her aunt may be buried. With no plot map it was difficult to direct her and it was suggested that the marker may be missing. Through our research we continued our own frustration regarding the lack of documentation of the physical composition of the site's underground strata. The decision to plot the cemetery seemed logical and timely. It was a way both to support the community with factual information regarding burial location, which in turn will help with the process of contemporary mourning, and to give us as designers the contextual information we need to move forward with the proposal.

The process to develop a plot map based on the above-ground evidence is simple enough – it involves placing survey flags in a grid and developing an information sheet to consistently record pertinent information such as names, dates, physical conditions, and dimensional placement. However, the scope of work is extensive and the process is time consuming. The primary cemetery covers approximately seven acres and there are an estimated 2000 existing markers with an equal number of fragments scattered throughout. The sheer extent of the endeavor gave us opportunity to reach out to the community and local organizations to solicit involvement. To date we have been generously assisted by over 150 volunteers and have been able to survey one quarter of Odd Fellows Cemetery.

I began each service session by sharing information about the cemetery including its founding, its story of abandonment and neglect, and the community's goals for rehabilitation. I described the procedure of surveying and demonstrated how one would measure and record the locations of

headstones. I thanked the volunteers for their time and reinforced how their service would directly inform the community. These announcements served as an opening ceremony.

The survey activity we proposed was seemingly innocuous. Though not common, it could be handled by a general set of skills. It provided us with an information set that will allow us to develop a partial database and plot map, yet for the volunteers the survey proved to be more than simply gaining statistical information. I witnessed a growing interest and intensity of focus in the participants. As they moved from stone to stone I saw them activate their bodies. They stepped gingerly to avoid sunken areas and stopped in recognition of the human proportions. They ran their fingers over worn stones, letting their sense of touch read the faded inscriptions when their eyes could not. I heard them discuss recognized patterns and groupings of family members. They hypothesized about relationships and about the meaning of certain symbols. They shared their discoveries with strangers in their group to find common insight. This became an intellectual and emotional process for the participants and the experience connected them to the place and the people. Though they may forget the historical information presented to initiate the actions, the memory now engrained in their bodies will have a lasting impression.



The heightened sense of discovery qualifies the survey activity as a nonce ritual. It is the special embedded in the everyday which, for the participants, calls to question the nature of the sacred and allows them to sense it even in the deteriorating landscape. For the witness to the activity there is similar recognition. On the days of the service sessions, the cemetery was transformed with by the visible working engagements. Neighborhood residents stopped to watch and to question the activity. They learned of our goals to support the community and many shared their own stories. There was an expressed sense of pride and thankfulness that we would take note of an area typically ignored. On these days when the survey is not in progress, the yellow ground flags stand as surrogate markers of the community's commitment to support the cemetery.

Proposals to mark the cemetery and support common ritual

This narrative demonstrates how a simple activity can hold a potential to link place and memory and instill the sacred in a public place. As we move forward with the design process, I continue to explore additional opportunities for intervention that would support site specific nonce ritual in the cemetery. The explored case studies demonstrate how an active engagement, permanent or temporary, can affect participants and witnesses alike and provide place for contemporary mourning and reflection. The following interventions each hold the potential to transform Odd

Fellows Cemetery and make evident the contemporary sacred value of the land to the community.

Memory Stones: One of the more impressionable realizations for the volunteers performing the survey was that the majority of burials are currently unmarked. Many of the gridded squares give indication of an assumed density for the cemetery as a whole. When a square is vacant, there is a sense of loss of history and memory. We spoke to the community about the potential for *memory stones* to be placed throughout the cemetery with a pattern and rhythm established by the existing stones. These surrogates would stand as symbols for markers that have disappeared over the years, but we do not consider them as replacements. The actual relics of history have been lost and we feel it is important that this be recognized. These new stones would bear no names or dates. They would be distinct in material and form. We mean for visitors to recognize that they were placed by a contemporary community with renewed devotion.

The ritual itself would involve the creation, placement, and possible removal of the *memory stones*. The activity could engage school children from the community through their civics or art classes. The purpose of the engagement should be clearly outlined and a ceremony of placement designed to include parents and siblings. If the ritual were practiced as an annual event, participants from the previous year could participate at the beginning of the ceremony, collect their weathered stones, and offer the barren ground to the upcoming group to mark with their own *memory stones*. It is anticipated that many stones would be lost or broken, instilling a sense of time, eliciting a mournful response from the participants. The orchestrated ritual could be as effective if conducted over a short period of time, a month or even a week, such that the cemetery transformation is temporary – an act of remembrance that one may anticipate happening annually and meaningfully engage.

Riverbed Walk: The history of Odd Fellows Cemetery is tied to natural waterways in the area. The initial community that the cemetery served was founded around Knoxville's First Creek. It carved a ravine through the neighborhood and shaped the topography. Though a source of delight for the inhabitants, the creek was channeled underground when the city proposed a new highway system and displaced the residents. In a parallel story, the cemetery itself is located in a low lying area on the previous outskirts of the city. Undesirable as farmland because of its tendency to flood, it was inexpensive real estate for an impoverished community. Unfortunately the issue of flooding was never addressed. Runoff from adjacent areas cuts directly through the cemetery, compromising the soil and accelerating the decay of landscape and burial markers.

Water relates to the specific history of the place and people and is a primary cause for concern in the landscape. We propose to reframe the element as a positive force, drawing on its more sacred associations of health, fertility, purification, and transformation. The planned ritual space involves the installation of a permanent piece of infrastructure, a *riverbed walk*. We propose that a dry stone creek be constructed that traces the natural route of water through the cemetery. This would help to contain and direct water to specific areas where rain gardens may be planted. It would be paralleled by a slightly elevated walkway that would invite residents from the neighborhoods to pass through the cemetery rather than skirt around its perimeter. As an added

layer, we propose to embed fragments of broken headstone currently scattered throughout the cemetery along the upper rim of the creek bed on the opposite side of the channel from the walkway, angled to address the glance of the passers-by.

The *riverbed walk* is the inverse of a memorial wall. It marks a linear path, but it is unobstructive, cradled in the landscape. The everyday ritual is passive. A simple pause along the walk gives opportunity to notice a date, a symbol, or the fragment of a name in the stones below. A longer wait may allow a visitor to mentally connect pieces and associate them with headstones standing on the high ground. To move deeper into the ritual, the community may be involved in locating, cleansing, and ultimately selecting the placement for the fragments. We imagine them trying to piece them together in the hopes of making amends for the neglect of the past century. The dry creek would serve as a communal surrogate stone, collectively honoring the displaced and forgotten.

Blooming Graves: The erosion of the landscape in the sensitive areas of disturbed ground has resulted in obvious outlines of sunken graves. They provide a kinesthetic understanding of the landscape where one's body is aware of an uneven earth and must adapt with greater sensitivity to sloping terrain and changes in ground density. These sunken graves are sublime reminders of the inevitability of decay and for many are important indicators of time in the cemetery. Yet for a great percentage of the public they are hazardous pitfalls. As neighborhood consensus builds, we find it more probable that there will be a necessary leveling of the landscape. This third ritual, the *blooming graves*, reinforces the memory of the depressed burial sites by impregnating the filler soil with perennial flower bulbs. The haptic reminders of burial give way to a more visual and olfactory appreciation. Planting typically reserved for headstone homage is transposed to the body as a whole and the previously unmarked graves receive a seasonal surrogate.

The ritual of planting is more engaging and therefore more personal for the participants. Working with the anomaly of the earthen form immediately over a grave, their body posture would reference that of a mourner. And though the identity of the interred is typically unknown, there would inevitably be an emotional association made. The ritual would begin with the preparation of the grounds, the removal of weeds, and the initial fill of soil to level the hollow. A layer of crocus or snowdrop bulbs would be distributed evenly over the plot. We would encourage participants to place a personal token, a note, a fresh-cut flower, a teddy bear, in and amongst the dormant plants and to use this opportunity to reflect. A prayer might be said as the final layer of soil is placed overtop and the semblance of a fresh new grave emerges.

These devotions would translate as a landscape marked by a carpet of monochrome blooms. From the perimeter of the cemetery, the fabric would read complete as the vacant areas grow with new life. From within the cemetery, the individually decipherable graves would become the new surrogates.

In these examples, the concept of the surrogate stone manifests itself in different scales, with different materials, to different audiences, and through different levels of engagement. As we look at the physical and cultural context to provide motivation for our intervening actions, we

consider the immediate impact a nonce ritual may have on a participant and the long-term effect it may have on the cemetery itself. With our focus on the unmarked graves, we look for genuine opportunities to affect the community and to provide them with inspiration to engage the cemetery. By re-marking and revealing the grave sites with surrogate stones, we encourage the conscious act of remembering and grieving and reinforce the meaning of the sacred in the community and memorial landscape.