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The Cemetery and the Golf Course: Mid-Century Planning and the Pastoral Imaginary

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Abstract

The well-draining ‘sandbelt’ in the southeast of Melbourne boasts many world-famous links established during the ‘golf boom’ of the 1920s. The soil conditions that make for good golf – sandy, loamy dirt – are also optimal for cemeteries. Starting in the 1930s ‘memorial parks,’ built at the urban periphery, began to replace crowded churchyards and Victorian-era cemeteries in the urban core. Sometimes within a stone’s throw of putting grounds, these new sites for burial placed the dead below bronze markers set into undulating green surfaces – very much reminiscent of a golf course. This paper offers a history of the landscape architecture, planning, and cultural shifts that aided in the development of both the suburban ‘memorial park’ and the modern golf course, two typologies that place a huge importance on Sylvan water features and grassy dells. The space allocated to each in rapidly urbanising areas illuminates the tension between the infrastructure of death and memorialisation and the land reserved for the living, and their leisure activities.

Taking the history of the cemetery and the golf course together, this paper examines the pastoral imaginary of mid-century spatial planners as both a cultural phenomenon and a technological feat, made possible by advances in irrigation and pest control. In the ensuing years the green imaginary of these heavily sprayed ‘lawnscapes’ has evolved with the emergence of various ‘green infrastructure’ framings, and a new scrutiny of land- and sod-intensive sites. Creating greenspaces for humans may not be enough, and both cemeteries and golf courses have struggled to justify their existence. Managers of these sites have started to channel a more-than-human constituency that includes plant and animal life who also ‘inhabit’ their spaces.
Saying Goodbye to the ‘Boneyard’

In 1938, three decades after its opening, Fawkner Cemetery, in Melbourne’s north, undertook a rebranding project. The site would drop the suffix “Cemetery”, replacing it with “Memorial Park”, a designation that was coming into vogue. A lux pamphlet celebrated new plantings and structures across the site. Its first page set out the reasoning for the name change:

For those who deplore the neglected graveyards of yesterday, and the marble-lined cemeteries of today, the Fawner Memorial Park will come as a welcome relief. To lift the shadow of death… has forever been the object of the creators of this remarkable institution.¹

The renaming was framed using the familiar language of cemetery overhaul. The remaking of urban burial grounds began in the United Kingdom as a project focused on hygiene and metropolitan growth at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Starting with the closure of churchyard burial grounds (as small, urban cemeteries were called whether they were adjacent to a church or not)² in favour of ‘reform’ cemeteries, it continued through the 1830s and 1840s with the creation of park-like ‘rural’ cemeteries at the urban periphery (the most famous being London’s ‘Magnificent Seven’ cemeteries). While Australia largely inherited the mortuary and burial traditions of its coloniser, there were far fewer churchyard burial grounds. Most of the cemeteries established in the mid-nineteenth century – such as Boroondara (Kew) Cemetery (1858), Coburg Pine Ridge Cemetery (1856) and Footscray General Cemetery (1869) in Melbourne; West Terrace Cemetery in Adelaide (1837); and Rookwood Cemetery (1867) in Sydney – combined reform elements with some pathways and plantings that reference the romanticism of the rural cemetery movement. Therefore, it was only in the 1920s and 1930s, as this older stock of cemeteries filled up and new neighbourhoods sprang up alongside them, that cemeteries were given a new look.

In keeping with the demands of rapidly growing colonial cities, older cemeteries were built with transport and infrastructural development in mind. Founded in 1906, Fawkner gave purpose to a failed train venture (the Upfield Line) and supplemented smaller Victorian Era cemeteries in Melbourne’s core.³ It remains one of the largest cemeteries in the state, and, at the time of its creation, represented a major outlay of Crown land at the city fringe (successive waves of urbanisation mean that it is now surrounded by what are considered Middle Ring suburbs). Designed as both a cemetery and a green
amenity – its creator, Charles Heath (1867-1948), was one of the first in Australia to take on the title of ‘landscape architect’. His plans called for a fan-shaped southern sector inspired by City Beautiful town planning and a more free-flowing northern quadrant that embraced the curved pathway of rural cemeteries (Figure 1). Crucial to the cemetery’s creation was its position adjacent to the Upfield train line, which skirts its eastern edge. Not only did this provide easy access for visitors (the fan-shaped pathways radiate out from a train stop at the front gates), but it also allowed a mortuary hearse car to arrive with the newly dead. For over 30 years, bodies came up the train line from the major hospitals and morgues in the city centre. This echoed the necro transport accommodations established at Sydney’s Rookwood Cemetery, which was even more closely bound to the rails. It had its own station, Regent Street Station (also called Necropolis Receiving Station and Mortuary Station), that brought people directly from the centre to the cemetery from 1869 to the late 1940s. Both major cemeteries relied on rail transport and saw themselves as part of larger infrastructural systems that included fixed sites, like hospitals, mortuaries and (starting in the 1920s) crematoria; but they also included conduits, notably rail lines and, later, highways.

Figure 1. Fawkner Memorial Park master plan, with the northern quadrant at right (State Library Victoria).

The mechanical, social and architectural infrastructure of death in Australian cities shifted with two major changes in the 1920s and 1930s: the acceptance of cremation and the rise automobility. First, the arrival of good roads helped to obfuscate (but not sever) the connection between cemeteries and existing infrastructural systems. Railroad mortuary wagons disappeared in favour of black hearses and, often, nondescript vans. Second, cremation helped to break the link between bodily interment
and cemeteries, because once a body is cremated and turned to ash, it can be scattered, kept at home in an urn or, if one wishes, interred in a cemetery. Bodies no longer needed to go to a cemetery and visitors no longer had to rely on train timetables and lurching trams to pay their respects.

The modernisation of cemetery infrastructure cast the ‘death ways’ of the Victorian and Edwardian Eras in a gloomy light. In 1900, headstones sold in Australia were “distributed… with inscriptions and designs usually chosen by the bereaved families from a pattern catalogue.” These were “almost without exception, the styles of markers, the symbols carved… upon them… thoroughly derivative of graveyards of Great Britain.” Within the space of a generation these symbols came to be seen as totally antiquated and a local carving industry, largely reliant on the new technology of pneumatic chiselling, began to create new headstone designs. They moved away from nineteenth-century staples, like cherubs and stricken angels, and towards modern decoration and abstraction. The verticality of Victorian ‘boneyard’ tombstones, often 1.5-1.8 metres high, was replaced by Streamlined Moderne altar tombs that were rarely higher than a metre, and featured glass, metal and tile accents that emphasised their horizontality (Figure 2). In short, the graves began to take on curves, accent lines and shiny finishes – they began to look somewhat like the automobiles that were increasingly delivering the well-to-do to the cemetery. Even the less fortunate, who still packed onto suburban trains at the end of the Depression, could partake in these new aspirational styles. With the creation of Memorial Parks, cemetery managers sought to take this a step further: headstones would compress almost completely, taking the form of bronze plaques laid flat into the grass to discreetly mark the grave below. Most ceremonies, the managers hoped, would not involve burial at all, but ash interments directly into the niche walls that came up from the manicured lawns. The melancholy Victorian cemetery with its winding paths, water features, and glens had begun to fade, replaced by park-like surrounds with uninterrupted sightlines.
The Growth of Golf

In 1925, Melbourne’s *Herald* ran a short piece in their miscellany section under the heading “More and More Golf,” noting that “more people in and around Melbourne are playing golf now than was even dreamed of a few years ago. The demand for new courses is continuous… The trouble is there is not so much suitable land available for courses close to the city, and the tendency to go well out of the metropolis for a day’s golf is growing.”7 While the first generation of grand dame golf courses, like the Royal Melbourne Golf Club (established 1891), date back to the turn of the twentieth century, the sport’s boom followed the First World War, when upper-class officers returned to Australia with plans for courses to be built along the lines of those they had played on in the U.K. In 1920s, five new clubs were established along the southeast ‘sandbelt’ in Oakleigh and Cheltenham (Table 1).

<table>
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<th>Size</th>
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</thead>
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<td>58 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntingdale Golf Club</td>
<td>Oakleigh South, VIC</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>57 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston Heath Golf Club</td>
<td>Cheltenham, VIC</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>63 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarra Yarra Golf Club</td>
<td>Bentleigh East, VIC</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>52 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Golf Club</td>
<td>Cheltenham, VIC</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>50 ha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1*. Melbourne Sandbelt golf clubs built in the 1920s.
While, in the early 1920s, it was assumed that golfers would arrive by train, the professional classes who played golf at private clubs were, by the decade’s end, expected to arrive in their own automobiles. This development untethered golf clubs from trunk railroad lines, allowing them to find new locations in what was still largely undeveloped land in the southeast. Several clubs, including the Royal Melbourne Golf Club, moved down tram lines and then out into the undeveloped scrubland, selling their links and pushing them further out as urbanisation caught up. In this manner many clubs sold their old sites as housing developments, turning a profit that allowed them to realise more ambitious links down the road. Simultaneously, homebuilders were able use the creation of these golf courses as a selling point for their new developments.

With large swaths of land being developed, new standards for the design and planting of courses were put into place. The Royal Melbourne club – which had shifted from its original location in Caulfield, to Sandringham, to Black Rock – brought in Alister MacKenzie, the famed Scottish-English golf course designer, in 1931 to create a new course with Alex Russell, a local golf enthusiast. Given the opportunity to start anew, MacKenzie and Russell departed from the modest design of their Sandringham predecessor (Figure 3), which was in operation from 1901 to 1931, to create two naturalistic 18-hole courses. The courses – which along with the clubhouse, surface parking and other amenities, occupy over 80 hectares of land – were designed to partially follow the natural contours of the dunes that occupied the site. Golf clubs were no longer sporting amenities in parks, but entirely planned environments, with hedge-lined drives, large car park areas, complex drainage and pumping, and armies of groundskeepers.
The Referee, a sport-heavy paper published in Sydney from 1886 to 1939, assiduously followed the rise of golf in Australia. A 1933 article notes the phenomenal expansion of the sport in “less than a decade” and chronicles the rapid maturation of golf landscaping, “an army of men are kept in employment” and dress-code style, the “days have gone by when any sort of old suit was considered good enough.” They note that keeping grass healthy cost a lot, with one suburban club using “900 tons [of] manure for top-dressing fairways,” while others incurred huge water bills and collectively used “thousands of yards of rubber hose.” The article concludes by noting that “golf, all in all, costs more than any other game to play, and the figures in aggregate reach amazing proportions.” This is not a dismissal of the game but an acknowledgment that it was ‘thirsty’, cash-intensive, and growing in popularity. Many of those costs were initially excised as golf-mania swept over the country and it would be years before they would be fully tallied.

“I build my altar in the fields” – Ritualised Green Space
Critiques of mid-century ‘lawncapes’ are many, and they mostly draw on the environmental harms of cultivating millions of acres of turf grass, often in climates in which it cannot thrive without extensive irrigation. Much of the scholarship on the rise of turf grass – famously called out as the primary ‘crop’ of the United States – focuses on the green spaces of individuals and the politics of suburban lawn maintenance. The creation of millions of hectares of institutional lawns, golf courses, parks and park-like cemeteries has received far less attention. These landscapes were the product of a socio-technical shift that preceded the “lawn boom period of the post-war era.”

Figure 3. The Royal Melbourne Golf Club in Sandringham, Victoria, 1909 (State Library Victoria).
Starting in the 1920s, new methods appeared for creating verdant landscapes, including: improved irrigation technologies, newly available turf varieties and the ability to bring water across vast sites, first with networks of hoses and then with in-ground sprinkler systems. Beneath these technological improvements was an emergent sense of ‘green-is-good’ in the creation of new leisure and memorialisation landscapes; a sentiment multiplied against the Anglo-Saxon settler discomfort with the red hues of Australia’s indigenous landscape that resulted in a drive to turn the continent’s semi-arid southwest into something more akin to the “bowling greens of urban parks” and the “heavily rolled cricket pitches of the British Empire.”

The emergent lawnscape of the golf club and the memorial park shared several commonalities, in addition to their wide-open expanses of heavily tended grass: both were created at the urban periphery, both relied on increased automobility for access and both were mono-use. The limiting of such broad areas to narrow forms of use was premised on the greater good: it was assumed these landscapes would have a regenerative effect on visitors. In the nine decades that have followed, critics of both traditional burial and golf have argued that these “dead spaces” occupy too much land and could better serve municipalities as multi-use parks or housing; but supporters of both have countered that wide green areas provide respite and solace for over-stressed city dwellers.

Urbanised nature was advanced as a curative, not just for the *anomie* that comes with living in a big city but for grief itself. Fawkner Memorial Park deployed a stanza from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “To Nature” in its brochure:

> So will I build my altar in the fields,
> And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be,
> And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields
> Shall be the incense I will yield to Thee

Across the page, a caption makes clear what kind of nature this is to be, not an enchanted forest-like surround but a broad and open meadow unencumbered by headstones:

> Where could we find a more appropriate place for a memorial than in a beautiful garden where flowers grow and birds sing: with wide spreading
lawn... and quiet shady nooks... Could we associate anything finer with the memory of a loved one?

A photograph, on the overleaf (Figure 4), shows the new turf-heavy landscaping and details options for cremation and placement in the Gardens of Remembrance, its “dignity and simplicity” presented in stark contrast to the over-the-top monumental headstones of years past. The large swathes of green are presented as areas of nature that have been extensively shaped by landscape architects for therapeutic purposes, creating a beauty and calm that will help visitors to lose their sense of grief. “The park-like nature... and use of lehmannii gums” along with the wide vistas stirs “a song in the soul and triumphant joy in the heart after every visit to the Gardens at Fawkner.” Green spaces are not just pleasant looking, they are curative. Passing through a well-landscaped cemetery will help those afflicted by grief to slowly come out healed on the other side.

Figure 4. An image from the brochure *The Fawkner Memorial Park*, 1938 (State Library Victoria).

Golf also emerged as a remedy for trauma. It is no coincidence that the great golf boom of the 1920s was led by soldiers returning home from the First World War. Programmes were developed to encourage wounded veterans and amputees to take part in the low-impact sport, and clubs helped to maintain friend networks forged during the conflict. Alex Russell, who worked with Alister MacKenzie to design and create the Royal Melbourne Golf Club’s courses, was wounded in France in 1916 when a shell exploded next to him. His enthusiasm for golf seemed to sprout from the fact that the sport was not based on war-like manoeuvres but on individual exertion in the company of fellow
leisure-seekers. The recuperative nature of the greenway brought a tamed and verdant nature within reach of city dwellers and allowed newly decommissioned servicemen to take part in convivial forms of exercise that reflected their status and gentlemanly ideals.

The pastoral imaginary of large swathes of grass, in both memorial parks and golf courses, might be seen as a response to the asphalting over of actual productive farmland. When it became impossible to reach the ‘countryside’ in a day’s journey, pastures and forests were brought to the city as simulacra. In the 1920s both land uses were designed with the middle and upper classes in mind. A costly annual membership to a ‘country’ club not only granted access to pristine fairways but also business connections; what’s more, it alluded to the inheritance and holdings of a grazier class that, while dwindling in actual political clout, was still important to the imagination of prosperity.

**Cars, Cremation and Cul-de-sacs**

Between 1921 and 1930 the rate of car ownership in Australia went from one vehicle per 45 persons to one vehicle per 11 persons, with much higher rates in Victoria and New South Wales. The 1938 brochure put out to christen Fawkner as a ‘Memorial Park’ makes sure to lead with the fact that it is just “twenty minutes’ journey by car from the [Melbourne] G.P.O.” This period marks a mainstreaming of automobility for the well-to-do, who were increasingly traversing the city on newly sealed roads (some created as Depression-Era work projects). Golf courses helped to fill in the area between nodal suburbs and their design and construction became increasingly sophisticated, as landscape architecture firms sprang up to do work that was previously supported by community volunteers. The sophisticated, industrialised lawns that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s presaged the post-World War II era when these interlocking varieties of green pastoralism – memorial parks and municipal golf – became available to all.

By the 1930s, with some clubs foundering during the Great Depression and a surfeit of labour, local councils began work on new municipal courses. In some cases, like that of Albert Park, this meant taking over ailing clubs and re-opening them as public amenities; in other cases, such as Yarra Bend, it meant building links from scratch on parkland. Here, Melbourne played a game of catch up with Sydney and cities that, by the early 1930s, already had “two or three” municipal links “to give the artisan class
the opportunity to play this popular game.”18 The ‘artisan class’ developed a fondness for golf that is, perhaps, unique to Australia and also New Zealand. Whereas in North America and other settler colonial states, like South Africa, golf is associated only with a very narrow swath of society, the popularity of the support extends well beyond the upper classes in Australia and New Zealand. The democratising of leisure that followed the Second World War has a lot to do with this. A second golf boom, this time for working- and middle-class men, had commenced before the war’s end. In December 1944, as Allied troops were closing in on Germany, an editorial in Melbourne’s Weekly Times noted that there were within the “fighting forces… vast numbers of sailors, soldiers and airmen… who have been introduced to golf during their service, and one is immediately conscious of the fact that all these will want to continue playing after demobilisation.”19

Like golf, the grassy memorial parks of the 1930s started out as relatively elite spaces. This was not based on price per se (a Dead of Cremation cost £5 in 1938, or £7 with a niche in a Garden of Remembrance,20 roughly $475 or $665 in today’s dollars21) but on taste-cultural terms. In the 1930s, all of the crematoria in Victoria were less than ten years old; and the process appealed primarily to highly educated elites interested in the ‘scientific’ and hygienic disposal of the dead. Working-class Melburnians still preferred the “marble-lined cemeteries” that the memorial park was meant to be an anecdote to. Roman Catholics were still officially barred from cremating their loved ones (this would only change with the reforms of Vatican II in the early 1960s). The memorial park designs of the time assumed that society would move towards cremation en masse, and, while the move has occurred (Australia has, at over 70%, one of the highest cremation rates in the Anglophone world) it happened over the course of decades. Memorial parks subtly shifted, retaining their wall niches and manicured lawns but also creating a variety of ’products’ for in-ground burial that would maintain the visual sweep of lawns while allowing them to accommodate extensive subterranean burial vaults.22 By the 1960s, lawn burial had been democratised and, in many new Memorial Parks like Atlona (opened in 1961) it was the only option. No headstone would rise from the surface and tributes – like plaster angels and stuffed animals – would be cleared after a set period. A sweeping green vista became the new language of memorialisation for all (Figure 5).
The Australian embrace of car culture encouraged the development of suburban housing, tracts of bungalows and ranch houses that often went up well before schools, recreation centres and other pieces of infrastructure. Ironically, the golf course came to be thought of as far more integral to the civic life of a suburban community than a cemetery; and while proximity to a golf course raises property values for individual homeowners, a cemetery (even when branded as a memorial park) was thought to lower them. Suburbs, that owe their winding roads and cul-de-sacs to the same landscape gardening impulses as rural cemeteries, turned their back on neighbouring graveyards. In the 1980s, there was even talk of turning under-maintained nineteenth-century cemeteries, like Coburg Pine Ridge, into Pioneer Memorial Parks by removing headstones and setting down sport fields. While neighbourhood groups fought back against the plan, other communities pressured councils to wall in cemeteries with opaque fencing, least the site of headstones through wrought iron rails impede the sale of their homes. Because of skyrocketing land prices, not-in-my-backyard sentiment and the rise of ‘direct cremation’, few new cemeteries were built in the last decades of the twentieth century. Those that were, focused on providing multi-functional green spaces where visitors could experience a ‘tamed’ nature, with picnic tables, large kangaroo populations and water features. This green pastoralism is presented as a primordial landscape that, although entirely non-native to the continent, is the appropriate Edenic location to remember loved ones.
From “Dead Space” to Green Infrastructure

Both cemeteries and golf courses are intensive land uses that, as cities grow, find themselves in the centre of urban areas, while their initial designs were informed by the urban periphery. Here, it’s worth briefly touching on how these large green swathes, set out between 60 and 100 years ago, have changed. Both cemeteries and golf courses have had to contend with criticisms that they lack relevance in today’s society, and ought to be repurposed. More subtly, both have had to tweak their grounds and their maintenance to accommodate new understandings of urban ecosystems and biodiversity.

In the late twentieth century, golf clubs added new buildings for restaurants, gyms and gear shops (a change mirrored, albeit far more modestly, by the basic cafés and stores that sprung up on municipal courses). In contrast, cemeteries often removed structures to make way for new burials. The logic of cemetery land use, particularly in Victoria where trusts are self-funded entities and interment rights are in perpetuity, is to use every square metre for burial, sometimes to the detriment of visitor amenities and the preservation of historic structures. Both St Kilda Cemetery and Melbourne General Cemetery, in Carlton, faced pressure to make more land available in their historic locations; both raised ornate entry gates to make room for lawn burial sections. Areas designed to be pathways and lawns were repurposed as new sections for burial, adding more hardscape to cemeteries and reducing the number of trees and permeable surfaces they provide.

Many golf courses have gone in the opposite direction, encouraging less spraying of insecticides and allowing some wooded areas to develop as more diverse habitats to serve as sites of “localised cooling” and “carbon sequestration” in warming cities.24 The framing of these areas as spaces for biodiversity is indicative of the rise of ‘urban greening’ as both a set of planning practices and as a buzzword within the suite of social responsibility terminology that has grown exponentially in corporate and not-for-profit spheres. Ironically, one of the reasons that golf clubs provide sanctuary for plant and animal life is because of their relative exclusivity: limited use means limited disturbance. But the dwindling number of golfers has also led some to label their land as ‘dead space’. In the last two decades, golf clubs shed over 23% of their members. Those who still play are nearly 80% male, of Anglo-Australian origin, and getting on in their years; in 2019, 71% of Victorian golfers were over 50 years old,25 an increase of twofold since the turn of the millennium. While the most prestigious of Sandbelt
courses will surely remain, some municipal courses have already been converted to other uses, such as the Elsternwick Park Golf Club, which was transformed into a nature reserve in 2020.

In conclusion, taking the development of golf clubs and memorial parks together helps us to understand the competing needs of leisure and memorialisation in the mid-century city and the reliance of both land uses on a pastoral imaginary imported from the United Kingdom to Australia. In both cases, green swaths of land were supported by hidden-in-plain-sight infrastructural systems that required huge outlays of money and maintenance to keep running. The manicured environments provided by memorial parks and golf links presaged the suburban lawn boom of the post-war era but, like the lawn, have been re-evaluated from the perspective of urban ecology and, in recent years, have had to prove themselves as spaces worthy of retaining.

Endnotes

1 The Fawkner Memorial Park (Melbourne: Ruskin Press, 1938).
5 This is the case in most countries but not all; some countries, such as Germany, still require that cremated remains be interred in a cemetery. In Victoria and Western Australia, almost all cremations happen in facilities run by cemetery trusts, on the grounds of cemeteries. In New South Wales and South Australia, private cremation is allowed and crematoria can be found outside of cemeteries, often in nondescript buildings in light industrial areas.
7 “More and More Golf,” Herald (Melbourne), 7 September 1925, 6.
12 Schama, Landscape and Memory, 573
13 Many mid-century memorial parks went back on this, establishing separate areas for monumental headstones, often from Italian, Chinese and Vietnamese communities, that wanted larger headstones and not in-ground plaques.
18 “Municipal Golf Courses,” Referee (Sydney), 12 April 1934, 18.
20 The Fawkner Memorial Park, 10.
22 Burial vaults, concrete berms and other grave-filling techniques helped to keep the visual integrity of burial spaces, allowing them to maintain smooth, grassy surfaces as graves settled below; but many of these techniques add concrete to the ground, enlarging the environmental footprint of earth burial.