Episode Book

EPISODE #5924

Living Among the Dead: Cemetery Housing, Cairo to Manila

PUBLISHED	13 October 2026 at 00:52 UTC
DURATION	28:01
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/cemetery-habitation-housing-insecurity-72354/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.4
SOURCES	18 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:41 UTC

SYNOPSIS

What does it mean when a cemetery becomes a neighbourhood? This episode treats cemetery habitation as its own form of housing insecurity — not a curiosity, not a horror story — and follows the evidence where it actually goes. The City of the Dead in Cairo grew from 35 recorded residents in 1898 to 180,000 by 1986, and is now being bulldozed under Egypt Vision 2030. Manila North Cemetery houses around 6,000 living people on 54 hectares, two-thirds of them rent-free with the plot owners' consent. Along the way: three distinct pathways into cemetery residence, five documented housing types, and an honest accounting of what the research does not know — including why no one has ever produced a global figure.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay. Daniel opened with a sentence I've been turning over all morning.



Herman

The Gaza one.



Corn

He read a report about displaced Palestinians sheltering in cemeteries because of the war. Which put the City of the Dead in his head. People living among the tombs in Cairo for generations. He was careful to say, very different circumstances. He's right to be careful.



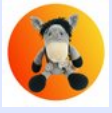
Herman

And then he asked the honest version of the question, which most people don't.



Corn

He wants cemetery habitation treated as its own form of housing insecurity. Not a horror story, not a curiosity. Prevalence. What puts people there. What it does to their health. And he asked for exactly one thing, which I'll read back to you since it's the spine of the whole episode. Ground the discussion in demographic research, public health evidence, and documented case studies, and distinguish established findings from assumptions and areas where reliable data is lacking.



Herman

That's the ask. Which means today we're allowed to say "we don't know" and mean it.



Corn

It's going to come up more than once.



Herman

It's going to come up a lot. Let's start with the scale problem, because the first thing you hit when you go looking for a global number is that there isn't one.



Corn

Not one?



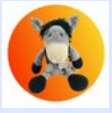
Herman

You look at the literature, you look at the news coverage, you look at public health databases, and what you get back is city by city. Cairo, Manila, a handful of others. What you don't get is any aggregated figure for how many people worldwide live in a cemetery. Nobody has counted.



Corn

That's a striking thing for something that's been going on for a century and a half.



Herman

It is. And I think it's because it's invisible by definition. Cemeteries are places people visit and then leave. The idea that someone stays is, for most administrations, an embarrassment rather than a statistic. So it doesn't get counted.



Corn

It gets bulldozed instead. Alright. Frame the shape of it for me properly, because I think we've got two different things wearing the same name.



Herman

We do, and this is the first distinction that matters. Cemetery habitation covers at least two phenomena that get lumped together. The first is long-established cemetery neighbourhoods. Places where living among the dead is generations deep, socially organised, sometimes with a rental arrangement, sometimes with caretaking duties attached. Cairo is the archetype. Manila is the other big documented case. Indonesia has whole cemetery villages, kampungs, where you can't actually tell where the graveyard ends and the neighbourhood begins.



Corn

And the second.



Herman

The second is emergency sheltering. People who go into a cemetery because they have nowhere else to go this month. Displacement, fire, eviction, war. Same physical location, completely different logic.



Corn

Same buildings, one is a system and one is a holding pattern.



Herman

And then there's a third pathway that sits between them, which is displacement and eviction. People who arrive at a cemetery after their house burned down and stay because it's safer than the alternative. That's documented in Manila. Residents there said the cemetery gave them protection from fire in a way the surrounding informal settlements didn't, because there's less to burn.



Corn

So the research sorts people into three doors. Chronic housing shortage. Humanitarian emergency. Displacement after a specific loss.



Herman

Three doors, and they're not exclusive. Chronic shortage is the tide, and the specific loss is what pushes one family over the wall.



Corn

Before we go further, I want to deal with the Gaza element honestly, because Daniel's prompt came from a specific report.



Herman

Right. And here's where I have to be straight with him. I couldn't find that report.



Corn

Say more, because this matters and I don't want it waved away.



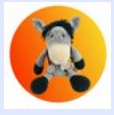
Herman

What's well documented out of Gaza is destruction of cemeteries, on a scale that's hard to process, and makeshift burial. Families burying their dead in school courtyards, in the corner of a residential plot, wherever they can. There's also extensive coverage of displaced people sheltering in tents, in damaged buildings, along the Yellow Line. What I could not confirm is a report of families sheltering inside cemeteries among the graves.



Corn

So the specific claim is unverified.



Herman

Unverified. Which doesn't mean untrue. It means I can't put a number behind it, and I'm not going to pretend I can. If someone out there has the reporting, I'd like to read it. But the destruction figures I do have, and they're grim. By September, reporting out of the region put damage to Gaza's cemeteries at over ninety percent. Of sixty-two cemeteries, thirty-nine completely bulldozed, nineteen partly exhumed, four untouched.



Corn

Four.



Herman

Four. And roughly sixty percent of individual graves destroyed. Around three thousand bodies in makeshift cemeteries that nobody has identified.



Corn

That's a lot of people without a place to be.



Herman

Yes.



Corn

And I want to sit with that for a second, because there's a version of this conversation that skips past the destruction to get to the interesting housing question. And the destruction is the housing question, in a way. If the ground itself is gone, then the people who would have been buried there have to go somewhere else, and the people who would have tended those graves have nothing to tend.



Herman

It's the erasure of the infrastructure of memory, and it's also the erasure of a physical place where a family could point and say, that's my grandmother. That's not a small thing. The literature on cemetery habitation talks about tenure and sanitation and square footage, and it's right to. But the reason people fight to stay near a grave, or fight to keep a grave, is not a housing reason. It's a continuity reason. And when you bulldoze sixty-two cemeteries, you're not just destroying graves. You're severing the line.



Corn

Which is the same logic that makes the City of the Dead a village. It's not just cheap rent. It's that the dead are there, and the living want to be near them.



Herman

And that's the piece that doesn't fit neatly into a housing insecurity framework. It's a cultural and religious attachment that happens to produce a housing arrangement. Which is why the policy responses keep failing. They treat it as a land use problem and the residents are treating it as a family obligation.



Corn

Okay. Let's take the two best-documented cases, Cairo and Manila, because they developed in completely different directions.



Herman

Cairo first, because the numbers are the most instructive thing in the whole episode. The City of the Dead, al-Qarafa, has been settled for a very long time. But we have records. In an eighteen ninety-eight census, thirty-five people were recorded living there permanently.



Corn

Thirty-five.



Herman

By nineteen forty-seven, sixty-nine thousand. By nineteen eighty-six, a hundred and eighty thousand.



Corn

That's not a curve, that's a wall.



Herman

And today, nobody really knows. Some sources claim up to one and a half million. The more careful academic estimates put it around a million. And you'll find a newspaper piece from twenty-eleven claiming four million, which I'd treat as unreliable, because it doesn't square with anything else.



Corn

Someone counted once and then everyone stopped.



Herman

That's the shape of it. A hundred and eighty thousand in eighty-six, and after that it becomes politically inconvenient to count.



Corn

How does it actually work? What's the arrangement?



Herman

A family negotiates with the owner of a grave. They move into the mausoleum, and in return they tend the grave. They keep it clean, they say prayers, they do the maintenance. Rent is very low, sometimes non-existent. So the essential trade is labour for shelter, and the labour is upkeep of the dead.



Corn

That's a functioning economy.



Herman

It's a functioning economy, and a resident described it in words that got me. "It's central, quiet and we all know one another. It's more like a village."



Corn

Central being the operative word. These aren't on the edge of town.



Herman

They're on prime land. The City of the Dead is walking distance from the centre of Cairo. People have jobs, schools, shops, bakeries, postal service. Some of it is essentially a normal neighbourhood with graves mixed in.



Corn

Which is why it's about to be flattened.



Herman

Under Egypt Vision 2030, mausoleums are being bulldozed and residents moved out with minimal compensation. And I want to say this plainly. What's being cleared isn't a slum on the periphery. It's central land that became valuable.



Corn

There's the ancient Egyptian line about this. What was it, the Valley of the Kings dressed in a turban?



Herman

From the Egyptologist Ahmed Seddik. "The City of the Dead is no mere cemetery. It's the Valley of the Kings dressed in a turban." It's a beautiful line, and it's also a line someone says about a place they think is worth saving.



Herman

The reporting describes residents being offered very little, and in some cases being relocated to settlements far from the centre, which severs the thing that made the arrangement work. You take a family that's lived in the middle of Cairo for three generations, with a job and a school and a network, and you move them forty kilometres out, and you haven't housed them. You've just moved the problem. The housing insecurity



Herman (continued)

framework would say the intervention didn't address the insecurity, it relocated it.



Corn

And the graves they were tending?



Herman

Flattened. So the obligation they had, the caretaking, is gone too. They're not even allowed to keep doing the thing that justified their presence.



Corn

It's a clean sweep. That's the phrase people use, isn't it? A clean sweep.



Herman

That's the phrase. And it's honest, in its way. The goal is a clean site, not a housed population.



Corn

Manila.



Herman

Manila North Cemetery. Fifty-four hectares of public graveyard. Roughly six thousand people living in it, and at least a million buried in it. And the count has gone up and down. Earlier coverage said ten thousand. Clearing operations change the number.



Corn

Six thousand living, a million dead.



Herman

And the housing types are more varied than "people sleeping in tombs," which is the mental image most people have. There's a paper from twenty twenty-three, Reyes, that lays out five kinds. People living inside mausoleums. People living above burial plots, in structures built over them. Terraces on top of mausoleums. Barung-barong, the light shanty construction, between the plots. And then the one I keep thinking about. Two-storey houses outside the cemetery wall, with upper doors that open into the cemetery.



Corn

So the second floor of a house on the street has a door that goes straight in over the wall.



Herman

Straight in. Which tells you this isn't people hiding. It's people with an address.



Corn

What's the tenure look like? Because that determines everything about whether you can stay.



Herman

This is the finding that reframes the whole subject. A survey of five hundred and sixty-seven residents in Manila North Cemetery found sixty-seven percent living rent-free with the consent of the plot owners.



Corn

Two thirds are there with permission.



Herman

With permission. Not squatting. There's an arrangement. Some of them are caretakers. Some are people the family allowed to stay. And there's a real distinction in the research between consented residence and covert occupation, because they behave completely differently. Consented residents build permanent structures. Covert occupants build things they can abandon.



Corn

Right. So we've got five housing types, three pathways in, six thousand people on fifty-four hectares, and two thirds of them legal-ish.



Herman

And the category itself is contested. There's a call in the Cairo literature for a reconsideration of how the numbers are counted, and specifically for being clear about the balance between people living inside burial structures and people living in ordinary shantytown construction that happens to be inside the cemetery wall.



Corn

Because those are different problems with different answers.



Herman

Very different. If it's a shantytown inside the wall, it's a housing problem. If it's people living in the mausoleums themselves, the arrangement is more contractual, and the fix has to account for that.



Corn

And Indonesia sits off to the side of both.



Herman

The kampungs. Whole villages that grow into the cemetery and out the other side. There the boundary isn't drawn. It's just neighbourhood.



Corn

Here's the thing that struck me in Daniel's prompt, and I want to actually answer it, because it's the question that separates a good study from a lazy one. How do researchers tell the difference between people who live in an established cemetery neighbourhood and people who are sheltering among graves?



Herman

Three axes, mainly. The permanence of the structure. Is it a mausoleum with a door and a lock, or a light-material shanty that could come down in an afternoon? Second, location. Periphery versus main street. Is the dwelling back among the plots or along the road where the visitors come through? Third, tenure. Consented residence versus covert occupation.



Corn

And what does the honest answer look like for Gaza under those axes?



Herman

Emergency sheltering, by every one of them. Nothing permanent, nothing consented, nothing that accumulates. Which is why lumping it with Cairo would produce a bad answer to a badly framed question.



Corn

Okay. Take the position of the person who reads that and says, fine, but they're living in a graveyard, that can't be healthy. What does the evidence actually say?



Herman

The evidence does not say what people think it says.



Corn

Good. Start there.



Herman

There's a review from two thousand and four, Morgan, in a Pan American health journal, and it's the foundational paper on this. The conclusion is that the risk dead bodies pose to the public is, quote, extremely small. The reason is simple. Disaster victims generally die of trauma. Not of an infection that will then travel. So the corpse is not a reservoir in the way people imagine.



Corn

That's the intuition killed outright.



Herman

It's the intuition killed outright. And there's a follow-up from two thousand and seven, Watson and colleagues, which goes further. The fear of epidemics from dead bodies after a disaster is, quote, frequently misconstrued. Outbreak risk after a disaster is driven primarily by displacement, crowding, safe water and sanitation.



Corn

Which are exactly the things you also get when people are sheltering anywhere in a crisis.



Herman

And they say the fear is likely derived from a perceived association between dead bodies and epidemics, rather than any measured one.



Corn

So the danger is the displacement, and the cemetery is scenery.



Herman

The cemetery is where the displacement happens to be housed. There is one real exception though, and I don't want to skip it. People in close contact with the dead, the ones who handle the bodies, do face real chronic hazards. Hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV, enteric pathogens, tuberculosis. That's the rescue worker, the volunteer, the person doing the washing and the burial. That's a genuine occupational risk.



Corn

And the people living there?



Herman

That's the gap. Nobody has run a study that measures disease outcomes in cemetery residents specifically. Not workers, not people drinking the water. Residents. I haven't seen one.



Corn

Say that again, because it matters.



Herman

There is no epidemiological study directly measuring the health outcomes of people who live in cemeteries. The health evidence is inferential. It's built from two things. What we know about the chemistry of decomposition, and what we know about disaster victims.



Corn

So we're extrapolating.



Herman

We're extrapolating, and any honest version of this conversation has to say so.



Corn

Alright. So extrapolate for me. What does decomposition actually put into the ground?



Herman

This is where it gets specific and useful. When a body decomposes, it produces leachate. On the order of half a litre per kilogram of body weight, so a seventy-kilogram adult is producing somewhere around thirty-five litres of liquid over the decomposition period, and that liquid carries bacteria, viruses, and the products of breakdown.



Corn

And where does it go?



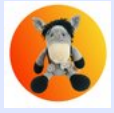
Herman

Down, and that's where the site matters. If the soil absorbs and filters, and the water table is deep, what you find in monitoring wells is very little. There's a study from Brazil that monitored cemetery wells and found, quote, little to none impact on groundwater where the soil conditions were favourable.



Corn

And where they aren't favourable?



Herman

Then you get the other set of results. There's work in Benin City, Nigeria, that found groundwater highly contaminated by heavy metals, with about a third of samples posing a high chronic risk for children through oral exposure. And this is the important bit. It was the metals, not the pathogens, that were doing the damage.



Corn

Metals from what? Caskets?



Herman

From caskets, from fittings, from embalming compounds, from the soil chemistry of that particular site. And there's a South African study finding elevated metals in cemetery soils, and a Portuguese one that detected pharmaceuticals in cemetery groundwater. Salicylic acid, carbamazepine, fluoxetine.



Corn

Anti-depressants in the water table.



Herman

In the groundwater under a cemetery. Which is, in its own way, a more interesting finding than the pathogen story, because nobody's minding that.



Corn

What about the things everyone worries about? Formaldehyde. Arsenic.



Herman

There's a study from Tennessee that went looking and found arsenic and formaldehyde below the limits of detection in all but one soil sample from nineteen fifty-two, and concluded a low likelihood of contamination. So the thing people most fear is, on the evidence, one of the less concerning parts.



Corn

And the thing nobody mentions?



Herman

Cadaverine and putrescine. Those are the compounds that give decomposition its smell, and they're flagged in the literature as potentially carcinogenic. Nobody's out there frightened of cadaverine.



Corn

Because it doesn't have a marketing department.



Herman

It does not. And there's a study from Nigeria that found the contamination attenuating with distance, and importantly, low contamination where the graves were deeper than a metre.



Corn

One metre.



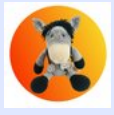
Herman

Which is the kind of number a regulator could write down, if a regulator were writing anything down.



Corn

Which takes us to the regulation, and I suspect the answer is embarrassing.



Herman

The answer is embarrassing. In Brazil, one study found that only half of the states have cemetery sanitary legislation, and only nineteen municipalities have their own specific laws. Nineteen.



Corn

In a country with five and a half thousand municipalities.



Herman

That's the pattern globally. Cemetery environmental risk is real, it's measurable, it's site-dependent, and it is almost entirely ungoverned.



Corn

And I want to make sure we're not overstating the risk, because there's a version of this where people hear "heavy metals in groundwater" and conclude that cemetery residents are being poisoned. That's not what the evidence says.



Herman

No, and it's an important distinction. The Benin City study found contamination in groundwater. It did not follow the people drinking it and measure their health outcomes. So you have a hazard, and you have a population, and you don't have the study that connects them. That's the gap again. It's the same gap that runs through the whole health section. We can measure what's in the water. We cannot tell you what it's doing to the people who drink it, because nobody's looked.



Corn

And the site-dependence is crucial. A cemetery on clay, with a deep water table, in a dry climate, is a different object from a cemetery on sand, with a shallow water table, in a wet climate. Same activity, completely different risk profile.



Herman

Completely different. Which is why the one-metre figure matters so much. It's not a universal rule, but it's a lever. Depth of burial, distance from wells, soil type, water table depth. Those are the variables, and they're all things a regulator could specify. The fact that almost nobody does is the scandal, not the chemistry.



Corn

So what does this mean for the actual question Daniel asked, which is about housing insecurity rather than soil chemistry?



Herman

It means the public health framing that most people bring to cemetery habitation is aimed at the wrong target. The risks people fear are small and site-dependent. The risks that are real are crowding, sanitation, water supply, and the absence of secure tenure. Which are precisely the risks of every form of housing insecurity everywhere.



Corn

The cemetery is not the hazard. The insecurity is the hazard.



Herman

That's where the evidence points.



Corn

And it means something about the choice itself, which is the part I find more interesting than the health question. Because the way this gets talked about assumes desperation, and the Manila research says something different.



Herman

It does. The residents describe reasons. Rent-free tenure. Central location. Access to work, because you're in the middle of the city rather than two hours out. And a caretaking economy where you have something to trade. One of them said the government want us gone, and they want to go, but they need somewhere to go. That's a woman who's lived there fifty-one years. She's not confused about her situation.



Corn

"We also want to go. But we need somewhere to go."



Herman

And that's the sentence that indicts the state response, because the state response in both cities is removal.



Corn

And the provision of alternatives?



Herman

Essentially absent from everything I could find. Cairo bulldozes mausoleums for a redevelopment plan with minimal compensation. Manila runs clearing operations before All Saints' Day, which is at least partly about making the cemetery presentable for the holiday, not about housing anybody.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's last question, whether these communities are transient or permanent, might be that they're permanent until someone with a bulldozer disagrees.



Herman

And that's the tension. Look at Cairo's curve again. Thirty-five, sixty-nine thousand, a hundred and eighty thousand. Over ninety years, with almost no planning, that settlement grew into a functioning district. That's not a transient population. That's a neighbourhood that the state refused to name.



Corn

Naming it costs money. Not naming it costs nothing until the land value goes up.



Herman

And that's the mechanism. It's not that the state doesn't know these people are there. It's that recognition creates obligations. The moment you call it a settlement, you owe it water, sewage, schools, tenure. So it stays a cemetery on paper and a village in practice, until the land is worth more than the obligation.



Corn

Which is where we came in. Daniel's report, the Gaza case, is the emergency version of the same thing.



Herman

It is. And the reason I wanted to be careful about the unverified element is that the difference between those two things is not academic. If people are sheltering temporarily among graves because there's nowhere else, that's a humanitarian supply problem. If people have established tenure among graves because the housing market shut them out for sixty years, that's a planning failure. Same picture, opposite remedy.



Corn

And getting that wrong means the wrong remedy gets funded.



Herman

Every time.



Corn

Okay. So we know the scale is uncounted, the health evidence is thinner than people think, and the state's answer is demolition. There's one person in the room who has been extremely quiet about this.



Corn

Sorry. There's one person in the room who has been extremely quiet about this.



Hilbert

Habitation. As if it were a type of dwelling. It's a tenancy.



Hilbert

My wife's aunt had a plot in the Mount of Olives. Small one. Marble, three slabs, a little iron gate that never closed properly. And there was a man, Nabil, who looked after it. He cut the weeds, he replaced a chipped corner of the marble in two thousand and four, he kept a key to the gate. And he lived in a room behind the next plot along, with his own key, and he had been there since before I met my wife.



Corn

And the family paid him?



Hilbert

They paid him nothing. He paid them. Eleven shekels a month. That was the arrangement. He kept the grave, and eleven shekels a month went to the family, and he lived in the room, and the arrangement was written on the back of an envelope that I have, and the last entry in it is from two thousand and eleven.



Corn

Two thousand and eleven.



Hilbert

He died. His nephew took it over. The nephew has a job at the bakery on Derech Jericho and he doesn't cut the weeds, so I do it now, and the family has never asked me to, and they have never paid me, and I have never sent them eleven shekels.



Herman

You're maintaining a grave that isn't yours, for a family that never asked?



Hilbert

I'm maintaining the gate. The marble's fine.



Corn

How long has this been going on?



Hilbert

Eleven years in March. My wife thinks it's about respect for the dead. It's about the gate. It's the only one on that row that closes properly and it's a better gate than the one we have at home.



Herman

And the envelope?



Hilbert

In the drawer with the keys. And the nephew, for what it's worth, is doing fine. He sends me a bottle at New Year. Last one was a plum brandy, and it was very good, and I have no idea where he got it.



Corn

The actual arrangement, the one nobody writes down, is a man paying eleven shekels a month to live behind a grave, and when he dies his nephew keeps the room and drops the accounts.



Hilbert

The nephew doesn't keep the room. The nephew sleeps at his sister's in Beit Hanina and uses the room for storage. There are two chairs and a mattress in there and about forty boxes of things he won't throw away. I've seen inside. I have a key to that too.



Corn

So where does that leave us?



Herman

It leaves us here. The thing Daniel asked us to distinguish, between established findings and gaps, resolved in one direction. The evidence on cemetery habitation is much better than the popular picture and much worse than we'd like. We can describe the arrangements, the tenure, the housing types, the chemistry of what's in the ground under them. We cannot tell you how many people live this way worldwide, and that's a real blank, not a rhetorical one.



Corn

The health question has an answer that will disappoint anyone hoping for a horror story. The risk from the bodies is very small and site-dependent, and the risk that's actually killing people is the one that follows displacement and crowding anywhere. The dead aren't the problem. The insecurity is.



Herman

Daniel's report. The one he read that started this. I couldn't verify people sheltering among the graves in Gaza, and I'd still like to see it. But the destruction numbers are documented, and they're in the same conversation. Sixty-two cemeteries, four untouched. Whatever else is happening there, the ground itself is being erased.



Corn

Which means the question Daniel was really circling is going to keep getting asked. As housing gets tighter and displacement gets larger, more people will end up behind cemetery walls, and the machinery to govern it barely exists. Half of Brazil's states have a cemetery law. That's where the world is starting from.



Herman

The permanent version of this doesn't announce itself. It just quietly stops being temporary.



Corn

Thanks as ever to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces the show and keeps his own keys.



Herman

Thanks to Daniel, for the questions we couldn't fully answer.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to rate us, that helps other people find the show. Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

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