

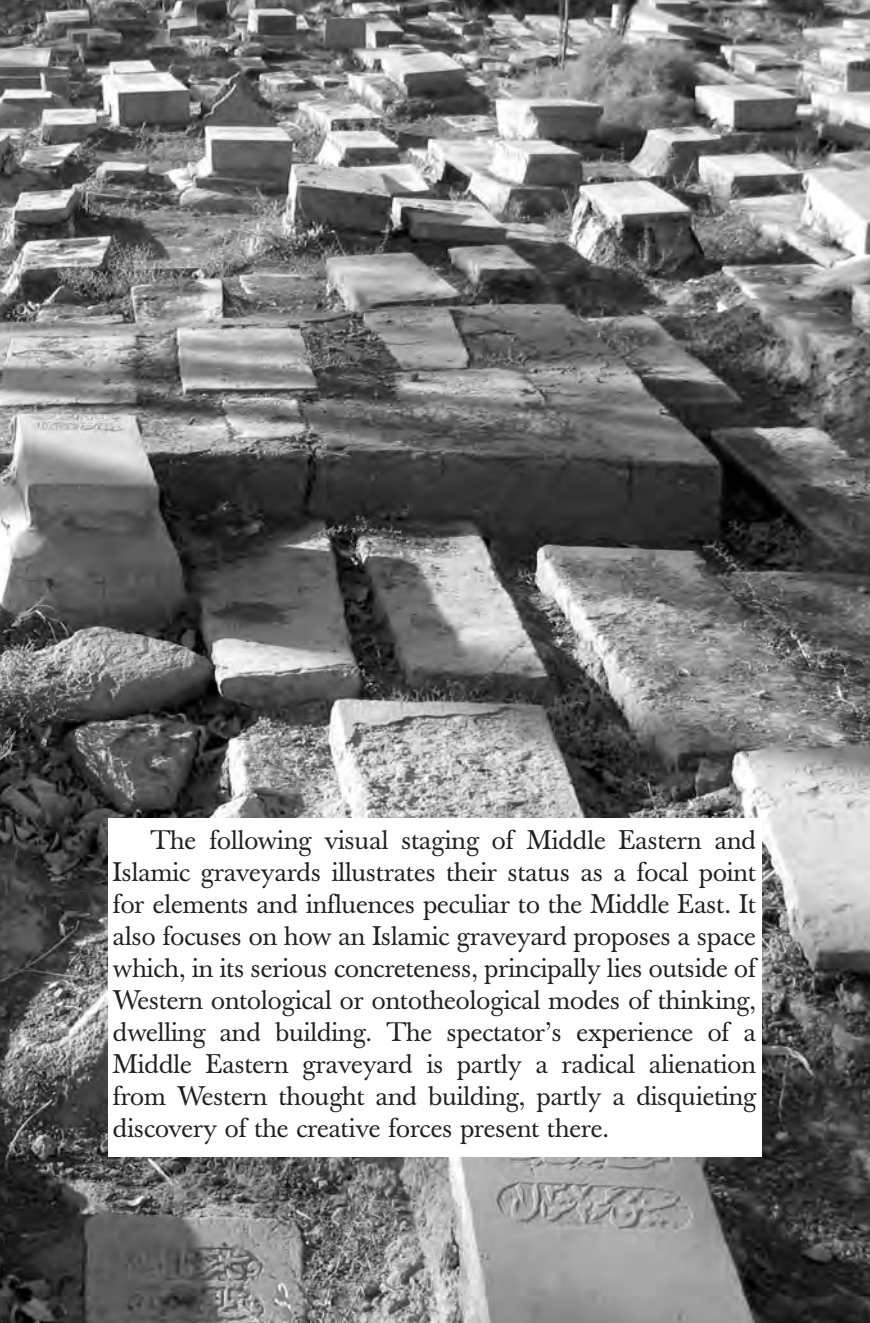
# Elysian Space in the Middle East

Kristen Alvanson



*ONTORIUM. The Western graveyard is a place of consummation for the ontotheological horizon which dominates Western engagement with time and space. The site of the graveyard bridges the ontological contents of the living and the post-mortem protrusion of these contents, thus marking the transition from ontology to theatrical ontology. Or, in other words, here ontology is staged both as it is – or as it functions – and as the result of its own accomplishment (effect). Thus, all ontological projections of architecture flourish in the graveyard. Taking into account Heidegger’s notion of ‘settling’ (regelung) which, from both objective and subjective perspectives, describes the connectedness of building, being and thinking, the graveyard, then, is a rich resource for reasoning back to the experience of the ontological encounter with space and time and the uniqueness of this experience within each culture or ontotheological formulation of Elysian Space.*





The following visual staging of Middle Eastern and Islamic graveyards illustrates their status as a focal point for elements and influences peculiar to the Middle East. It also focuses on how an Islamic graveyard proposes a space which, in its serious concreteness, principally lies outside of Western ontological or ontotheological modes of thinking, dwelling and building. The spectator's experience of a Middle Eastern graveyard is partly a radical alienation from Western thought and building, partly a disquieting discovery of the creative forces present there.



**MORE THAN A VOLUME, LESS THAN A SPACE.** The Western ontology of dwelling has it that *residing* (remaining) alone in a space which both separates its dweller from, and connects them to, their surrounding environment, is not in itself enough to define dwelling. Therefore, residing or occupying cannot be appropriately integrated with building and being – and for that reason, with the human. Dwelling is the inhabiting and populating of a space by an entity. This definition requires an axial factor which is sustained by an entity and its dwelling place; a factor that can be defined as ‘the minimum space required for the inhabiting and populating activities of a given entity in a given place’. The basis of these activities is movement. The dwelling-place, or room, is a space in terms of its capacity to accommodate contents or allow actions. What is required for such a definition is, firstly, a volumetric instance of building that can support both an entity and its actions, or



more specifically, its movements within the space. The consequence of dwelling, then, is more than mere inhabiting; it also includes different actions provided by this 'enough' space or room which fundamentally takes shape and is built upon the minimum, that is, the minimum space. According to this ontology of dwelling, then, the human as a dweller builds its action on a limit which is that of the minimum, and which is maintained in every ontological context related to (the) *room*. Western graveyards push this ontology of dwelling to its extreme. Such an ontological orientation only makes sense when an onto-theological disposition of dwelling in its fully-fledged sense is involved; for otherwise, the application of the dwelling ontology of the living to the dead would merely signal the reduction of ontology to law. Sarcophagus and coffin as above-ground and underground volumetric spaces of room are examples of this ontology of dwelling

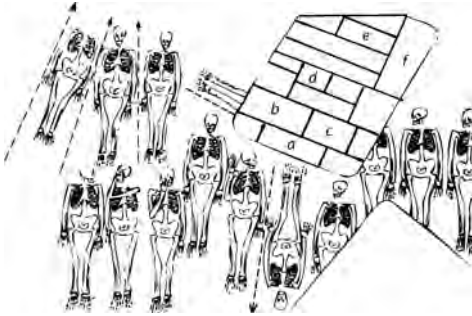
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that is manifested in Western graveyards and entombment. Similarly, the required limit for dwelling or room as 'enough' space entails not only an adequate space within each grave but also between graves, determining an orderly arrangement in the graveyard.

**PROXIMITY, PRIVACY AND NEIGHBORHOOD.** In Middle Eastern graveyards, graves randomly infringe or interfere with each other's affairs and private space. The openness of graves is only superficially restricted by the size of the horizontal grave slabs and their boundaries. The slabs are commonly used as markers, as opposed to vertical tombstones. Neighboring grave slabs or horizontal markers form a relatively uniform surface, a solid flatness as opposed to a volume. If the Middle Eastern graveyard exhibits a single ambition, it is that of partaking of and sharing flatness. Socializing with the dead in Middle Eastern graveyards is partly inspired by the elimination of 'room' or sufficient space of dwelling. In order to reach loved ones, a visitor has to walk over neighboring graves. Greco-Roman graveyards maintain a type of dwelling or





adequate space for the living and extend the dwelling space of the living to the dead via a law-abiding transition of ontology to the ontotheology of the living. The reason for Western culture's preoccupation with the roaming or walking dead can be found in the establishment of the graveyard as a residential complex, a settlement which the dead should have no reason to abandon. In Western graveyards, the space of graves can be given as a metric value, each person being allotted relatively equal space for their grave and its surrounding. In Islamic graveyards this space varies: some graves are inches away from each other, others slightly further; many are buried on top of each other, as new cemeteries are carpeted exactly atop older ones. Sometimes five layers of new cemeteries – as in the case of Iran's *Dar-o-Salam* graveyard – bear each other's tombstones, graves and their contents; only the most recent graveyard is visible, while the rest form the bedrock of the new cemetery until rain or soil change force a small part of the older graveyards to surface in an unexpected place, sometimes beneath a recent tombstone. Thus the

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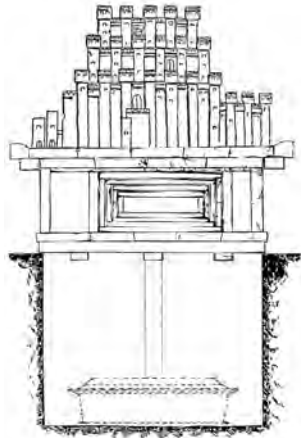
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*hadith* that ‘no one can build any palace or even a house other than on top of someone else’s home’ is exemplified in a typical Middle Eastern graveyard. The *hadith* aims at the nihilism of economy or its impending fate, because this is understood to lead to a tranquilized economy. If layers and layers of graves over each other – in addition to the literal contact of graves and their horizontal slabs – have one ontotheological message, it is the intimacy of the living with the graveyard, the dead and their own demise.

**ELYSIAN OR EMPHATIC HORIZONTALITY.** Western coffins or burying spaces are by their nature sarcophagi. They are governed by the fate of volume: providing room. Western graves bespeak dwelling space on two levels: one is the coffin or casket which provides its contents with room; and the other is the surface tombstone or perpendicular marker that represents a volume. The difference between Western and Middle Eastern – or specifically,

Islamic – graveyards in their approach to building originates from their difference in grasping or working with the solid as a building or architectural component. If, for the Western graveyard, dwelling is supported by solid volume, or the solid that brings space to volumetric enclosure, for the Islamic graveyard the solid subtracts dwelling from the volume. In Islamic graveyards, solidity is the privileged state of matter; unlike its role in the Western graveyard, where it creates volumes, it is replete, and has only one role: to remove room or adequate space for dwelling from the grave. The body in an Islamic burial is not placed in a coffin; coffins are used only by family and friends when carrying the deceased to the grave site. The body is placed atop a solid stone slab deep in the ground, tightly wrapped within a *kafan* or shroud sheet.

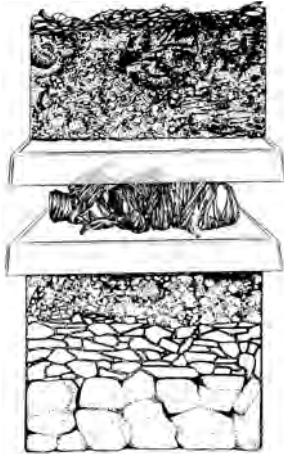


Another slab of the same size is put over the body to fully press its weight on the deceased, crushing the chest and eliminating any space or air around the body. Then dirt or soil is dumped on the slab, swallowing the body into an Elysian horizontality which is that of a filled solid without room. Finally, another slab is placed on the surface to conclude this Elysian horizontality for the living.

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In general, then, graves in Islamic graveyards have no 'dwelling' potential. Heidegger ties building and dwelling to the twofold of thinking and being. Thinking is entailed by *raum* (room) or dwelling space. In the wake of the Western graveyard and its ontological dwelling-space, continuing as it does either on the ground or under the surface as in the coffin, the Western aspiration for thinking



is carried on even beyond death, in the grave. The act of removing the dwelling-space in Islamic burial leaves no space for thinking. The Elysian space of Islam creates spaces which, by virtue of their resistance against the ontology of dwelling, subtract the creative force of building and being from the Western exigency of thinking.

Unlike the comforting Western spaces, the slabs of the Islamic burial exert pressure. Their emphatic horizontality rises from bottom to top, diminishing *post-mortem* relief. The two slabs under and over the body transmit the hardness and the weight of deeds in life. These weights create a crushing force which makes use of tolerance and turns it into pressure; because sin (pressure) reaps its potentiality from tolerance. When tolerance reduces, or one becomes less tolerant by various means, such as temptation or loss of hope, sin ensues by virtue of this lack of tolerance. Yet the dead have no



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tolerance. If theology nourishes faith by being well-grounded and valid to the very End, the Islamic graveyard deals with a theology that maintains faith by purposely stopping making sense.

**OVER ONE'S DEAD BODY.** An Islamic graveyard encourages an uncommon socialization with the dead. The dynamics of this socialization are for the most part inspired by the building forces of the graveyard. If the dignity of the dead is nothing but the indulgence of the living, then the living too ought to be liberated from the legal codes that bind the graveyard to dwelling and traffic taboos. Firstly, everyone, regardless of religion or orientation, can be buried in an Islamic graveyard – as long as one can endure the place. In the Middle East, the graveyard is fully connected to the social body; it is located in the vicinity of social activities. The Islamic graveyard is a place of casual socialization. Fruits and snacks are brought to the graveyard to be distributed among the poor. The poor come to the graveyard to eat and return to the communal structure of society. The graveyard levels the dead as well



as the living; privatization of the space around graves rarely happens. When it does, it is to construct a shade over the horizontal slab to protect the marker from the sun. If in the West, graves represent private spaces even when they have no walls built around them, in a Middle Eastern graveyard this private space is casually broken by people walking over graves. Tens of footprints on each grave mark the evidence of this passage from restricted dwelling to collective wayfaring.

Lastly, the graveyard is trans-gender. In the Islamic graveyard, the faces of deceased women are often rubbed off from the photos which are placed on their graves.

Given the fact that historically in Islam, the face of God and holy figures must not be depicted, and vermin are faceless people, removing the faces of women amounts to verminizing the Divine, or making God and woman equal.





