

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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VISUAL ESSAYS

The American Dream

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Abstract

Holy Hope Cemetery (founded in 1907 in Tucson, Arizona) was the city's first Catholic cemetery that was not directly a part of a parish. The upkeep of the graves used to depend on the families of the deceased, but over time the state diocese took on the commitment. With all this, structural inequality and neglect have progressively deteriorated the cemetery.

It is currently divided into two clearly differentiated sectors. On the one hand, the northwest sector (the historic core of the complex), where the remains of Mexican citizens are buried. There are signs of neglect, with graves without tombstones, levels of uncleanliness and a disrespectful use of the space. It is known locally as "the place of the forgotten", and contrasts with the second sector, the southeast, set aside for well-off families. This division symbolises a social frontier that transcends mere architecture.

Without knowing the history of the cemetery, in 2022 I had the chance to explore it. I documented its state of repair and life through a photographic project, *The American Dream*, which sets out to retrieve and showcase the memory of the Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery. Some of these photographs were exhibited in 2025 in Almería (Spain) and were well received, despite the modesty of the exhibition.

However, it is paramount to continue sharing the reality of this architecture until another one can ultimately be related and portrayed. This visual essay reveals Holy Hope Cemetery as a wounded landscape and calls for its repair.

Keywords: Tucson; Mexico; Cemetery; Conservation; Documentary photography

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In 1907, a group of American investors (led by J. Knox Corbett, John M. Ormsby and Frank L. Culin, members of the Tucson Cemetery Association) purchased 48 hectares of agricultural land north of the city, later handing over its management to the Diocese of the State of Arizona. This resulted in the first non-parochial Catholic cemetery in Tucson: Holy Hope Cemetery. In the early days, the diocese created a revenue stream exclusively intended for the upkeep of the cemetery, so it was the families who ensured the state of repair and security of their loved ones' graves. Over time, the diocese said it would take on both commitments, although structural inequalities and progressive neglect were eroding the promise of a dignified space.

The first graves (located to the northwest of the cemetery) house the remains of Mexican citizens (given the origin of the city), while the later extensions (to the southeast) are home to the most affluent families. As a result, the cemetery is currently divided into two sectors. The first – and original – reveals that the descendants of the deceased cannot afford the minimum maintenance costs. The opposite occurs in the second sector.

The Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery is only cleaned twice a year (after decades of poor conservation) and is frequented by private neighbourhood patrols due to the disrespectful use of the space. The cemetery is not structured in any order and family members are even allowed to bury their loved ones without a tombstone, making it more affordable for them. This practice, although understandable thanks to its compassionate component, adds to the gradual destruction of the cemetery and the loss of its identity. This might be why people in Tucson refer to this area of the cemetery as the place where “the forgotten” live. Prickly desert undergrowth has grown in this area, dry dust permanently blurs the misty horizon, and confusing paths prevent us from understanding where the cemetery begins and ends. At the same time, in the wealthy (well-preserved) sector, an immense structure of stone tombstones gives order to the space, which in turn is covered by a blanket of spongy grass criss-crossed by meticulously paved paths. The differences between the two sectors are so evident that they seem to build another symbolic border, rather than a landscape contrast.

Without knowing its history beforehand, in 2022 I had the chance to fully explore Holy Hope Cemetery. It was May, but there were still remnants of the Day of the Dead Festival (celebrated on 2 November). It was hot and there was no shade anywhere. I wandered among mass graves marked with crucifixes and crumbling tombstones and observed some prefabricated concrete pieces stacked up waiting to finally close the space. I stopped to look at acrylic and clay statues of the Virgins of Guadalupe, Frida, Diego, Zapata and Catrina, and I witnessed colourful flowers resisting time. As a result, I decided to portray the place respectively, experiencing its silence and suffering its inclement sun. I photographed the Mexican heartland of Holy Hope Cemetery to demand its upkeep, to boost its roots, to revive the collective memory of those called “the forgotten” and of those who cannot afford to watch over them, to celebrate the strength, character and survival-focused identity of its landscape and, above all, to support its resistance.

These photographs were submitted to national and international photographic contests months later, but it was not until April 2025 that they were exhibited thanks to the interest of the La Jaquería Association in Almería, Spain (La Jaquería 2025)¹. The exhibition was not a purist exhibition space, nor did it have an expensive format, or even a professional catalogue. With all this, the proposal was well received and soon reviewed by two provincial media outlets: the (*Diario de Almería 2025*)² and (*Candil Radio 2025*)³.

However, I think it is necessary to continue sharing the reality of this cemetery until a better one can be related (and portrayed). Private financial management publicly questioned on social media by the deceased's relatives (among other reasons) make this place an architecture that turns its back on its roots. Holy Hope Cemetery is a wounded landscape crying out to be repaired, and this visual essay is the chronicle of its hopelessness.

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All Images belong to the photographic project The American Dream. Holy Hope Cemetery, Tucson, Arizona, 2022. © Alicia Fernández Barranco.

[Fig. 1]

Muddy and cracked.





ROBERT
LANGSTON
ILLINOIS
1ST INFANTRY BRIGADE
JULY 13 1921

SGT PRIVATE
EDW. JENKINS
1882 - 1903
NEWPORT ARK

ALFRED
LAFAYETTE
MASSACHUSETTS
CORPORAL
FEBRUARY



[Fig. 2]
Southeast sector.





[Fig. 3]

Visual outline of the northwest sector.



[Fig. 4]
Cemetery.

[Fig. 5]
The Mexican heartland.







[Fig. 6]
Virgin of Guadalupe.

[Fig. 7]
Cemetery (2).

[Fig. 8]
New interventions.







[Fig. 9]
Mass grave.

[Fig. 10]
The American Dream.