**Scarce Cemetery Space Creates Prices to Die For: Cities Hw #4**

By Flavia Krause-Jackson - Aug 4, 2014

Even in death, you can’t escape the property bubble.

From New York to London, growing populations are competing with the deceased for land, driving up real-estate costs well into the afterlife. In Asian megacities, where cremation is the norm, even space for urns is in short supply. “At the end of the day, it’s like any other piece of real estate,” says Amy Cunningham, a New York state licensed funeral director. “Prices have conspired to put burials out of the range of most people’s budgets.

Every week, about 1,000 New Yorkers die. Manhattan is running out of room for them. Further out in Brooklyn, prices of plots for the deceased and apartments for the living are at records. A 756 square-foot mausoleum site in Green-Wood Cemetery, nestled on the edge of Brooklyn’s Park Slope neighborhood, costs $320,000. An 1,800-square-foot single family home across the street sold for $245,000 in 2009. Today it’s worth $1 million, according to real-estate website Zillow Inc.

Former Mayor Ed Koch may be among the last New Yorkers to be buried in Manhattan. He paid uptown Trinity Church Cemetery $20,000 in 2008, five years before he passed away at 88. “I don’t want to leave Manhattan, even when I’m gone,” Koch told The Associated Press at the time. “The thought of having to go to New Jersey was so distressing to me.”

Bargain Alternatives

Across the Hudson River, there are more than a 100 cemeteries to pick from. Leaving the five boroughs can cut the cost by 75 percent, Cunningham said. Upstate, a single rural plot less than a three-hour drive from the George Washington Bridge can cost as little as $500. It can be cheaper still to be scattered at sea or stacked on top of your spouse for eternity.

Burials plots aside, the median cost of a funeral in the U.S. shot up to $7,000 in 2012 from $700 in 1960, according to the National Funeral Directors Association, based near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That and shifting cultural and religious attitudes explain why cremations will become increasingly common, said Christopher Coutts, an associate professor of urban and regional planning at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

In 1960, fewer than 4 percent of Americans chose ashes to ashes. In 2012, it was 43 percent, according to the association. That’s still lower than London, where it’s 70 percent, or Tokyo, where there is virtually no alternative to incineration.

Space Oddity

From a floating cemetery on the South China Sea to launching corpses into space, architects and urban planners are dreaming up new ways to dispose of human remains. “The problem is pressing, now more than ever before,” said Coutts, co-author of a 2013 academic paper, “Planning for the Deceased.” “Right now we’re not being efficient, or environmental.”

The solution may be as simple as dialing back the clock.

Green burials are a draw for eco-friendly urbanites: There’s no embalming and no metal casket. These no-frill alternatives are cheaper, too: about $3,000 compared with $10,000 for a traditional interment, Cunningham said. Claiming to be the greenest of them all is Promessa Organic AB, based in Nosund, Sweden. It is developing a procedure that would freeze-dry bodies in a tank of liquid nitrogen and pulverize them. Unlike cremation, the process doesn’t release toxins, such as mercury, into the air.

London Digs Deep

To tackle the shortage in burial grounds, London passed a 2007 law allowing authorities to dig up graves at least 75 years old to make way for new ones. Problem is, boroughs have been reluctant to use their powers, according to the University of York’s Cemetery Research Group.

In Asia, the dead, like the living, are moving into high-rises.

The wait time for a sought-after slot in a public Hong Kong columbarium -- a building containing urns -- can be as long as five years. One private development approved earlier this year will convert an abandoned leather factory into an 11-story columbarium that can hold 23,000 niches. There are also cultural considerations in China, which has a public holiday for tomb-sweeping. “Dumping someone at sea is not an option,” Coutts said. “You honor the dead. You visit regularly.”

Swipe Card

That’s where Japan’s approach comes in: mechanized facilities where families use a smart card to retrieve ashes from an underground vault housing thousands of urns. “You sit in a room, punch in your codes and call up your remains,” Coutts said.

In Beijing, locals often joke that they can’t afford to die and look to cemeteries in neighboring Hebei province. The cost for a standard plot of 0.9 square meters (9.7 square feet) in the capital ranges from 40,000 yuan ($6,500) to 300,000 yuan for the most desirable locations, according to Mudi114.com, a Beijing cemetery-service website.

Lack of space to bury one’s dead is a problem as old as cities themselves. From medieval Paris to ancient Rome, catacombs were a practical solution. Today, both European capitals contain miles of underground mazes and caves. Among Napoleon Bonaparte’s first acts was to clear out the capital’s overloaded graveyards and build new cemeteries at the edge of Paris.

A decent Christian burial in the Eternal City can cost more than a year’s salary. The price of a spot six feet under at Verano, Rome’s central burial ground, is about 24,000 euros ($32,200). The average disposable income in Italy’s central regions, where the capital is located, is 18,700 euros, according to Istat, the national statistics office.

Concrete Niche

Italians on a budget have to settle for a concrete niche, 10 rows up from the ground, for 320 euros. Even those bargain-basement prices aren’t immune to market forces. The near-bankrupt city is seeking a 50 percent increase, il Messaggero reported.

From Rome to California, the age-old maxim still holds: location, location, location.

Marilyn Monroe’s final resting place is in Pierce Brothers Westwood Village Memorial Park in Los Angeles. Such is her enduring allure that in 2009 a spot above her drew a $4.6 million bid on EBay Inc. The offer, by an unidentified Japanese fan, didn’t result in a sale, according to the Los Angeles Times.

In Brooklyn, the Gothic architecture and landscaped hills and lakes marking Green-Wood’s 478 acres echo the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Prospect Park a mile away. Rich Moylan has worked at the cemetery more than 40 years, initially as a teenager cutting grass. Now he’s the president.

Overgrown Jungle

“When I started here, this place was a jungle. It was not a place to be proud of,” he said. Moylan recalls being cagey when people asked him what he did for a living. “I usually led with, I’m an attorney.” Since the mid-1980s, he’s presided over a sea change in the business. The future is not in selling burial lots as the inventory of available land runs out.

“It’s supply and demand, sadly,” he said in an interview during a tour by electric car past the tucked-away grave sites of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein. Green-wood has 1,200 funerals a year, a 20 percent drop from a decade ago. In five years, it will run of space. Rather than trying to squeeze more in, Moylan is counting on events such as LGBT-themed trolley tours -- with a guide highlighting where famous gays are buried -- to help supplement lost income.

Relaxing Picnic

As part of its transformation, Green-Wood even offers outdoor yoga that integrates its “serene landscape” in a “subtle, thoughtful way,” followed by “a relaxing breakfast picnic.”

The cemetery’s lifeline may come from an overhaul in nonprofit laws that will allow it to re-invest money given by families to tend the plots. Right now, these perpetual-care funds, which can’t be touched, account for about half of its $250 million portfolio. “Income being what it is these days, that hurts even a cemetery like Green-wood,” he said. “You’re looking to grow, and the only way to do that is in the stock market.”