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For a Price, Final Resting Places That Even Tut Could Appreciate

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. ? Ed Peck is in no hurry to get there, but when the time comes for him to go to eternity, he wants his last earthly stop to be consistent with his social station.

So Mr. Peck, a real estate developer who made his fortune in Florida condominiums in the 1970's, not long ago joined a small but growing number of Americans who have erected that most pharaonic of monuments to life-in-death, the private family mausoleum.

A Greek-pillared neo-Classical style structure of white granite, Mr. Peck's mausoleum has a granite patio, a meditation room, doors of hand-cast bronze and a chandelier. The family name is carved and gilded above a lintel that in the original sales model carried the legend "Your Name."

Developed just over two years ago to accommodate a growing demand for mausoleums like the one Mr. Peck bought, which including its lot has a retail cost of \$400,000, the Private Estate Section at the century-old Daytona Memorial Park here has 15 lake-view lots. Six have been sold.

"The mausoleum says, 'I'm really significant in this world, I think I'm really significant to my family,' and this is one way to communicate that to the community," said Nancy Lohman, an owner along with her husband, Lowell, of this and several dozen other Florida cemeteries and funeral homes.

Mr. Peck, 87, an Atlanta native with a sonorous voice and a laconic manner, framed a similar thought more modestly. "It began to occur to me that I did not want to be in the ground covered with weeds and whatnot and totally forgotten," he said. "I don't like the idea of dirt being dumped on me."

Six feet up and not six feet under is increasingly the direction in which people want their remains stored when they die, representatives of the funeral industry say. In addition to custom single-family mausoleums, community mausoleums for both coffins and cremated remains are also gaining popularity; in classical or contemporary styles, these often have room to hold hundreds of niches for coffins or urns.

The Cold Spring Granite Company, among the country's largest makers of cemetery monuments, sold 2,000 private mausoleums last year, up from about 65 during a good year in the 1980's. Prices range from \$250,000 to "well into the millions," said Michael T. Baklarz, a vice president of the company.

The development is perhaps logically to be expected of those at the leading edge of the baby boom generation, which forms the bulk of the market. The progression seems natural for the folks who gave the world blocklong, gas-hogging sport utility vehicles and lot-hogging 40,000-square-foot suburban homes.

"It's in keeping with the McMansion mentality of boomers," said Thomas Lynch, an author and funeral director in Michigan. "Real estate is an extension of personhood."

The market for the custom structures is greatest on the coasts, although exclusive estate sections have recently been set aside for private mausoleums at cemeteries in Atlanta, Cleveland and Minneapolis.

Some mausoleums echo the temple of the goddess Fortuna Virilis in Rome. Some are hefty, rusticated stone barns. Some have more square footage than a good-size Manhattan studio apartment, their interiors fitted out with hand-knotted carpets, upholstered benches and nooks for the display of memorabilia. In late 2004, a Southern California family ordered a mausoleum with room for 12 coffins, 20 cremation niches and a patterned marble vestibule.

Commonplace in the 19th century, when both newly prosperous immigrants and robber barons vied to stake claims on American soil by investing in the only real estate that is "permanently valuable," as Mark Twain http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/samuel_langhorne_lemens/index.html?inline=nyt-per famously remarked, the mausoleum seemed to have lost favor in recent years.

More people were choosing to be cremated ? industry experts say that more than a quarter of the 2.3 million people who died in 2004 were cremated ? and some opted for new forms of interment like the "green burials" that flickered onto the cultural radar after a character from the HBO series "Six Feet Under" was buried unembalmed and without a coffin, in an unmarked grave protected by a nature preserve.

Yet the brief buzz about eco-burial, executives from America's nearly \$15 billion funeral industry say, may obscure the larger reality that, as in seemingly every other facet of contemporary life, the taste for personalization has touched the funeral industry in time to provide an otherwise static business with an opportunity for growth.

"Nobody wants a cookie-cutter burial anymore," said Robert M. Fells, the external operating officer of the International Cemetery and Funeral Association, the industry's leading trade group. At the group's annual convention in March in Las Vegas, the resurgent interest in building private mausoleums was striking, Mr. Fells said.

"The private family mausoleum used to be considered a high-ticket, upscale item that only the wealthy could afford," Mr. Fells said, and there is no reason to amend that impression given that \$250,000 is the average base price to build a private family tomb. "The pendulum is swinging back to people being willing to spend money for things that are meaningful to them," he said.

The need to create "new concepts in the death care industry," said

Christine Toson Hentges, vice president of a company that owns three cemeteries in Wisconsin, has helped increase the appeal of private estate sections.

"We've reversed the traditional way of selling," Ms. Hentges added. Traditionally, funeral directors or cemetery owners began their post-mortem pitch to families by quoting the most affordable options. "But now we're going top-down and starting with private buildings," she said, "because there is this influx of people who are financially successful and who are thinking about these issues and how to have a structure that tells the story of their lives."

At the historic Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, a spokesman said that there had been no marked increase in private mausoleums lately, but last year the cemetery completed a five-story, \$16 million crypt mausoleum for 2,500, replete with skylights and waterfalls.

"All of this is recent," said Herbert B. Klapper, president of Cedar Park Cemetery, a 300-acre site in Paramus, N.J., that offers burials in mausoleums where crypt space is priced the way urban real estate often is, by neighborhood and floor. (From the ground or "prayer" level, crypt prices ascend to the "heart" level and then to "eye" and are reduced again for the harder-to-reach berths at a tier called "touch.")

Yet the most grandiose niche in Paramus is humble compared with the granite extravaganza erected at Daytona Memorial Park to house the mortal remains of L. Gale Lemerand, a Florida philanthropist who founded a residential insulation company that he sold in 1995 for an estimated \$150 million.

Two \$4,000 Medjool date palms shade Mr. Lemerand's red granite mausoleum, which cost \$650,000 and has ample space, as the cemetery co-owner Lowell Lohman explained, to accommodate Mr. Lemerand, 71, along with his family.

A granite balustrade flanks the doorway and from it one can stand and gaze across a palm-fringed lake, where two swans named Ed and Hilda glide, adding to the pastoral landscape an almost inevitable touch of Evelyn Waugh. On the far shore is Ed Peck's family tomb.

"People who are going to be buried here can well afford it, so money is obviously not an issue," Mr. Peck said on an afternoon of blustery winds that propelled an armada of fleecy postcard clouds across the Florida sky. "It's a very pleasant place to be. As pleasant as it could be, considering."