



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 2C

ROUTES TO THE PAST

**Legacy: Presenting the Value of the
Past Through Constructed and Cultural
Landscapes**

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INTERPRETIVE URBAN CEMETERIES: URBAN CEMETERIES REINTERPRETED

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Cemeteries – the oldest repositories of architecture and society – have until recently ‘quietly’ been undergoing a technological as well as cultural revolution that is creating new opportunities for interacting not just with memorialisation but history and our built environment as well.

Not since the garden cemetery prefigured the garden city movement or even the invention of industrialised cremation itself (both in the 19th century) has ‘death’ figured into such radical discourse. Today however, there is a burgeoning international industry of services and products for the acts of memorialisation. QR codes for data storage are now a common enough option on cemetery tombstones in some countries. Likewise, Japan has not just verticalized the cemetery model but turned it into an interactively mechanised down-town urban building too. Digital cemeteries now compliment physical ones, and Olson Kundig Architects’ current Recompose project proposal for metropolitan Seattle (USA) is one such example that is squarely aimed at using technology to disrupt the commercial funerary industry.

Closer to home, two recent spotlights have potentials as catalysts in accelerating this movement. Firstly, there is the commercialised sale and development over part of the historical East Perth Cemeteries site in Perth. Second is the public open space proposal to replace Melbourne’s Queen Victoria Market carpark, over what in many ways is still the historical Old Melbourne General Cemetery site. Both sites contain the remains of personal and collective stories tied to the history of their respective city’s and both have mere fragments left of their memorial architecture.

What emerging cemetery design practice is now showing is that these two worlds, the digital historical archive and the physical one (a condition of urban archaeology), are no longer standing apart from one another. Instead, they have the potential to radically benefit the culture of memorialisation as one and the same thing.

Cemeteries - the oldest repositories of architecture and society – have until recently, ‘quietly’ been undergoing a technological as well as cultural revolution that is creating new opportunities for interacting not just with memorialisation but history and our built environment as well. The word ‘quietly’ is used here because until this year of 2020, when our digital media accounts had become almost entirely occupied with articles pertaining to the likes of mass burials resulting from Coronavirus deaths, the *Black Lives Matter* Movement and the prevalence of online funerals resulting from social gathering restrictions, not many would have given much thought to the ways in which technology has been and still is undoubtedly changing our relationship to ‘death’. However, the fact of the matter is that not since the garden cemetery prefigured the garden city movement or even the invention of industrialised cremation itself (both in the 19th century) that the architecture of the cemetery has figured into such a radical public discourse about death and its legacies. Today, there is a burgeoning international industry of services and products from startup companies dedicated to the act of memorialisation. Moreover, Japan has not just verticalized the cemetery model but also turned it into an interactively mechanised down-town urban building too. Digital cemeteries now compliment physical ones, and Olson Kundig Architects’ current *Recompose* project proposal for metropolitan Seattle (USA) is one such example that is squarely aimed at using technology to disrupt the commercial funerary industry. As positioned by ethnographer, Dr Matthias Frihammar and anthropologist, Professor Helaine Silverman: “Indeed, death – which was medicalized and marginalized during the last century – is once again part of the public discourse, including around heritage...Heritages of death are vernacular as well as official, sanctioned as well as alternative.”¹ In a sense, the cemetery is a city in microcosm of what is emerging in the world of cultural heritage and interpretation at large. So, as the rituals of death shift further away from the physical tangibility of traditional burial, particularly in the English-speaking world, digital technologies associated with memorialisation will inevitably continue to become more prominent.

Visiting a cemetery it obviously would not be unusual to find either yourself or another seeking comfort in being able to speak beside the grave of a loved one. Irrespective of any spiritual disposition, the notion of being able to “talk with the dead” is arguably about as ancient as humanity itself. Nor has the historical evolution of scientific knowledge and technology greatly diminished that sentiment of being able to directly engage with our past. Even when the phonograph was first publicly presented in 1877 in the US, at least one major newspaper underscored the headlining of this momentous occasion with the words:

Another electrical invention, still more wonderful than the telephone – the tones of the human voice to be represented years after death.²

If you pause to think about the sorts of uses that could have been envisaged for the phonograph let alone those that Edison himself identified (such as the recordings of business meetings and letters³), it is somewhat peculiar to retrospectively find that it was the theme of memorialisation that made media headlines. Remember too, that painted ancestral portraits had not yet met their demise from photography at this stage either.⁴ Even more curiously however, by the mid-20th century, the pseudoscientific idea that background noises in electronic recordings of sounds and voices were potential sources of spirit voices beyond the grave, known as “electronic voice phenomena” became further popularised. It is equally out of this context that various electronic devices pertaining to this interest in the paranormal would become immortalised in the cult *Ghostbusters* films of the 1980s.

Of particular note from the 1970s though, was an early ‘high-tech’ commercial attempt by a US engineer to create an interactive tombstone via the near US\$40,000, solar-powered, pre-recorded sound (and later video) from the dead delivering – ‘Talking Tombstone’.⁵ The exorbitant cost might have been one of the key factors hindering its mass favour but like the phonograph, its’ intentions certainly didn’t end there. Today, the application of QR (Quick Response) codes or Bluetooth enabled proximity devices to funerary monuments has become an infinitely more proficient and cost effective technological pursuit for the sort of concept that the ‘Talking Tombstone’ idea was striving for. In some ways our lives could well be seen as potentially

immortal digitally augmented translations of architect, Julia Morgan's poetic book shaped funerary urns designed for the Chapel of the Chimes (c.1928). The social media application, *Facebook*, for example is itself now also a quasi virtual graveyard, with the evolution of what the company calls 'legacy accounts' (social media accounts that remain active in memory of a deceased). Predominantly however, this new generation of digital commemoration is being driven by a myriad of startup companies now offering easily accessible interfaces for any sort of digital memorialisation – video's, photographs, voice recordings, social media profiles, weblinks to an online cemetery provider (such as *World Wide Cemetery*), holographic artificial intelligence and much more.



Figure 1. © Chapel of the Chimes, Oakland (USA)

Likewise, cemetery management itself has traditionally been somewhat akin to historical archiving in the sense that keeping and maintaining records has been not only tedious but highly vulnerable to compounding data losses and resourcing pressures that accumulate over centuries (not just decades) of their existence. Arguably, similar pressures exist for heritage buildings of course; however, it is only in relatively rare instances that these face the same level of daily public access issues and scrutiny that cemeteries do. More durable, all-encompassing solutions have therefore long alluded caretakers – until now. Aided in part by a state authority grant, an Australian based software company known as *Chronicle* was (in a matter of months) able to survey, compile and store the entire grave details of Victoria's mid-19th century, Beechworth Cemetery.⁶ Moreover, researchers from Edinburgh and Yale University have also been studying ways of efficiently assessing and monitoring the physical deterioration of cemetery monuments. Their study, published in 2020 and based on the historic Grove Street Cemetery site (Est. 1796) that abuts the Yale University campus, combined 3D model production of memorials with the mapping of their weathering as it stands as well as *ultrasonic pulse velocity* (UPV) measurements⁷ (a non-destructive technique of determining the strength of homogenous materials such as concrete and rock in-situ via the generation and measurement of electronic pulses across a known distance). Invariably this builds up a highly detailed picture of the state of the cemetery condition as it stands as well as better inform its management plan for caretakers going forward. If successful, it is thus plausible that these sorts of initiatives will inform more mainstream solutions across cemeteries generally as well as other urban artifacts. In the shorter term however, cemetery organisations publically appear to be turning to technological developments to regain a renewed sense of social value and economic sustainability amongst a contemporary society that has generally shifted further away from plot-based burials and monumental commemoration.

Whether it be a greater movement towards a more secular society, increased global mobility, the fact that most funerary rituals in Australia now involve cremation ceremonies (currently at a rate of about 70%⁸), basic economics (such as rising funeral costs), disruption of existing institutions including funerary directors or a combination of all these and more, cemeteries are fast recognising that they need to adapt to offering a greater sense of cultural diversity and relevance. Curiously enough, numerous cemeteries worldwide and within Australia are already recognizable as legitimate tourist destinations unto themselves – ‘star rated’ on the same consumer review websites as hotels and restaurants.

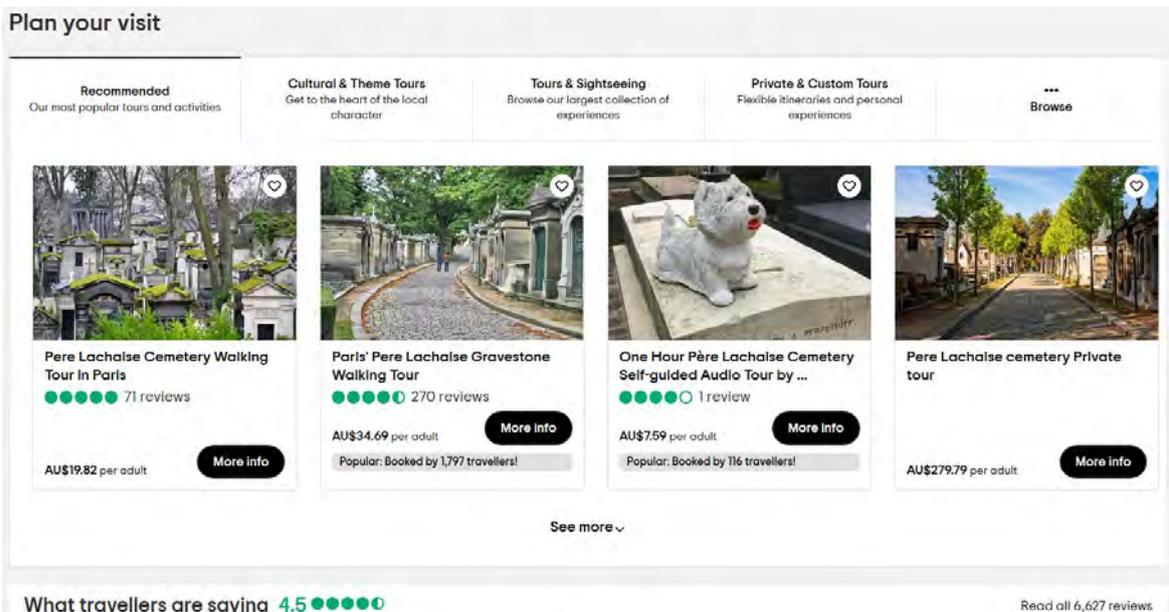


Figure 2. Partial review of Paris' Pere Lachaise Cemetery (Est. 1804) via the online tourism website *Tripadvisor* (November 2020, https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g187147-d188698-Reviews-Pere_Lachaise_Cemetery-Paris_Ile_de_France.html)

Sydney's Waverley Cemetery (Est. 1877) and Melbourne General (Est. 1852) are obvious references, however the centrally located East Perth Cemeteries Precinct (1829-1899), itself closed for well over a century to new burials, is one such example of this technological augmentation of what is commonly referred to as ‘dark tourism’ (tourism of places traditionally associated with death). As with many historical cemeteries, guided tours are offered throughout the year. More recently however, under the auspices of the annual, local alternative entertainment event known as the Fringe World Festival visitors are also invited to attend the cemetery at night where they each receive audio-visual interpretive headsets alongside a guide map to some of the original monuments still left standing. Akin to what might be found in many cultural museums, the headsets are used to directly communicate the challenges endured by many of the early settlers and the biographies of some of the many significant colonial figures buried there. At times, the National Trust (WA) has also used the cemetery to host standalone music and sound art performances. While these initiatives, if considered individually, are not entirely unique they have successfully run over several years and so it might be said that this ‘curatorial’ manner of inactive-cemetery stewardship is something unique in and of itself within an Australian context - where we have traditionally remained more ambivalent about the role of cemeteries and death in our urban fabric.

Though the embellishments have long disappeared, directly across from the current East Perth Cemeteries boundary is an area where several other settler denominations were originally buried. And so, the latter part of its history has become better known as a humble, school surface carpark that formed part of a land sale in 2017 by the Government of Western Australia to private developers. Responsibility for relocating the existing bodies subsequently fell on the developer as

part of the sale conditions⁹ and the construction of a multistorey, mixed-use development has since been initiated. Universally, as developmental pressures on inactive inner-city cemeteries continue to grow, what happens next should raise significant questions regarding how we want to treat such sites in the future – do we, for example, have a responsibility to interpret their cultural histories for future generations? If so, how? And to what extent might people be comfortable with this, if at all? It is also worth considering at this point that the fact of the matter is that much of the fabric of cities are invariably built upon and around histories of ‘death’. By way of conceptually illustrating this point, part of architects’ Alison Killing and Ania Molenda’s exhibition at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, titled “Death in Venice”, mapped sites of London that have existing or historical ties to death. Inviting visitors to interact with digital screens, the places included in the research and mapping for this exhibition were the likes of cemeteries, crematoriums, palliative care facilities and hospitals.¹⁰ In Killing’s own words:

One of the biggest surprises about this was how much space in cities is given over to death. Cemeteries that often function as parks and green spaces, for example. Or mortuaries located in light industrial estates.¹¹

What makes Australia’s context unique is that it is further enriched by thousands of years of pre-colonial history with its own links to Indigenous notions of *Country* and ritual that traditionally places exceptional respect for the spiritualism of places pertaining to the dead.

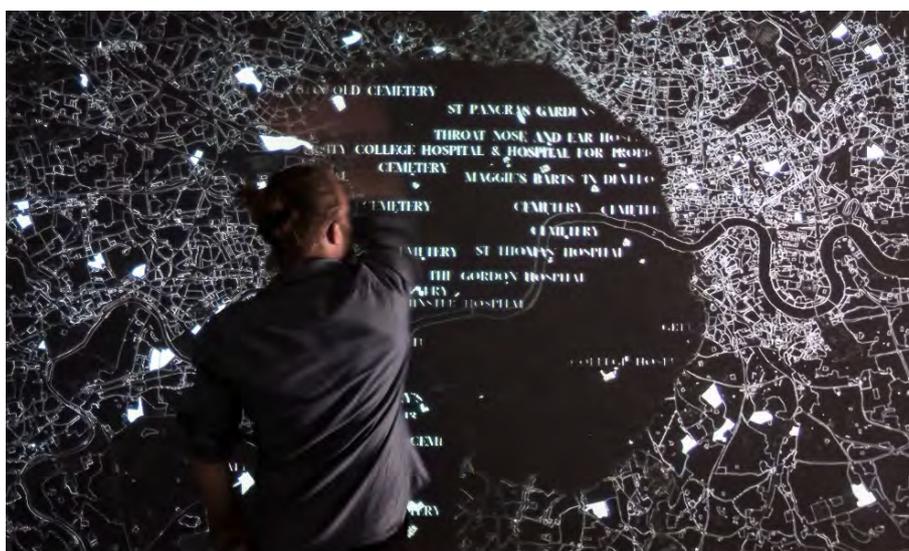


Figure 3. “Death in Venice” Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2014. Photograph by Ania Molenda.

Let us not neglect that prior to colonial settlement, Australia’s city cemeteries and capital cities already had their own cultural identities. So, while site histories are being explicitly and rightfully acknowledged (particularly via the insightful work of the *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* mapping project by The University of Newcastle), there are still gaps to be reconciled. For instance, Kings Domain Resting Place (Est. 1985) bordering the south-east corner of Melbourne’s CBD and where the skeletal remains of 38 repatriated Victorian Aboriginals are located and acknowledged¹² is quite different to the northern CBD edge, where human remains of Aboriginals and colonial settlers are still located at the former Old Melbourne Cemetery (1837-1854).¹³ The latter has long been obscured by the Queen Victoria Markets precinct and has (albeit not for the first time in its history) recently been the subject of an architectural competition and development proposal for a new inner-city civic square.¹⁴ Most tourists (and even many local-residents for that matter) to the highly popular markets simply wouldn’t be aware of the post-colonial, let alone any pre-colonial significance of this site and to their credit, there is nothing to physically suggest anything particularly ‘out of the ordinary’ either. So, if we are to truly embrace the ramifications of designing architecture with respect to Indigenous notions of *Country* and

history then this prevailing social contradiction in Australia - that *Country* somehow only exists outside of city boundaries – must surely change.

The agency that the sorts of technological developments in the realm of cemeteries potentially afford in terms of capturing alternative histories and voices attached to a site can and should form part of this cultural change that better acknowledges the legacies of a place. Somewhat ironically during some of the early phases of community wide social distancing restrictions put in place during the coronavirus pandemic, some cemeteries even saw increased leisurely patronage as their garden settings and inner-city locations proved to be remarkably proficient at ensuring a public place of respite, solitude and distancing for patrons itself.¹⁵ On the one hand this represents something of an ironic throwback to the popularity of early garden cemeteries of the 19th century in US such as Mount Auburn (Est. 1831) as places of leisure. Equally, it also demonstrates plausibility for the general public to again see cemeteries as more than places of grief or curiosity. However, this is not to be naïve to the potential problems posed with technologically augmenting this experience. As Australian social researcher and writer, Hugh Mackay once observed, “You don’t need to be an ‘opponent’ of technology to be a techno-sceptic.”¹⁶ Information technology is after all something that is in the first instance *unnatural* to us as a communicative form.¹⁷ Likewise, as social sciences academic, Andrew Hoskins (University of Glasgow) points out -

...search is premised on a model of the pursuit of total memory, where the ease and the compulsion of connectivity, the recording of everything and the entanglement of the network ego obfuscates the precariousness of future access.¹⁸

Hoskins is possibly being deliberately ambiguous about exactly what the word ‘search’ means here but he is also uniquely coupling the perpetual archival challenge of deciding what to keep with the added impact of the inevitable redundancy of technology as a practical and representational issue in itself.¹⁹ Furthermore and very importantly for that matter, we can not automatically conflate the potentials of technological developments with a renewed sense of intimacy with loved ones no longer with us. In some ways, the opposite can be true. As Margaret Gibson (Griffith University) posits in her paper, “Death and mourning in a technologically mediated culture”:

[With technological mediation] there is always an effect of distance. The viewer knows they are experiencing proximity at a distance. And depending on the politics or ethics of a representation, this proximity at a distance can also produce modes of emotional connection or disconnection from the image and narrative.²⁰

The University of Melbourne’s DeathTech Research Centre also addresses ethical questions associated with algorithmic curating of information and how this also needs to be factored into discussion.²¹ There are no simple answers to these fast-moving developments and in the author, Richard Seymour’s words that so accurately capture the current zeitgeist, “[we] are writing more than ever before, on our phones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers. And we are not so much writing, as being written.”²² Civil legal battles have taken place between families over what sort of physical commemoration (such as a plaque inscription) might be associated with a deceased individual²³ and so, particularly in the absence of any sort of digital mediator, it might be only a matter of time before this extends further into disputes on the account of virtual information being held too.

For architecture, and particularly since Boullée introduced the world to his highly evocative conceptual proposals for the likes of Newton’s Cenotaph, the discipline is as guilty (if not more so) as any other artistic one of tainting death with default connotations of ‘darkness’, solitude, sadness and absence. However, as stated from the outset via Frihammar and Silverman, “death – which was medicalized and marginalized during the last century”²⁴ should no longer be thought of as an architecture of the urban fringes born from venerable institutions. At a micro level for example, the big-box store, Costco started offering its US customers in-store and online sales of discount funerary supplies such as caskets and urns several years ago. On a macro level, the

Recompose project currently being planned by Olson Kundig Architects in collaboration with company founder, Katrina Spade for Seattle (USA) is one such example that is squarely aimed at using technology to both disrupt the funerary industry and offer ‘consumers’ a more ecological option of environmental design for inner-metropolitan based funerary ritual. As per Olson Kundig’s description,

...the *Recompose* process, which is centered around a natural organic reduction vessel that transforms human remains into organic, nutrient-rich soil. The core of the *Recompose|Seattle* space is a modular system containing approximately 75 of these vessels, stacked and arranged to demarcate space for rituals and other types of public gatherings. Radiating from this ceremonial disposition area are spaces for shrouding (the storage and preparation of bodies), administrative back-of-house areas, and an interpretive public lobby which describes the *Recompose* process.²⁵

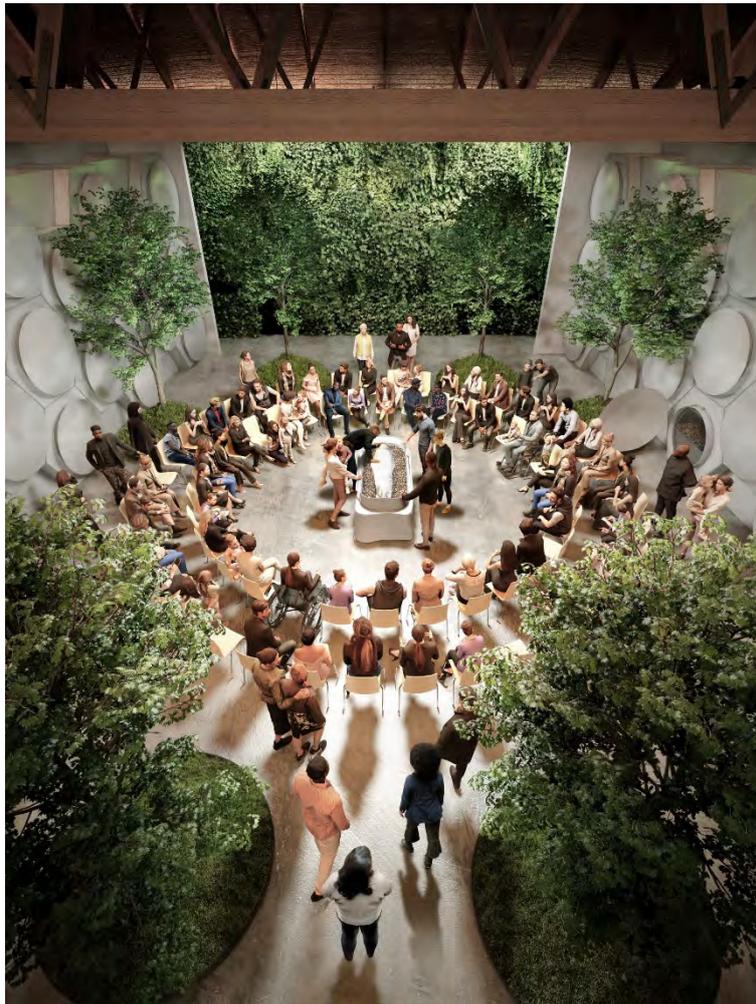


Figure 4. *Recompose Facility Seattle* visualisation by Olson Kundig Architects.

The end product (after about a month in one of the vessels) is approximately one square metre of entirely organic material that can be donated to a land regeneration initiative or taken away for private use for loved ones wishing initiate the growth of their own new plant.²⁶ While the coronavirus pandemic has forced a downsizing of initial ambitions²⁷ the architectural implications of the project forecasts something that might invariably see the cemetery become more common as a highly mechanised (even ‘down-town’) building solution than something (literally and figuratively) grounded in landscape design.

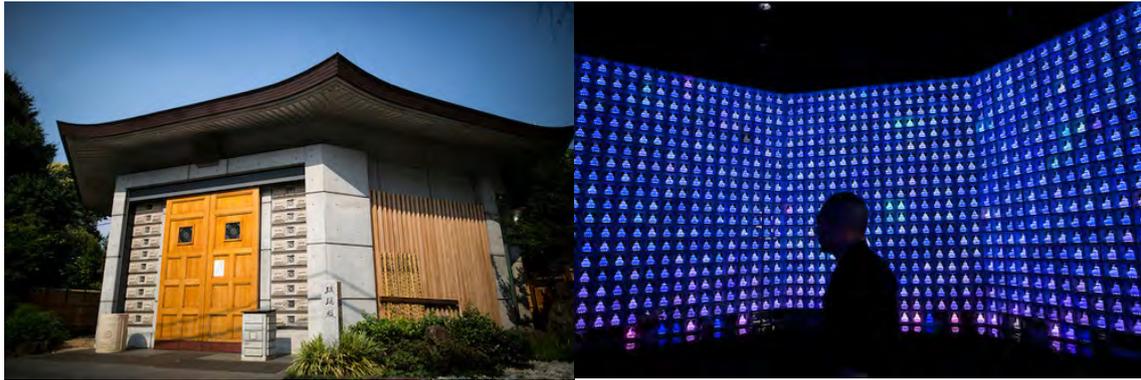


Figure 5. *The Ruriden, Kōkoku-ji Buddhist Temple, Exterior & Interior.* Photographs by Richard Atrero de Guzman.

In Japan, by way of example, cultural customs have traditionally contributed to the country having one of the highest cremation rates in the world and great reverence for cemeteries and their historical ties to the family unit. However, there are several relatively recent building examples that manage to capture an entirely different way of considering funerary architecture and memorialisation within areas of high urban density and endemic pressures – particularly associated with land availability and costs but also in regards to ongoing maintenance issues amidst an ageing demographic. *The Ruriden, Kōkoku-ji Buddhist Temple* columbarium has become one of the more commonly quoted examples of this amongst media. This is because, tucked inside a relatively modest octagonal footprint of approximately 33 square metres and a contemporary-vernacular exterior on the grounds of an old cemetery complex, are 2,046 funerary niches; each with their own Buddha statuette that forms part of a dazzling LED lighting display for private visitors and tourists alike. Likewise, in the same district of the city but well away from the traditional cemetery and thrust into the commercial precinct across from one of the busiest train stations in the country is *Shinjuku Ruriko – in Byakurenge-do* (White Lotus Hall 2014).



Figure 6. *Shinjuku Ruriko – in Byakurenge-do.* Photographed by Yushio Shiratori.

Designed by Amorphe Takeyama and Associates, *White Lotus Hall* presents a sleek digital interface coupled with a contemporary interpretation of the calm architectural austerity of a Buddhist temple that contrasts its surroundings (hence the metaphor of the 'lotus flower'). Entirely hidden away however are the mechanicals of something more akin to a large industrial sized vending machine – co-designed as well as maintained by a division of the *Toyota Motor Company*²⁸ and automated to robotically access urns of the deceased from a large storage crypt (a collective repository of sorts) and to the gaze of their viewer at any time via the mere swipe of a key-card. This engineering system, known in Japan as an 'Automatic Conveyor-Belt Columbarium' (*jidō hansōshiki nōkotsudō*)²⁹ allows for what is again a relatively small building footprint (528m²) to house somewhere in the vicinity of 7,000³⁰ funerary niches across a six-floor building height equivalent. Though this is far from the only verticalised cemetery architecture in Japan or the world, to even consider that a cemetery could potentially be an autonomous, decentralized, even 'curatorial' building is equally enlightening and challenging enough. The fact that it could be something so tangible and interactive to us as living human beings is something quite unexpected however. As architect and researcher, Paul Alt points out, somewhere along the way humanity largely abandoned a reverence or desire for creating architectural spaces of sacred healing.³¹ For *White Lotus Hall* however, the spaces are warm and light filled and the remainder of its 1,000m² site is one of the few unimpeded, urban social spaces open to the street in the vicinity. It is such projects therefore, that start to offer a glimpse of how we might begin thinking about how we reconceptualise the fundamental architecture of cemeteries, and their burgeoning potentials, in order for them to survive the pressures of urbanism and still retain their critical role of allowing the city to provide a safe space for healing and remembering our loved ones.³²

The timing of this conference paper relative to the global coronavirus pandemic simultaneously taking place is not something that can be easily ignored. Via digital media, we've despaired as we learnt that the death rates across much of the world were unfortunately accelerating beyond belief and existing mortuaries in some countries were even becoming overwhelmed. In the UK for instance, we also saw temporary morgues being established at previously unimaginable locations including both Birmingham and Southampton Airports. Likewise, repurposing ice-rinks was seen in parts of Europe and even proposed as a worst-case scenario in Canberra.³³ And from the US, even some New Yorkers were surprised to discover the obscure Hart Island Potters Field once it become an infamous site of world news media broadcasts pertaining to mass burials (not to discount the incredible work that *The Hart Island Project* has been doing since 2011 to raise awareness and reconnect families to lost loved ones there). Moreover, the *Black Lives Matter* movement spread to Australia to address deaths in custody and again, much like the rest of the world, this coincided with restrictions being placed on the number of people that could attend funeral services. So quite suddenly, the likes of live service broadcasts seemed to take on a broader level of appreciation and cultural questioning. With these events, death, cultural memory, collective healing, digital media and technology have only become more connected and albeit, more complex. Looking at historical precedent however, whether it be the likes of the phonograph, 'talking tombstones' or whatever the latest developments in digital storage may be, the collision of technologically and monumentally based memorialisation has been developing for longer than we might have initially given it credit. So, *what if*, we mark 2020 as the point of impact – *what if* we've just witnessed a new turning point for our oldest form of architecture?

Endnotes

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³² Domenic Trimboli and Benjamin Juckes, "Memento memorial," *Architecture Australia* 108, No. 3 (May/June, 2019), p.112.

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