

# Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore: Historic significance and future role in urban social sustainability

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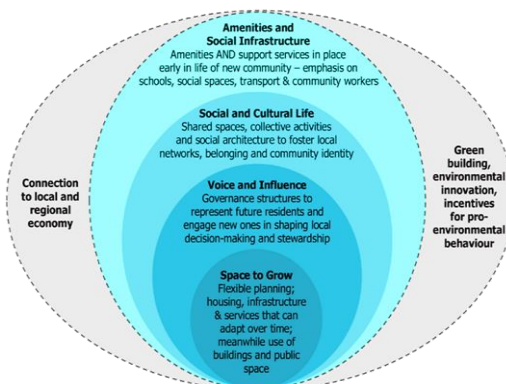
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**ABSTRACT:** Urban open spaces play a vital role in the social life of city residents. This paper presents a taxonomy of urban spaces and explores the role of cemeteries as an open space that may enhance the social sustainability of neighborhoods. As urban infrastructure, cemeteries provide a resting space for departed citizens and express historical continuity for evolving communities. As superstructure, cemeteries offer spaces for contemplation and chance encounters for the living, contributing to historically-grounded civic identity. Baltimore's Mount Auburn Cemetery was established in 1861 as a rural burial space on farmland outside the city and in time grew into a complex and evolving "City of the Dead". It is more than a place of rest for the dead and expresses the importance of ritual and ceremony over form and related Euro-American concepts of perpetual maintenance (Jones, 2011). Recognizing its uniqueness as an African American cultural landscape, this paper presents a socially sustainability framework for the revitalization of this privately-owned cemetery into a public memorial park taking into account the full life cycle of urban communities. It also posits the role of universities in developing Partnership and Revitalization Plans through community engagement with varied stakeholders to take care of these resting places and design spaces for meditative contemplation for the living.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Sustainability, Urban Redevelopment, Urban Open Spaces, Cemeteries, Baltimore

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development first emerged in the 1980s with the well-known WCED publication *Our Common Future* (1987), and in response to a growing awareness of the need to balance economic progress with the exploitation of natural resources. The Commission defined sustainable development as "meet(ing) the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Studies have also shown that positive social interaction is an important element of sustainability that can improve and alter people's behavior and attitude (Soflaei, 2013 & 2017), as well as improve personal well-being, environmental awareness and care, and aesthetic perception (Warne, 2014). This research focuses on its social pillar (Figure 1) to suggest that future generations should have the same or greater access to shared urban resources for social interaction as inherited by the current generation.



**Figure 1.** Framework for socially sustainable design (The Young Foundation, 2011)

Examining the case of the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, we argue that privately-owned open spaces may be revitalized as public spaces for contemplation and social encounters. Our aim is to understand the Cemetery's historic significance, document its current state, and chart the most appropriate framework for its revitalization as a Public Memorial Park. We used two research methods: 1) through literature review, we focused on types of spaces that generate most social encounters and identified a research gap in existing strategies that deal with privately owned open spaces in decline where the owners and affected communities are distant, both in time and space; 2) through two surveys, we evaluated the existing condition of the Mount Auburn Cemetery and conducted guided-interviews with stakeholders to understand issues regarding the perpetual care of the cemetery. As conclusion, we propose a socio-spatial framework for revitalizing the Mount Auburn Cemetery as a unique public open space for contemplation and encounters.

# 1. THE IMPACT OF OPEN SPACES ON URBAN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

## 1.1. Urban social sustainability

Literature review reveals that definitions of social sustainability in urban context are offered under four theoretical frameworks: 1) Theories that pay more attention to the existing positive conditions of urban life. For instance, Chiu (2002) mentioned that social sustainability relates to the "social norms and conditions" in that any environmental or economic decision must not exceed the community's tolerance for change. In other words, urban sustainability goals are directly related to social acceptability around shared concerns. 2) The main focus in the second framework is on the "measurement", where scholars usually target the positive indicators. According to Colantino (2010) social sustainability themes such as employment and poverty alleviation are increasingly being complemented or replaced by the less measurable concepts like "happiness", social interactions and "sense of place". 3) Scholars have also maintained a "future focus" on the continued improvement of individual "well-being" from the current to the future generations. Barron and Gauntlett (2002) explained that social sustainability occurs when formal and informal processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life for citizens. 4) Theories in the fourth framework offer a functionalist understanding of social sustainability as a process of generating cohesion. According to McKenzie (2004), social sustainability is a life-enhancing condition within communities arrived through a process. Examples cited under each of the theoretical frameworks reveal six common characteristics of communities deemed socially sustainable:

- 1) Demographic diversity
- 2) Equity in satisfaction of human needs
- 3) Individual well-being and happiness
- 4) **Social interaction and mixing (cohesion and inclusion)**
- 5) Recognizable sense of place (cultural identity)
- 6) Notable sense of community (place attachment)

The fourth character that relies on social interaction (cohesion and inclusion) is the one most needed in Baltimore; a city with a history of designed segregation. When open spaces are designed to generate cohesive inclusion, their maintenance issues are best addressed when residents in vicinity have a stake as users. While city residents use open spaces in a wide variety of ways (Soflaei, 2014), individuals and groups are much more likely to look after and care for the urban space if they have a positive association or emotion, whether generated by the environment or other people (Warren et al., 2014). This paper investigates the social value of urban cemeteries as an important type of privately-owned urban open space that may be utilized for public social interactions, enhancing neighbourhood sustainability, and the evolving civic identities.

## 1.2. Social value of urban cemetery as a type of open spaces

Open spaces, like streets and plazas to the water front and parks, are integral to the sustainable life of cities. This paper treats cemeteries as a type of open space that play a vital role in connecting communities across time and space, and enhancing urban civic identity. A cemetery or graveyard is defined as a place, where the remains of deceased people are buried or otherwise interred. The word cemetery, from Greek *κοιμητήριον* means sleeping place (Cantor, 2010), implies the land is specifically designated as a burial ground. There are many different types of cemeteries based on size, function, religion, and location. Early urban cemeteries in occupied US emerged in churchyards but filled quickly and exhibited a haphazard placement of burial markers as sextons tried to squeeze new burials into the remaining space. New burial grounds were established in the early nineteenth century to compensate for lack of space within existing churchyards with burial plots laid out in a grid to replace the chaotic appearance of the churchyard (Mytum, 2004). Cemeteries or burial grounds, have always been a part of the human environment and, as an important type of urban open spaces, have been studied by many architects, landscape designers, and urban planners (Alekshin 1983, Rainville 1999; Yalom and Yalom, 2008; Eggener, 2010; Jones, 2011; Vernon, 2012; Goodrich, 2015). The emergence of the rural or garden cemetery movement in the 1830s gave American cities their first public parks. Initially, urban cemeteries as parks were seen as respite from pollution in urban environments that were rapidly industrializing, providing both a resting place for the departed and encounters with nature for the living. Though originally peripheral, today urban cemeteries are home to wildlife, birds, and plants that are hard to find anywhere else in the urban areas (Worpole, 2003), provide permeable surface that reduces urban storm water flow and mitigates oceanic pollution.

For the African American communities of the US, death in the nineteenth century marked an important social and historical moment and a claim to freedom from slavery (Fletcher, 2014). As the first cemetery in the State of Maryland that is created and operated by the free, fugitive and enslaved member of the African American community, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore allowed autonomy in death during institutional slavery. It's historic significance as the first place where the African American communities asserted their citizenship should play a vital role in Baltimore's civic identity.



**Figure 2.** Mount Auburn Cemetery: the oldest African American Cemetery in Baltimore (Kirchner, 2018)

Though originally created as a rural cemetery, Mount Auburn Cemetery is now surrounded by urban neighbourhoods of Westport and Mt. Winans. While the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church has continuous ownership of the Cemetery since its founding in 1807, the Church itself is located 3.7 miles away from the Cemetery and most of the Church Congregation resides outside the city. Maintenance of the Cemetery was a challenge since, until 1997, there were no provisions for “perpetual care”. Changes in the demography of the adjacent communities have resulted in the Cemetery’s loss of value from the collective memory of its immediate neighbours and the city residents.

## **2. CASE STUDY: MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY IN WESTPORT NEIGHBOURHOOD, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND**

### **2.1. Westport neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland**

Westport neighborhood is located in southwest of Baltimore City along the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River with the Gwen Falls stream forming an edge where an iron furnace was set up as roads and railroads lines were introduced to service the Carr and Lowrey Glass works in 1889. Soon after, the Westport power station was established and more people moved into Westport. Once annexed into Baltimore City, Westport rapidly developed into a dense community of row houses. In 1920 the waterfront was set aside exclusively for industrial use and the internal Annapolis road reached its peak as a commercial main street. In 1952 Westport neighborhood was divided with the construction of the Baltimore Washington Parkway, I-295. This event along with the start of industrial and economic decline left Westport in a state of neglect. Economic hardship and the flight of affluent residents to the suburbs allowed for the influx of minority population and low income families into Westport. The introduction of the I-295 highway divided the neighborhood into two parts. While the Westport neighborhood was physically divided into two parts internally, it became accessible externally from two State Highways, easier to get to by car than by foot.



**Figure 3.** Location of Westport Neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland

### **2.2. Mount Auburn Cemetery in Westport neighborhood: A historical overview**

Mount Auburn Cemetery is the oldest owned and operated African-American cemetery in the city of Baltimore, founded by the seven Trustees of the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church in 1807, with the official deed signed by Reverend James Peck in 1871. As the first Cemetery in Baltimore where African American people could be buried in dignity, it was originally named “The City of the Dead for Colored People”. The name was changed to Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1894. The location and ownership provide a continuing evolution of ethnic history of the African American community in the City of Baltimore, the State of Maryland, and the nation. The Cemetery was incorporated with its urban and rural roots by an Act of the Maryland State

Legislature in 1982, and leased to the Westport Cemetery Corporation for thirty years, ending in May 9, 2012 (Mt Auburn Cemetery Archive). It was designated as a Baltimore City Landmark in 1986 and as a National Register of Historic Place in 2001.

Since 2004, Morgan State University has collaborated with the Sharp Street Church to engage students in visioning the future redevelopment of the 33-acre Cemetery as a treasured landscape. In 2012, after decades of neglect, the DPSCS had partnered with the Church and Morgan to pursue the "clean-up" of the Cemetery by prison inmates. Though the Cemetery remains underutilized as a potential contributor to the image of the city, its grounds are of national significance, as they preserve and sustain history through citizens who experienced slavery and the civil rights movement (Jones, 2011). The rural landscape at the edge of the City is the resting place of generations of Baltimore's African-American community, including historic figures and many unnamed freed and fugitive slaves.



**Figure 4.** Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore: a) Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church owns Mount Auburn Cemetery, b) A panorama view toward Mount Auburn Cemetery from Water view Avenue, and c) Main Gate of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore.

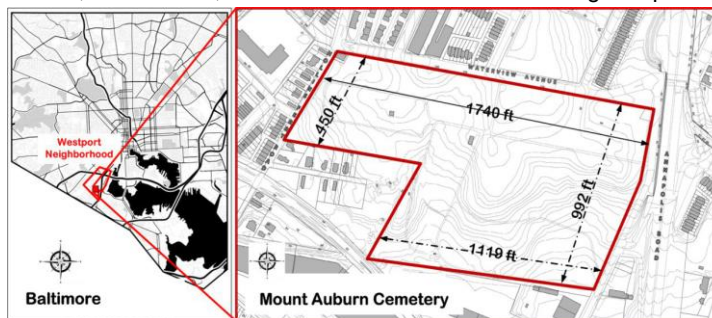
### 2.3. Field investigation

Our field investigation of Mount Auburn Cemetery includes both an observational study of its current condition and stakeholder analysis to articulate its historic value and future redevelopment.

#### 2.3.1 Observation: socio-spatial analysis of Mount Auburn Cemetery

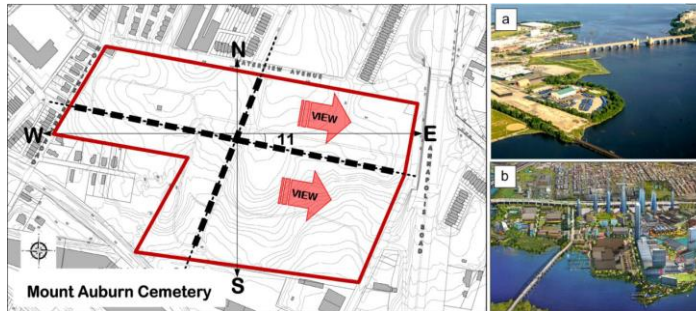
In order to revitalize Mount Auburn Cemetery as a significant historic space in Westport community and the City of Baltimore, we first conducted an observational analysis of the socio-spatial characteristics extrapolated from an extensive literature review (Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1990; Whyte, 2001; Francis, 2003; Watson, 2003):

**2.3.1.1 Size, and location and neighbourhood context:** Mount Auburn Cemetery is located within the city limits of Baltimore accessed by State Highway 295 and Interstate 95. The 32 acres of land it occupied in a polygon shape is permanent home to 55,000 African-American buried here. Originally a rural cemetery, today it is surrounded by housing projects, row homes, commercial, small industrial sites and is the largest open space in Westport.



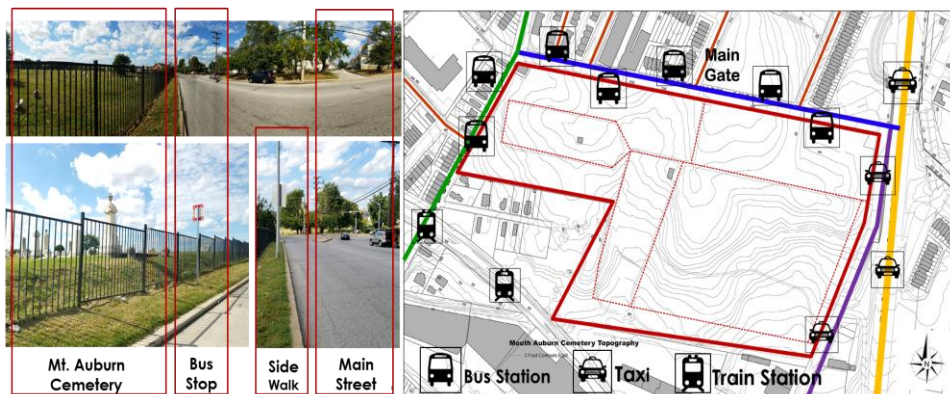
**Figure 5.** Size and location of Mount Auburn Cemetery

**2.3.1.2 Climate, orientation and views:** Mount Auburn Cemetery lies within the humid subtropical climate zone (Cfa), based on the Köppen classification, with four distinct seasons. It enjoys a view shed oriented alongside Annapolis Road of a very scenic view toward Hanover Street Bridge on the Baltimore inner harbour. The sight to the harbour warranted the naming of the northern boundary street running parallel the cemetery, Water view Avenue. This view may eventually encompass the Sagamore Development for the Under Armour Headquarters, West Covington on Middle Patapsco River (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Views of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore: a) View toward the Hanover Street in the north-east of the site, b) View toward the Under Armour Headquarters in the eastern side of the site

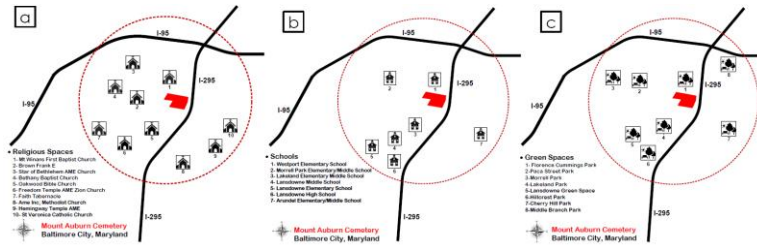
**2.3.1.3 Accessibility and Circulations:** Mount Auburn Cemetery is accessed by Waterview Ave from the North, I-295 and Annapolis Rd from the East, and Hollins Ferry Rd from the West. Access to public transportation includes five bus stops on the northern side of the site and taxicabs that are around, however they stop anywhere on the road that creates traffic problems, and unsafe environment for local residents. Since originally designed as a rural Cemetery, a strong conflict can be observed between vehicles and pedestrians, as the sidewalks and roadways are not clearly separated from each other. There is no crosswalks at key intersections that caused confusion, accidents and unsafe circulation for the visitors (Figure 7). Wayfinding is an issue as the majority of installed signs are not designed properly and do not guide first time drivers and pedestrians to the site. The Mount Auburn Cemetery has a standard ornamental entrance gate, brick and wrought iron half perimeter fence, the remaining fence is chain linked adjacent to the neighboring commercial trucking. There is lack of sufficient crosswalks to serve pedestrian access into the main entrance gate of the cemetery, which causes confusion, accidents and unsafe accessibility for pedestrians. Inside the cemetery, the paths do not lead comprehensively to all zones of the Cemetery, leaving some areas hard to access. While the serene rural landscape provides a respite from the urban chaos of the city, its present condition does not allow for social gathering for events around Easter sunrise for which the Sharp Street Church Congregation visits the Cemetery. Open and covered spaces, as well as additional paths for access are needed, particularly for seniors and disabled persons. In addition, the exit gate is closed and signage opposes directionality making way finding confusing for first time visitors.



**Figure 7.** Public transportation and strong conflict between vehicles and pedestrians in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore

- 2.3.1.4 Environment and landscape:** Originally designed as a rural Cemetery over farmland outside the city, Mount Auburn has many features that distinguishes it from urban cemeteries. It contains free flowing unordered distribution of natural elements that include wildflowers, shrubs, bushes and grass. Occasional trees provide shade for groups of burial sites that are individually taken over by grass and weeds. The designed randomness of locating burial sites is intentional and enhances temporality and flexibility. It is a “way to ensure that there will always be room to bury additional family members” (Jones, 2001).
- 2.3.1.5 Facilities and equipment:** On 32 acres site of Mount Auburn Cemetery, facilities to provide a comfortable environment protected from harsh climatic do not exist. There is inadequate facilities and furnishers to support gatherings, sitting, drinking water, parking, and spending time to explore this unique landscape.

- 2.3.1.6 Safety and security:** Some dark, dead ends, and in-accessible corners near the residential area were observed in the Mount Auburn Cemetery, and the absence of lighting and lack of security system encourages crime. The quality of signage can be upgraded to clarify the main route and allow visitors to find their way *to the graves inside the Cemetery*.
- 2.3.1.7 Architecture and construction:** With regard to the architectural elements, an old vault still exists near the main gate of the cemetery located on the highest site topography. This is an asset for providing visitors a sense of place and enhance way finding. It is suggested to renovate this ancient vault based on original style to maintain a sense of permanency and heritage, improvement of sense of place (aesthetically, culturally, and historically).
- 2.3.1.8 Programming, activities and sociability:** In addition to the residential communities, the Cemetery has religious structures, educational buildings and green spaces nearby.



**Figure 8:** Cemetery Connectivity with: a) Religious Buildings, b) Educational Institutions, c) Green Spaces and Parks

- 2.3.1.9 Management, operations and maintenance:** The owners of the Cemetery no longer live around it, and have not allocated sufficient funds for management and maintenance. An examination would be necessary to best serve the need for repair and/or maintenance of headstone and graves. An estimated \$25000 per year for maintenance (<http://mountauburn.msa.maryland.gov/>) will need a Partnership Plan that engages all stakeholders in the perpetual care of the Cemetery.

## 2.3.2 Meetings, Interviews and Survey Results:

To further explore the role of Mount Auburn Cemetery in the socially sustainable redevelopment of Westport neighbourhood, we interviewed resident members of the Westport Neighbourhood Association in 2016 as part of the elective Urban Regeneration Studio ARCH403 in the Bachelor of Science in Architecture and Environmental Studies program at Morgan State University. In 2017, we met with Reverend Cary James, the current Pastor of the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, and in 2018 interviewed the Members of the Church History Committee as well as conducted a survey of the Church Congregation.

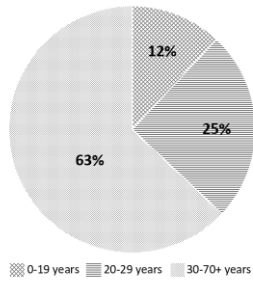
- 2.3.2.1** While the Westport residents honour the Cemetery as a historic site, they also consider it unsafe to walk by or use as an urban respite for contemplation and meditation. Residents in general are willing to volunteer in the efforts to revitalize the Cemetery and help with its perpetual care and upkeep. Their interest centred on ensuring a safe green space in the vicinity of the Elementary School for the health and wellbeing of their children.



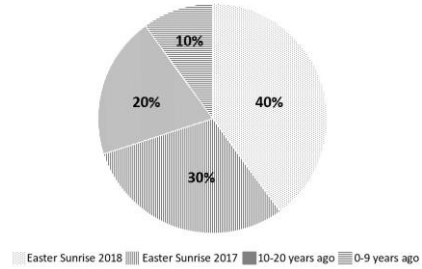
**Figure 9:** Morgan BSAED students engaging the Westport community in Fall 2016

- 2.3.2.2** The results of the meetings, interviews and surveys conducted with the Sharp Street Church community reveals that most members have been affiliated with the Cemetery through the Church for more than 30 years and have seen with dismay the continued cycles of the Cemetery's decline, periodic efforts at "resurrection" that eventually proceed with neglect. Most visit the Cemetery at least once a year as they reside far away, yet each recognizes its tremendous historic significance to their distant community, to the city, state and the nation.

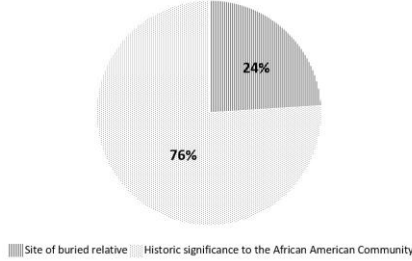
**Question 1:** How long have you been associated with Sharp Street Church?



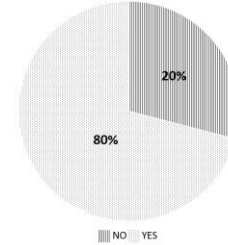
**Question 2:** When was the last time you visited the Mt Auburn Cemetery?



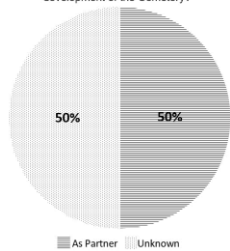
**Question 3:** What do you value most in the Cemetery?



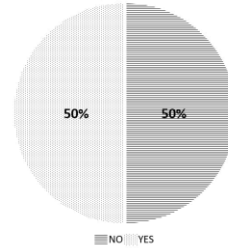
**Question 4:** Is the historic significance of Cemetery appropriately reflected in the city, state or country?



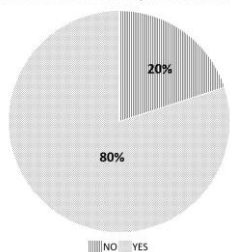
**Question 5:** What is the role of the Westport/Mt Winan neighborhood communities in the historic and future development of the Cemetery?



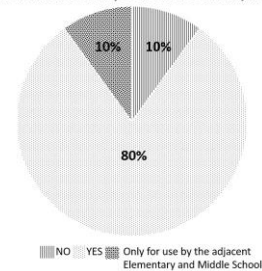
**Question 6:** Is Mt Auburn Cemetery accessible from different parts of Baltimore?



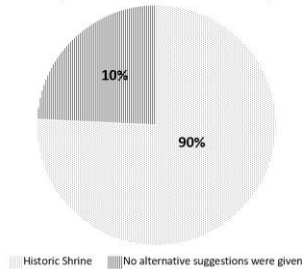
**Question 7:** Should Mt Auburn Cemetery be used as a Memorial Park?



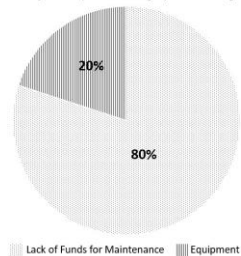
**Question 8:** Should Mt Auburn Cemetery be used as a Community meeting space?



**Question 9:** What are other possible uses of the Mt Auburn Cemetery for future development?



**Question 10:** What are the key issues (main challenges) in revitalizing the Mt Auburn Cemetery?



**Figure 10:** Results of survey conducted in March 2018 with the Sharp Street community

One third of the Church community surveyed suggested reviving the partnership with Morgan State University and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) to train and hire inmates for the continued upkeep of the Cemetery grounds. The operational maintenance of the Cemetery could be sustained through continuation of this partnership and

the role of the Morgan State University's Landscape Architecture program could be expanded to provide technical and skills training of the inmates to develop life skills for future jobs. Some Church History Committee Board Members suggested that the visibility of the Church will be enhanced through a sustained partnership with Morgan State University and the Westport Neighbourhood Associations. One member noted that special Bus Tours between the Church and the Cemetery could bridge the distance between the communities and allow Church community to visit the Cemetery more often and engage in social activities generated through the redevelopment of the Cemetery.

## CONCLUSION

This paper explored the theoretical and potential impact of socially interactive urban open spaces on sustainable development of neighborhoods. It focused on the potential for revitalizing private rural cemeteries as important open spaces often neglected in urban development, and concludes that:

1. Mount Auburn Cemetery is historically rooted in 150 years of African-American culture and contains a unique landscape that has connected nature with the transforming urban communities. While originally designed as a rural burial grounds, the Cemetery remains the largest pervious green space in the urban neighbourhoods of Westport, with a potential for social enhancement.
2. While the cemetery's historic and present ownership remains with Sharp Street Methodist Church, the neighborhood residents are not directly connected or engaged with the upkeep of the cemetery. The social disconnection between the Sharp Street Congregation and the Westport communities is one of the reasons for the perceived deterioration of the cemetery.
3. Though the Church and the Westport residents have both faced a great social transition, revitalizing the Cemetery as an urban Memorial park through community engagement process will reconnect the Cemetery as a "City of the Dead" to collective memory and enhance civic identity.
4. Morgan State University School of Architecture and Planning has a critical role to play in guiding the Partnership and Revitalization plans for the Mount Auburn Cemetery through community engaged activities with the distinct stakeholders and the Cemetery Board of Trustees.
5. Mount Auburn Cemetery is a place for reflection on the uniqueness of African American cultural landscape in the lives of the city residents contributing to the urban history of the City of Baltimore.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank our colleagues Professors Leon Bridge and Dale Green, Pastor Reverend Cary James Jr., members of the History Committee of the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, Ms. Dorothy Daugherty, Ms Sara Ford for their valuable time and sharing of archives and space for community engagement activities. We are grateful to Ms. Keisha Allen, Mr. James Allston of the Westport Community and Economic Development Corporation for their support and connecting us to the residents. Lastly, we wish to further the work of Ms. Robin Howard, Associate Director of the James E. Lewis Museum of Art (JELMA), Dr Diane Jones for leading previous collaborative projects on the Mount Auburn Cemetery, and look forward to meeting the Mount Auburn Cemetery Board of Trustees to discuss the next phase of this research project.

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