Dead Space: The Creole Cemeteries of New Orleans

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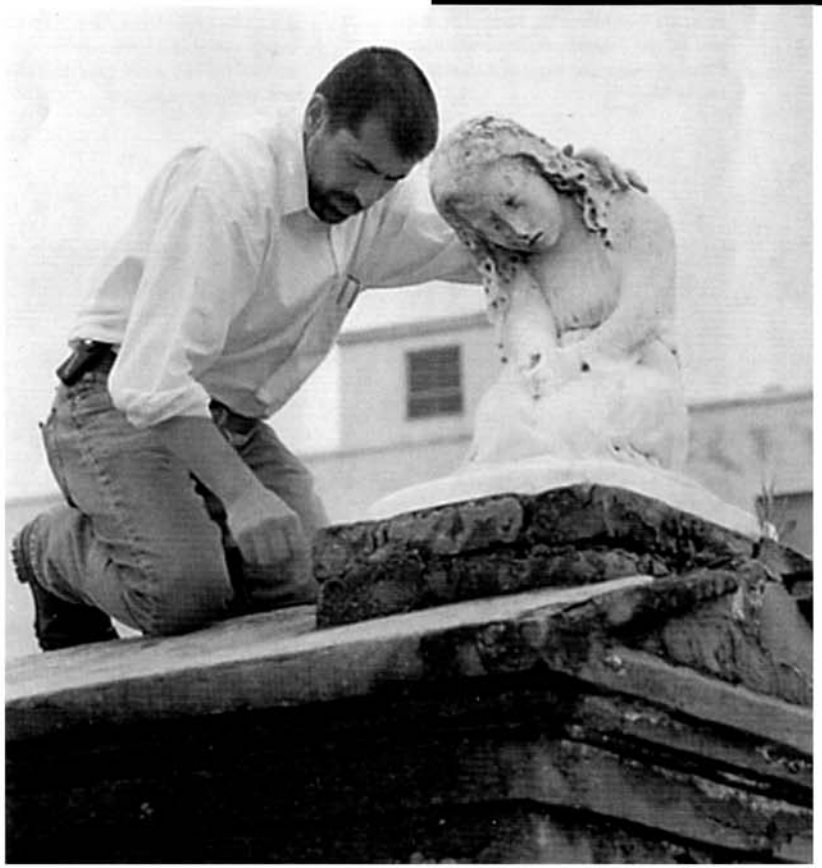

Frank Matero conducts a workshop on masonry conservation at St. Louis I.

New Orleans' Creole cemeteries have fascinated visitors to the city since the early 19th century. Today, after years of abandonment, they are experiencing a renewed popularity through heritage tourism. Yet despite this revived interest, neglect, theft, vandalism, and a long history of physical marginality continue to pose serious threats to these unique yet fragile sites. Underlying these problems is the more fundamental question of the continued relevancy and practicality of these places as sacred burial sites, an issue confronting many such older urban cemeteries and burial grounds. Shifting and declining populations, redevelopment of surrounding land, space limitations, and changes in burial practice and religious observance have all diminished the primary function of these places for the interment and veneration of the dead.

A new approach to the preservation of such sites is currently underway by faculty and students from GSFA and the School of Architecture/Preservation Studies at Tulane University. A collaborative studio, directed by Frank Matero from Historic Preservation and Dana Tomlin from Landscape Architecture, was conducted this spring with students from both departments, and funding was provided by the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, Office of Cultural Development and The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, in partnership with Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. and the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The studio focused on St. Louis I Cemetery, New Orleans' oldest extant cemetery, founded in 1789. This site, along with neighboring St. Louis II Cemetery, are unique cultural landscapes of combined European and American traditions, as complex in their design and evolution as they are rich in the assemblage of family and society tombs of great historical and architectural value.

The goal of the collaborative studio was development of a conservation plan, beginning with the documentation, recording and analysis of the cemetery and its urban context over time. This was realized through a visual mapping and typological and condition survey of the site and its neighborhood, measured drawings of selected tombs, and a practical technical conservation program for the care and maintenance of the tombs and landscape. Central to the project was the utilization of digital technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to better map, analyze and ultimately manage this and similar sites. The studio also sought to develop and implement practical technical solutions to the increasing material problems of tomb and landscape degradation by preparing specific technical and design guidelines for site managers and tomb owners. These were demonstrated through the conservation and repair of three selected tombs funded by Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. and the Archdiocese of New Orleans. In addition, a heritage education program with Joseph A. Craig Elementary School in the neighborhood was developed as a prototype for New Orleans schools.

Through the specifics of a site-related problem, the collaborative studio moved beyond the physical issues of the tombs and landscape, to past and contemporary meanings and associations of such places as cultural landscapes and the related issues of use, abandonment, and preservation of historical necrogeographies. As the investigation progressed, the studio focused further on an exploration of how earlier site histories have influenced current attitudes and values and how these—as invented narratives—have helped shape the motives and methods of use and preservation of these places over time. Such concerns are related to the larger cultural questions of the 'construction of identity' and the 'invention of tradition' that have been of interest to historians, anthropologists, and sociologists for at least a decade. Moreover, they beg renewed consideration of such places—as J.B. Jackson has long observed—as social constructs formed over time rather than only as designed entities,"...regarded first of all in terms of living rather than looking." Consequently, the role of history, personal and collective memory, and changing concepts of space and time—as well as death—in the preservation and interpretation of such places all need to be better understood. In so doing, the studio began to reconstruct an ethnohistory of New Orleans' early cemeteries in which the physical transformations and cultural meanings of the site were studied by working back through time to represent or illuminate past realities and current conditions.

Consideration of these issues in practice through a cross-disciplinary studio introduced a highly critical approach to the preservation of such places. Moreover the mix of students and faculty as well as outside visiting scholars and practitioners promoted a unique exploration of the problems of place definition before site solutions were developed. Plans to continue the project are underway with a public presentation and technical workshop scheduled in New Orleans this month and additional analysis during next academic year. The results of the studio may be accessed through the project's website at <www.noladeadspace.org>