

Beyond Terrain Vague: Future Cemetery/Memorial Parks as Critical Green Space in Changing Cities

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Abstract

This paper explores an exploration of the contemporary changing nature of the ‘terrain vague’ and considers the potential of this term to help define or locate new green space in changing cities and towns. First popularised by Morales (1995), this term refers to the vague or ill-defined spaces or places within or adjacent to the urban fabric that are often overlooked by contemporary planning and are in transition to another state, suggesting future possibility. Over 2023 and 2024, Master of Landscape Architecture students at the University of Western Australia considered the potential of one exemplar of the terrain vague through focussing on the 68ha Rockingham Regional Memorial Park, a growing cemetery approximately one hour south of the state capital, Perth. This expansive site is a landscape in transition: mostly cleared of original vegetation and largely undeveloped and ill-defined, wedged between a nature reserve, rubbish tip and expanding suburbs. Through a studio learning environment, the future of this place, its identity and its multifunctional potential was considered through a series of design explorations. This began with considering the theoretical framework of the terrain vague followed by the craft of individual detailed briefs where students reflected upon future post-life trends across different religious, cultural and historical contexts. This, in turn, fuelled a design process that culminated in a range of 45 different design and planning approaches. These articulate a range of potential ideas and scenarios across several scales from masterplan to detailed design and were elaborated through site visits, drawings, juries and model-making. While primarily pre-occupied with the delivery of the functional requirements of cemetery and memorial park design and planning – including visitor circulation and ceremonial intentions, infrastructure requirements, numbers of burials, cremations and other options such as green burial – the site acted as a test case for reconsidering the terrain vague. This examined its potential to offer and create the critical, novel green space so desperately required in rapidly changing cities and towns with increasingly dense and contested land-use and human occupancy.

Keywords: terrain vague, green infrastructure, cemeteries, critical green space, urban ecology, urban planning

Introduction

Public or green space is in short supply in the world's contemporary cities and Australian cities are no exception. For city planners, a far reduced palette of potential green space candidates is available from which the contemporary city must find the critical new public space to serve an increasing number of citizens. Furthermore, not only are these spaces fewer in number, but so too are the demands that are asked of them. No longer do urban parks serve purely recreational functions. Rather, in the rapidly urbanising cities and the challenges of the Anthropocene, urban parks may also act as surrogate for diverse functions including biodiversity protection and refugia for

particular species; as locations for the management of hydrology; for connection with nature and environmental education; or a range of other ecosystem services. This range of challenges and pressures for development means that some agility by which we consider potential candidates for open space must now be considered.

The term ‘terrain vague’ offers a potential framing to consider and identify a range of spaces within the urban fabric in novel and multi-functional ways. This term was first popularised by Morales (1995) and refers to vague or ill-defined spaces or places situated within or adjacent to the urban fabric. Often overlooked, or in a state of transition these hold future possibility, and such sites may include sites that may or may not have a prescribed function, be vacant or abandoned (Nassauer and Raskin 2014) and as such offer some flexibility as to their future trajectory. This may include ‘roadsides, railyards, city edges, cemeteries, water reservoirs’ (1995) and such sites are present in all urban environments, regardless of geographical location. However, of these, perhaps the most often archetypal examples are cemeteries (also commonly referred to as memorial parks).

Cemeteries as places in transition of type and function

Present across almost all cultures and nationalities globally, cemeteries serve as excellent examples of the terrain vague and as places often overlooked by city planners and decision makers as potential candidates for inclusion as critical novel green spaces in cities new and old. As places in transition, change of function is a long-established reality for cemeteries. Many cities already possess examples of land previously used for burial that has been repurposed. For instance, Edinburgh’s Bruntsfield Links (a plague burial site, now park and golf course), Belmore Park, Sydney (cemetery to train terminus), Zagreb’s St George’s Cemetery (cemetery to park) or Wellington’s Bolton Street Cemetery (partly demolished cemetery to become cities first motorway).

Moving beyond the historic singular ‘hygienic function’(Arffmann 2000) of resting place for the non-living, cemetery function is increasingly being reassessed (Peinhardt 2019; Rugg 2000; Harvey 2019; McClymont 2016) and this shift is taking several forms. Historically, Victorian times saw a refocus toward recreation and the fusion of cemeteries with landscape parks. This characterised famous examples including the ‘magnificent seven’ cemeteries of London (London Natural History Society 2025) while more recently, contemporary gardens characterise cemeteries in Berlin (Holleran 2023) and overwhelmingly urban trees and as civic green spaces are key functions (Halajová, Bihuňová, and Lančarič 2016; Evensen, Nordh, and Skaar 2017). Elsewhere the rise of necro-tourism gives rise to higher visitation of famous cemeteries such as Père-Lachaise in Paris. This broadening of function includes the consideration of ecosystem service provision (Sallay et al. 2023) and biodiversity protection (Clayden and Dixon 2007; Yılmaz, Kuşak, and Akkemik 2018; Morelli et al. 2018; Kowarik et al. 2016) and as species habitat or refugia, by design or accident, is increasingly commonplace. Even recreation (Nordh, Wingren, et al. 2023) and active transport functions and as locations for socialisation and places for cultural encounters (Swensen and Skår 2018) prevail with significant differences in use due to availability of other greenspace also of note (Nordh et al. 2022).

Meanwhile other forms of intentional and unintentional use or mis-use, for instance concerning the provisions for animals (Petersson et al. 2017), are contested and conflict may occur (Goh and Ching 2020; Nordh and Evensen 2018; Davies and Bennett 2016; Nordh, Wingren, et al. 2023). Cemetery design highlights that human perspective and attitude to these spaces is complex and requires

careful negotiation. Reimers (1999) suggests that cemeteries and the rituals that they contain be *'regarded as tools for the construction of individual and collective identity'* and underpin character and sense of place (Tuan 1975; Seddon 1972). As a universal and critical aspect of human life, the 'recurring crisis' of death is something all societies must respond to, developing strategies to define, interpret, ritualize, and otherwise manage (Glaser and Strauss 1965) - even if cemeteries are often poorly frequented.

In lockstep with the shifts in function are changing practices and ceremony relating to an increased diversity of funeral cultures (Jedan, Westendorp, and Venbrux 2022; Nordh, House, et al. 2023). Jedan et al's 'Arena Model' concept offers a useful framework to understand this interplay as 'dynamic ritual spaces' with multiple layout, communities, spaces, markers, values and interests (2020). This reflects the popularity of diverse design ideas and functions beyond traditional headstones, crematoria and columbaria to living memorials and green burial (Stock and Dennis 2021; Lau et al. 2020) connected to more fluid understandings of place and enduring identity (Jedan, Westendorp, and Venbrux 2022), visitation (Colombo and Vlach 2023) and memory of the deceased. Nevertheless, enduring themes, of 'hygienic function, sorrow, contact with eternity and markers of social status' (Arffmann 2000) still prevail and require solutions. Lastly, many cemetery managers seek to encourage visitation and while this is difficult and may lead to conflict – as identified in (Goh and Ching 2020; Nordh and Evensen 2018), there is a response to long term privatisation and potential need for cash flow management (Davies and Bennett 2016).

These challenges, an open-ended 'vague' nature and changing practises relating to ceremonial purposes has given rise to cemeteries potential for synergistic coupling with other functions, and of specific interest to this research, as that of critical urban green space or (Skår, Nordh, and Swensen 2018). This is especially important in places that have minimum recreation opportunities and a forecast lack of space within existing cemeteries, as documented for Sydney, Australia by Davies & Bennett (2016) or Poland (Puzdrakiewicz 2023).

Aim and objectives

There is very little research on cemeteries – and almost nothing that brings together a forward thinking, shifting use of cemeteries – in a contemporary, Australian context. A partnership formed between the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board (MCB) and UWA School of Design provided the opportunity to explore future cemetery ideas on a real site. Utilising a university design studio environment to explore key ideas, the key aim was to specifically explore and document the diversity of novel solutions developed in response to this exemplar of the terrain vague and if and how any trend toward green space provision and emergent functional themes was identifiable. In so doing the research sought to quantify and document the degree to which functionality could be prescribed to the terrain vague.

Context

Location specifics and shifting trends

Located approximately one hour south from the state capital, Perth, in the southwest of Western

Australia (WA) the 68ha Rockingham regional Memorial Park offers a substantial area of land for the practise of interment and memorialization of citizens from Perth and WA. An expansive site and former sand quarry located in a peri-urban context, this is a landscape mostly cleared of original vegetation and largely undeveloped and ill-defined, wedged between a nature reserve, rubbish tip and expanding suburbs. Managed by the MCB for the people of Western Australia, this is one of eight cemeteries and memorial parks across a growing metropolitan region of approximately 2.5 million people, estimated to reach 3.5 million by 2050 (State of Western Australia 2018).

With increased pressure for lands for housing and urban development this land is the result of historic planning to cater to the future deceased and it would be expected that pressures to provide for the dead would be in high demand. However, upon examining trends in interment practises this is not the case. Surprisingly, shifting trends in burial and ceremonial practice mean a trend toward cremation versus internment among the populace meaning that the future occupation of a large portion of this land is unclear, underscoring its definition as a suitable exemplar of the terrain vague. Furthermore, the site contrasts directly with the overpopulated cemeteries elsewhere in Australia and also those in Perth managed by the MCB (namely the large historical Karrakatta cemetery) where due to lack of space, ‘renewal’ processes see existing graves interspersed with new burials.

Across Australia the rates of cremation versus burial vary. In Western Australia, this surpasses the national average of 69.23% (The Cremations Society 2009) to sit currently at 80% (Metropolitan Cemeteries Board WA 2024). By comparison, Sydney metropolitan region sits at 47.6% (Scott and Harley 2020). The specific, local trend in burials versus cremations at the Rockingham site is documented in Table 1. This formed part of the initial project briefing, requiring students to consider 87,500 human remains over a 25-year period from 2050 and by 2100.

Table 1. Cremation versus burial numbers annually at the Rockingham Regional Memorial Park (Metropolitan Cemeteries Board WA 2024)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Burials	69	51	48	63	75	74	63	67
Cremations	0	0	645	845	No data	1151	1747	3372

Also of note is that while cremations are an activity legislated and only permissible to take place within the lands and infrastructure maintained by the MCB, human remains seldom remain on the specific Rockingham site - a theme also explored in a Swedish context by Marjavaara (2012). Indeed, the practise of laying such ashes is increasingly up to the individual (and/or family/friends) and may occur in diverse places from lakes, sea, bushland and mountains to gardens and public places. Technically an illegal act under the policy, this is largely unpoliced and overlooked, except in places of high human traffic, including certain scenic lookouts and signposted hotspots where the issue between placement of human remains (ashes) and the living are in conflict. Such places include Kings Park, a notable park near Perth’s centre.

Research-by-design

Landscape Architecture is a discipline defined by the planning and conceptualisation of space to develop a range of design possibilities for a given challenge or design problem in a propositional, forward-thinking manner. In this landscape architectural research-by-design approach, a ‘projective design strategy’ was pursued (Deming and Swaffield(2011, 124). Furthermore, the act

of burial and/or interment is arguably one that harkens back to the very roots of the discipline of landscape architecture. The creation of cemeteries and memorial parks today continues a long tradition that enacts and entwines the practice of digging – as solemn, deliberate and sacred – with the processes of ceremony, burial and memory. This landform manipulation for many of us will be the final designedly act to conclude our lives, our last impactful landscape project.

Studio specifics

To consider the future of this exemplar of terrain vague space as test case as future resources of critical urban green, this research-by-design approach was undertaken through a Master of Landscape Architecture design studio at the School of Design, University of Western Australia over 2023 and 2024. Student design studios have been used to explore ideas to complex questions (Neldner and Kilbane 2017; Armstrong 2009; Satherley 2010; Bose 2007) and offer a valid means of research and enquiry. Similar to other collaborative methods such as charrettes (Kilbane and Roos 2022) they offer the opportunity to rapidly explore design and planning ideas in response to a brief in a limited time frame offering prototyping of ideas and a rich choreography of learning.

Through this studio learning environment, the future of the Rockingham site, its identity and its multifunctional potential were considered. The project asked students to develop a visionary memorial park masterplan that understood and appreciated context, sensitively incorporating diverse user groups and anticipated and embraced change and evolution through time. This meant reconciling the dead and the living with land, topography, Country and delving deep into people's relationship with place in an individual way that was felt and respectful.

The studio had three clear stages of research, ideation and design exploration. First, students researched post-life trends across different religious, cultural and historical contexts and reflected upon emerging rituals, ceremonies and end-of-life preferences that accompany contemporary cemetery and memorial park planning and design. Undertaken through both literature review and case study precedents, this documented the historical record as well as the contemporary landscape architectural practice. Documentation of shifting approaches in design, memorialisation and planning then led to students crafting individual design briefs. Second, students undertook a series of detailed site analytical processes and investigations including personal adaptations of '*dwelling*' as field method thinking (Kilbane 2024) and informed by Girot's four stage 'landing, grounding, finding, founding' (1999) approach to underpin a site and place-specific body of student work. Third, potential design solutions to articulate and illustrate this new vision, objective and/or future ideas were undertaken. During the course of a 14-week semester, students developed conceptual and sketch models and collages, and undertook additional research and field trips. Final designs were developed to respond to staged critical peer-review and feedback from guest jurors and MCB staff and a critical requirement of the work produced was its completion as 'measurable, accurate and visual' outcomes (Kilbane, Weller, and Hobbs 2019). Students delivered a range of design ideas from masterplan scale to detailed design, accompanied by a summary text of 200 words.

Method

Following the semester's completion, documentation and analysis of the work was undertaken. The functional themes explored by the student work were first documented through an examination of the final drawing package and especially the accompanying project summary text. The summarised

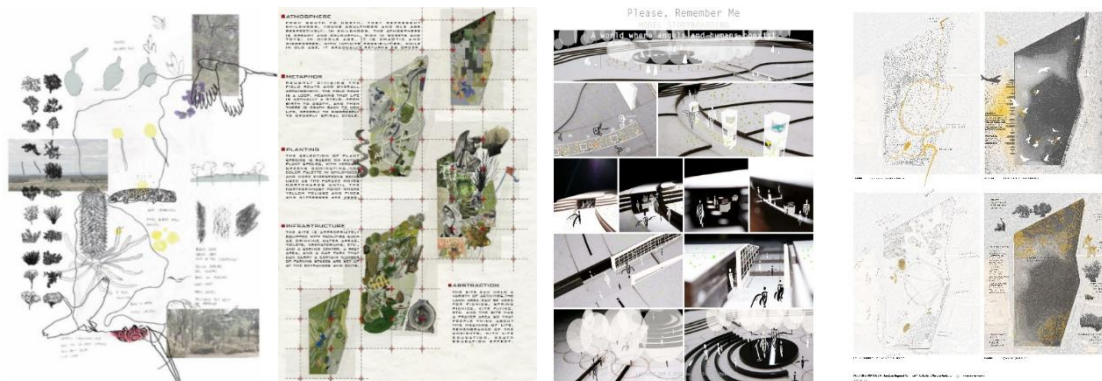
themes were drawn from scholarly literature as well as direct observation of the work and are noted in Table 2. Following this summary, consideration back to the original research ambition of the potential for cemeteries and memorial parks to be critical green space and documentation of any change in functionality and the implications of what this might mean was documented.

Table 3. Functional thematics of the body of student work.

Theme	Description	Example
Hydrological	investigation of WSUD and water management	swales
Ecological	focus on biodiversity and more-than-human outcomes	ecological restoration
Recreational	specific sporting and/or energy intensive activities	sports field
Ceremonial	highlighting ceremonial and ritual	amphitheatre
Civic	including community through diverse functions	café, gallery
Educational	a key outcome to educate and inform	school, learning
Industrial	development of specific post-life industry/activities	funerary consumables
Agricultural	growth and production of edibles or consumable materials	flowers, food
Wellness	spectrum of non-religious diversions and healing activities	counselling spaces
Spiritual	specific attention and accommodation of user group beliefs	chapels, mosques
Technological	specific computer and/or software-based advances	apps, physical interfaces

Student design outcomes/results

Students worked over the semester's 14 weeks to deliver 45 distinct designs: 20 in 2023 and 25 in 2024. Each provided a comprehensive masterplan at 1:2,000 to illustrate large planning moves; and one (or more) fragments at 1:100 to detail the ideas embedded in their masterplans. Accompanying details, sections, model(s) and explanatory diagrams/illustrations then communicated a comprehensive and considered design approach, see Figure 1 for examples of this work.



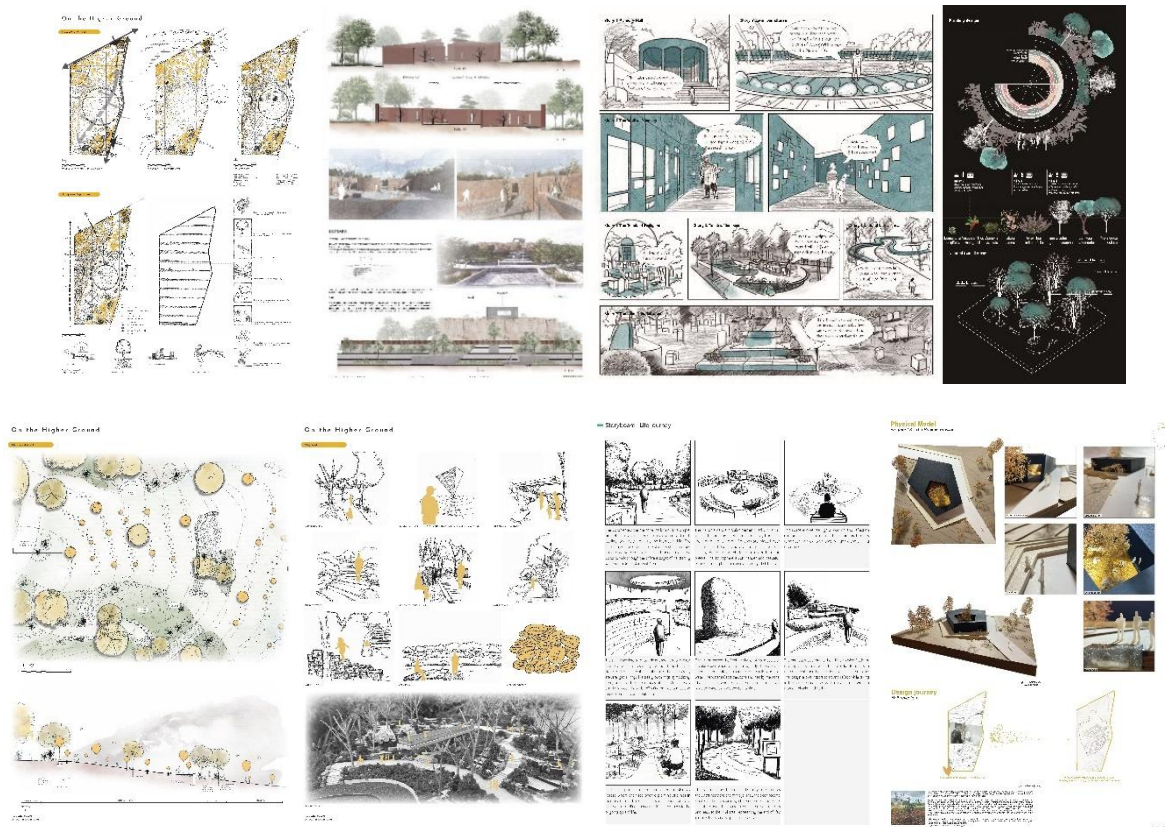


Figure 1. Sample of student projects from the design studios 2023-2024 (Brashaw, Liu, Zhang, Driver, Rekha, Zhao, Malihan, Hubbard)

The previously described thematic analysis then categorised projects, resulting in the identification of five leading functional outcomes for the proposed site. This was led by Ceremonial (29), Civic (26), Ecological (24), Wellness (19) and Spiritual (17) themes. Indeed, 100% of all students had at least one of these in their respective designs. The least evident themes were Industrial (2) and Agricultural (3), see Table 3.

Table 3. Student work by functional themes

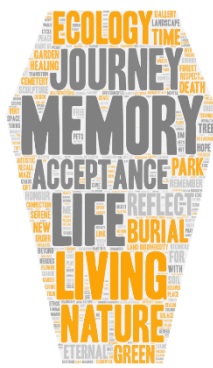
	Hydrological	Ecological	Recreational	Ceremonial	Civic	Educational	Industrial	Agricultural	Wellness	Spiritual	Technological
2023	3	13	2	10	12	4	1	0	11	5	2
2024	5	11	4	19	14	2	2	2	8	12	7
Total	8	24	6	29	26	6	2	3	19	17	9

The diversity of student projects is reflected by this analysis, additionally, there was one student who demonstrated only one theme (civic); and, conversely, three students with at least six.

Certain surprises worth mentioning in the results included the functional hybridisation and inclusivity of opportunities toward sustainability targets and the specific lessening of waste through education, agricultural and industrial roles and synergies. These included, for instance, circular economy thinking around the production of on-site flowers and wildflower meadows, food forests to connect with visitation and ceremony and even biodegradable mycelium caskets for burials. This

underscored and demonstrated an enhanced understanding and creative embrace of the changing culture and practice around cemeteries and the shift toward diverse, ecologically focussed multi-functional spaces. Indeed, at least eight students over the two years had designs with no gravestones, markers (etc) and only living memorials (as trees, other vegetation). In addition, due to the flexibility of individually written briefs and their liberty to explore ideas, several very sobering topics were tackled and the process of grief and ritual was not ignored by a number of students. This included memorialisation of deaths related to drugs, suicide, homelessness and the passing of the very young. Some even dove into novel ways to preserve personal memories, effects and objects so important to those left behind (Gibson 2004); while others developed engaging interfaces to connect with loved ones through bespoke technologies, apps and AI.

Finally, an examination of the students' 200-word descriptive text and project title was made using *wordcloud*. This noted prevalence of specific words and phrases and placed hierarchically in a visually accessible manner. The specific words with the highest counts are shown in Figure 1.



memory (20), *life* (19), *living* (17), *journey* (15), *nature* (15), *ecology* (14), *acceptance* (12), *burial* (10), *reflect* (10), *time* (9), *green* (9), *park* (8), *eternal* (7), *death* (6), *new* (5), *tree* (4), *healing* (4), *garden* (4), *cemetery* (3), *serene* (2), *hope* (2), *gallery* (2) and *landscape* (2)

Note, inclusive of words with greater than two instances, but limited to 100 most frequent

Figure 1. Word cloud of student project work from descriptive text and project titles

Discussion and Conclusions

This research sought to better understand the potential planning and design direction for a Western Australian exemplar of the terrain vague, the Rockingham Regional Memorial Park. The terrain vague is a term used to describe spaces and places that are ill-defined and lacking clear identity or function and cemeteries offer a great candidate for consideration with their somewhat ambiguous nature and patchy connection with time and people.

Using a cemetery site, two MLA design studios over 2023 and 2024 considered potential design and planning options. This was set against the (somewhat atypically) challenge of a cemetery that appears to find itself with too much space, too much terrain vague (contrasting with the nearby Karrakatta cemetery). Coupled with the acknowledgement of very high cremation rates – and even less understanding of where these ashes end up – this project presents a unique design challenge of what could be and sits at the intersection of ideas, cultures, rituals, past and future. This veritable ‘arena’ was the setting for which students delivered 45 unique designs for a previously ambiguous space and results were then examined to better understand and to identify trends and a shift from non-functional terrain vague to a series of multifunctional outcomes. Revealing a range of new

functions to this real example of the terrain vague students explored and delivered a diverse range of outcomes that operate at the nexus of people, place and ecology. Here, aesthetics met the functional and occupancy (in many forms) formed a dialogue with emptiness, a choreography of the living, the dead and resident biodiversity.

The classification of projects into 11 functional categories demonstrates serves to provide an understanding of the way that this site's character could now evolve with the majority of students promoting an approach inclusive of ceremonial, civic, ecological, wellness and/or spiritual functions. This gives potential insight into a richness of ideas that – although untested by the realities of the market – are responsive to this time and place and act as potential case studies and lessons.

Regarding the provision of critical greenspace in growing and changing cities, this operated at two levels. In light of future urbanisation prospects surrounding the site, many students realised the criticality of such green space offered by a cemetery to benefit future residents of adjacent suburban/tract housing. Second, some students took a macro view and connected the existing Regional Park to the North southwards through the cemetery expanse as an ecological corridor and critical piece of green infrastructure to connect into the suburbs and beyond. This aligns with changing perceptions toward cemeteries as multifunctional hybrid spaces that have emerged from the terrain vague and offer critical urban green space for the future city and its residents.

Finally, and on a different note, the ‘discovery’ of these spaces by students who may have had little contact with them previously, meant improving the relationship that we all have with such spaces. As one student suggested: ‘cemeteries are no longer synonymous with eerie indifference’. May this be the beginning of something good for these future graduates - from an arguably overlooked and unlikely place.

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