

Status

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What We Look Up To Now The Democratization of Status in America



A resting place to **J**die for?

By Amy M. Spindler

Just think of the graveyard gates as the last velvet rope. And think of the mausoleum as the last V.I.P. room the fabulous will ever enter. And think of Tyler Cassity as the cemetery set's Steve Rubell, who keeps the list of those who have been admitted to rub elbows with the famous — in perpetuity. Finally, someone is creating a home for those who are, literally, terminally trendy.

Cassity is the new 28-year-old owner of the 100-year-old Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery, final resting place of Rudolph Valentino, Jayne Mansfield, Tyrone Power, Peter Lorre and about 80,000 others who invented Hollywood, from pioneers to city founders to one of the first feature-film directors (Cecil B. De Mille), screenwriters (Frank E. Woods), producers (Jesse L. Lasky), movie stars (Florence Lawrence) and Academy Award winners (Janet Gaynor). Even the woman who gave Hollywood its name in 1886, Daida Wilcox Beveridge, is entombed there.

It was the first cemetery in Hollywood, but until Cassity bought the bankrupt landmark for \$375,000, it was the last place anyone would have wanted to be buried. Jules Roth, who had owned the graveyard since 1940, died in January and left behind — in addition to a large collection of Playboy Club keys from across the country and what is perhaps the only swinger's wet bar ever installed in a cemetery — a wreck. Water was cascading through the stained-glass panels of the Jewish portion of the cemetery, where Bugsy Siegel lies. Roth, a bit of a gambler, had sold off two corners of the property, including the original entrance, to strip malls, which then used up most of the available water, so the grounds had died. According to Cassity, Roth hadn't repaired the roofs for 30 years; he raided and sold statuary from the mausoleums, never repaired earthquake damage to crypts and left the fund meant to take care of the cemetery till the end of time missing about \$9 million. The cemetery was making more money from disinterments — disillusioned families taking their loved ones elsewhere — than burials.

The gates were about to be padlocked when Cassity made a bid; his was the only one. "It's a cultural icon full of cultural icons," Cassity says. "But in the state it was in, for the people who have that need, this wasn't the place to be."

Out the front gate, there's a clear view of the Hollywood sign. Out the back, the Paramount Pictures prop house. Cassity concluded that for a generation fixated on celebrities, becoming common dust with the glitterati is certainly better than an autograph. The new design, by the trendiest team of designers he could find to attract the discerning dead, makes room for 60,000 more of the famous or their fans. Plans include multimedia centers, a virtual



library for ashes, and caskets, urns and memorials by artists like Jim Turrell and Richard Serra.

"It's this balance," Cassity says. "I want it to be a cultural center—because it is, and the neighborhood needs one. And I want it to be a place where important figures are buried. We'll restore it to such a state that today's celebrities will want to continue to be part of that narrative."

Historically, the cemetery used the best designers and architects to attract the famous and powerful. Which is why Cassity is doing the same, right down to marketing the place the same way it was advertised as far back as 1932, when it was dubbed Cemetery of the Immortals. Interior design of the buildings is being handled by Brad Dunning, who is simultaneously working on houses for Tom Ford, Gucci's designer, and Bryan Lourd, one of the head agents of C.A.A. Frederick Fisher, the architect who designed the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, N.Y., is creating new mausoleums. And Nancy Goslee Power, who just designed the Norton Si-

mon Museum's new gardens and who has worked with many of California's living legends like David Geffen and Frank Gehry, is the landscape designer.

Cassity is aware that it will take a design team of such a pedigree to overcome the kitsch inherent in memorializing death, inarguably a defining factor of Hollywood Memorial—from the portrait of Pete the dog on Carl "Alfalfa" Switzer's gravestone to the "That's All Folks" etched on Mel Blanc's. Even Cassity's most radical idea, of providing multimedia histories for the famous buried there and the new customers coming in, has that potential.

But growing up in a family that owned 13 funeral homes and three cemeteries in St. Louis makes him a little immune to the camp involved in a theme-park-style cemetery. "When you grow up with something like that, it makes it regular," Cassity shrugs.

Twelve years ago, he and his brother, Brent, came across a recording made of his grandmother

before she died. It moved them so much that they invented a biography service, called Forever Enterprises, that offers interactive digital life stories to be viewed, in kiosks, by family members visiting graves. Cassity was in Los Angeles last November, presenting Forever Enterprises to a group of cemetery owners, when they said that none of them wanted anything to do with the Hollywood cemetery, which was up for sale. "On the way to the airport, I stopped by, and I said, 'I can't leave,'" Cassity says. Three months later, his bid, \$7.5 million less than what the cemetery was worth in 1986, was accepted.

Cassity saw it as an opportunity to market Forever Enterprises, hiring a full-time archivist to research and create multimedia biographies for the interred famous like Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Victor Fleming, who directed "Gone With the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz." The same sort of high-tech biographies will also be available to those less famous who buy space in the cemetery. "We've always looked at the biog-



If Tyler Cassity has his way, the Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery will be the place for the discerning dead.

raphy product in those terms, which is why this is such a good fit for us, the concept of celebrity," Cassity says. "The culture selects certain people to celebrate, and those people are granted immortality by the culture. What we're trying to do is say that everyone has the right to be celebrated."

He even renamed the place "Hollywood Forever," but was criticized for making one of the most important landmarks in Hollywood sound like a T-shirt shop next to Grauman's Chinese Theater. He changed the name back.

WHETHER OR NOT CASSITY'S IDEAS work for a new generation, his something-for-everyone approach has a certain logic: everyone is, after all, terminal. So there will be sanctuaries for Buddhists and Hindus as well as a Holocaust memorial. Silent movies of the stars buried outside will be shown in a Gothic room that was a Mason's temple, and the octogenarian-populated annual Valentino memorial services will be held

there. There will be rooms for crypts open to the sky on top of mausoleums, and a cylindrical building suggested by Erik Gunnar Asplund's public library in Stockholm will be lined with book-shaped urns. A topiary labyrinth will have several ash-scattering options inside. (The last cremation at Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery was Marna Cass Elliot in 1972.)

Those working on the project all have favorite celebrities on their wish lists, people deemed appropriate to lay alongside John Huston, Marion Davies and Harry Cohn. "Right now, we want to create a place that would correspond to their esthetic," Cassity says. "We're not trying to court them directly, ambulance-chase. We would have loved it if Frank Sinatra would have come here. But he didn't."

If drawing attention weren't an element of a successful grave site, then everyone would be cremated and sprinkled in mountain ranges. Cassity understands the need for a cemetery to have traffic. His dream is to give Jim Morrison's crowd-

drawing body, which Père Lachaise has been threatening to disinter for years, a new home. "It's a nice thing to talk about, because it seems like a good place for him, since this is where it all started for him," Cassity says. "Père Lachaise complains because people come and do graffiti and set up shrines. We'd give him a special area."

If Cassity sells all 60,000 new sites, he should take in at least \$60 million, which would put the endowment up to \$8 million. And that should leave plenty of money to take care of his own future. "I've always wanted to be buried in a simple box with a tree," Cassity says. "With this much land, and being responsible for it, I feel like I should be buried in it. Sometimes I feel like I'm buried knee-high here already."

Ultimately, Cassity is creating a new set of rituals for a generation that is just beginning to come to terms with its own mortality. "Culturally, there's been so little focus on death and dying for the past few years," Cassity says. "But the best way to deal with life is to deal with death." ■