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The Institution of Perpetual Memory: The Typology of the Cemetery and the Generative Potential of Renewable Tenure

Landscapes constructed to honour the memory of the dead contain some of the most enduring edifices across cultures. Monuments and commemoration practices in Australia and New Zealand derive from the practices of Western Europe, particularly the cemetery reforms of eighteenth-century Paris. Such reforms responded to a growing distaste for the spectacle of death that had resulted from burial places being located in crowded cities. This growing social revulsion, strengthened by the fear of contagion resulting from plague, led to the establishment of cemeteries that were built to perpetuate the memory of the dead. These new cemeteries consisted of permanent mausoleums and graves, often initially laid out in gardens and park-like surrounds.

This typology, initiated in Paris and then emulated in Britain and its colonies, has been modified over successive generations, particularly as municipal authorities inherited the management of neglected cemeteries, and looked for ways to navigate complex issues of cemetery decline. A recent agent of change to the cemetery typology is the implementation of renewable tenure in some Australian cemeteries.

Renewable tenure, which effectively involves recycling gravesites, has been a response to the looming crisis of burial space that is affecting many cities. While grave re-use was a necessary occurrence in pre-industrial burial grounds (bodies were buried long enough for decomposition and bones were then removed to charnel houses), its reappearance in the context of the contemporary cemetery signifies an important ideological shift within the dominant cemetery typology. This shift is characterised by movement away from the primacy of the notions of perpetuity, the individual grave and the monument, and movement towards new practices and forms within the cemetery that reflect the inevitable effects of decomposition and decay upon the body.

This research explores the implications of this shift upon the institution of the cemetery in Sydney. It concludes that renewable tenure, while likely to remain a controversial practice, generates an ideological basis for new spatial expressions of the cemetery to emerge within the contemporary metropolis.

Sydney's burial space is at a crisis point, as capacities are reached in many of the city's large, public cemeteries. Prolonging the life of these cemeteries has become a subject of intense public interest, as reflected in a series of recent Government discussion papers, parliamentary inquiries and, more recently, changes to legislation regarding the management of cemeteries and crematoria in New South Wales (NSW).¹ In particular, renewable tenure,² essentially the recycling of gravesites, has received a significant amount of attention as a possible means to increase the long-term sustainability of cemeteries without requiring the acquisition of new lands. While this discourse represents a positive step towards the resolution of the burial space issues in Sydney, the emphasis so far has been on acquiring more space to accommodate burials through management processes such as intensification of cemetery use, encouragement of alternative burial practices and acquiring land for the development of new cemeteries. Meanwhile, the underlying historical, spatial and institutional origins of the burial space crisis in Sydney have yet to be fully explored within the literature. As such it currently remains difficult to ascertain whether renewable tenure offers a long-term solution to the burial space crisis, or whether it merely prolongs the inevitable demise of the cemetery as a typological form.

To address these questions, this research presents an investigation into the potential effects of renewable tenure upon the institution of the cemetery. Here, the recent introduction of renewable tenure is presented as a type of provocation that may change the role and function of the cemetery within Australian cities. The discussion around the potential metamorphosis of the cemetery has been organised in three parts. The first part of this paper traces the historical origins of the cemetery institution within the European tradition, followed by the later evolution of its typological form within the Australian context. The second provides a new perspective of the current burial crisis in Sydney, by positioning it as a symptom of broader structural challenges facing the nineteenth-century cemetery institution in Australia today. The final part of this paper proposes that renewable tenure is a destabilising and as such, a potentially generative idea, in relation to the cemetery institution. These relational ideas of destabilisation/generation are framed through a discussion of renewable tenure's impacts upon three traditional cemetery ideals: perpetuity, the individual grave and the monument.

The cemetery as an institution

Monuments and landscapes built to honour the memory of the dead are some of the most enduring edifices across cultures. Cemeteries and commemoration practices in Australia and New Zealand derive most strongly from the practices of Western Europe, particularly the cemetery reforms of late eighteenth-century Paris, which then had a significant influence on the development of nineteenth-century cemeteries in England. This led to the development of a recognisable typology that was then spread throughout British colonial settlements.

These cemetery reforms, which contributed to the form and layout of many Victorian cemeteries that are still in evidence today, had emerged in part from a growing distaste for the spectacle of death and decomposition that had resulted from centuries-old burial

places being located in crowded cities. The incorporation of burial grounds in the centre of cities had been the custom in Europe from the third century, when Christian practices overtook the ancient Roman traditions of physically and legally separating the worlds of the living and the dead.³ Whereas Roman burial was required to be outside the city walls, and often involved a structure or “home” where the dead could reside, Christian burial was not so concerned with the visitation of the living to the grave, but more with care of the body until Judgment Day. Bodies were frequently buried just long enough for decomposition and bones were then removed to charnel houses, enabling the re-use of the ground for further burial.⁴ By the late eighteenth century, this situation had led to concerns about the unsanitary nature of burial places in the city.⁵ A growing revulsion, strengthened by the fear of contagion resulting from plague, led to a reassertion of the separation of the worlds of the living and the dead that had been enforced by law and custom in Roman times.⁶ Cemetery reform was initiated in Paris by a law that closed all of the burial grounds within the city walls. The physical remains of over six million Parisians were disinterred and then reinterred in catacombs, which were ancient stone and gypsum mines dug under the city.⁷

This in turn led to the establishment of cemeteries that were located outside the city boundaries, built to perpetuate the memory of the dead in permanent mausoleums and graves and laid out in gardens and park-like surrounds. One of the most famous of these, the cemetery of Père-Lachaise, was established in 1804 and included an innovation that influenced subsequent cemetery development. This was the first time that a grave could be purchased as a piece of property in perpetuity.⁸ Families could purchase a plot in perpetuity, and also pay for “perpetual upkeep” of the grave. This innovation has also been linked to the dwindling of collective belief in an afterlife. As religious ideas were increasingly challenged, the idea of perpetual life lost its power. Instead the dead were to be kept alive in the memory of the living, and the grave monument, maintained in perpetuity, was a feature of this memory apparatus.

This model was followed in England with the establishment of some very influential cemeteries in London such as Kensal Green (1833), Highgate (1839) and Brompton (1840).⁹ Started as very lucrative enterprises, these businesses foundered when cemeteries were

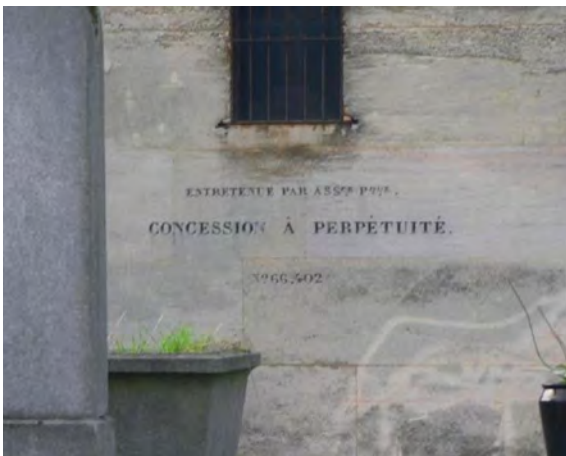


Fig. 1 The status of the grave property in perpetuity is carved on the rear of a mausoleum in Père Lachaise. Photograph by Katrina Simon 2014.

full and could no longer take more burials. At this point the money invested for perpetual upkeep was found to be inadequate, and with the businesses collapsing, the cemeteries were then passed into the care of the local municipal authorities. The prevailing attitude to the permanence of the grave was also a factor that was instrumental in the closure and demise of these “successful” cemeteries as they “became in turn as densely packed as the urban centres from which they had been removed: gardens of death became cities of the dead.”¹⁰

These typologies, initiated in Paris and then emulated in Britain and its colonies, have been gradually modified over successive generations where they have been influenced by local conditions and changing social patterns. This is the case in Sydney, where cemeteries have evolved from the extramural pleasure grounds established during the late nineteenth century, to a culturally diverse group of landscapes that have been increasingly absorbed by urban sprawl. The emergence and evolution of the cemetery typology in Sydney, and its distinction from the earlier church burial ground type, will now be traced.

The cemetery in Sydney

The history of the cemetery in the city of Sydney¹¹ is primarily one of expansion. Sydney's earliest burial grounds tended to consist of small, *ad hoc* and functional landscapes located adjacent to the church parish or on private property. Many were established to service the farming communities on the fertile floodplains of the Hawkesbury River or the Cumberland Plain. Others, such as the Old Sydney Burial Ground (1792) and St John's Cemetery at Parramatta (1791), were found near primary maritime transportation routes such as those in Sydney Harbour and on the Parramatta River. Early burial landscapes in Sydney were relatively small, often less than eight acres in size and simply laid out at least one mile from settlements.¹² Their design characteristics tended to be based on traditions inherited from English parish and church graveyards where graves were arranged according to Christian burial traditions, perpetual burial was favoured and the use of monuments ranged from elaborate to non-existent.¹³ However, as historian Lisa Murray points out, the practice of burying bodies in extramural, interdenominational grounds, rather than in close proximity to the city and church, was rapidly adopted by the colonists.¹⁴

As the population of Sydney grew, many of the early burial grounds became overcrowded and neglected spectacles within the urban setting. The horror of collapsing burial sites, wild animals foraging amongst the graves and putrefying remains in open pits, became a cause for social concern with many of the colony's elite choosing to bury their dead on their private lands.¹⁵ Calls for the reformation of burial grounds in Sydney culminated in 1847, with the passing of the General Cemetery Act. This legislation enacted a formal set of criteria for the establishment and design of cemeteries in the settlement, including the requirement for cemeteries to be located on well-drained soils, in proximity to running water (but sufficiently above the water table), to have sufficient room for future expansion and to be designed in a generally rational and organised manner.¹⁶ Nevertheless, a series of parliamentary enquiries about the state of Sydney's cemeteries held in 1855, 1866, 1881 and 1888, demonstrated

that social concerns about the state of cemeteries in Sydney continued throughout the later part of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

By the 1860s, the General Cemetery had taken over as the dominant typology in Sydney. The city's growing system of railways meant that cemeteries such as the vast Rookwood Necropolis (1867) could be located at a greater distance from residential populations but still be accessible within a day's travel.¹⁸ Although there were necessary variations between different landscapes, this new "rural cemetery" typology was generally characterised by elaborate funerary architecture, distance from the city centre, compartmentalisation of graves and a large area compared to previous burial grounds (Figure 2).¹⁹



Fig. 2 Ornate graves and architecture at Sydney's Rookwood Cemetery. Photograph by J. Bar, 2007, 2007, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ARookwood_Cemetery_3.JPG.

In the years from 1941 to 1975, many of the General Cemeteries started to reach their burial capacities once again. The increasingly diverse and growing population of post-war Australia created an urgent need for cemeteries to expand and adapt to provide adequate burial space for the community. As cremation became more popular, crematoria and columbaria



Fig. 3 Lawn cemeteries reflecting the minimal post-war aesthetic of commemorating the dead. Photograph by Emma Sheppard-Simms, 2011.

were added to the cemetery landscapes, and lawn cemeteries characterised by minimal grave architecture became common.

This move to a new type of minimal memorialisation has been linked by some commentators to a social desire to minimise the emotional impacts of the mass deaths of the two world wars (Figure 3),²⁰ although the ease of maintenance associated with this style was also an important driver of its popularity. The growth in migrant communities in Australia after the Second World War also influenced the changing form of the urban cemetery, as migrants from southern Europe and Asia brought their specific burial traditions with them.²¹ In particular, the construction of columbaria and vaults became more common in Sydney cemeteries during the post-war period.

The contemporary burial crisis

Today the majority of Sydney's cemeteries have become enmeshed within the urban fabric; no longer the separated, spacious landscapes of yesteryear, but overcrowded landscapes that are coming into increasing conflict with surrounding urban land uses (Figure 4).²² One of the primary areas of concern has been the availability of burial space for Sydney's growing, and ageing, population. If current usage and demographic trends continue, it is predicated that Sydney will require 245,000 new burial spaces by 2020²³ and will entirely exhaust its currently available burial spaces by the year 2050.²⁴ Furthermore, these burial space needs are spread unevenly throughout different geographical and cultural contexts.²⁵



Fig. 4 Competing land uses in an adjacent cemetery and market garden at Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park, Sydney. Photograph by Emma Sheppard-Simms, 2011.

In part, the scarcity of burial space has been due to the scant attention given to cemeteries within urban planning contexts over the past century, particularly in comparison to other land uses such as residential and commercial development.²⁶ Further compounding the situation, many communities continue to resist the development of cemeteries in close proximity to residential neighbourhoods.

In their study of proposed cemetery developments in the western suburbs of Sydney, Bennett and Davies contend that

local opposition to new cemetery projects is inevitable, irrespective of demand (current and future) and regional planning intentions. Local community priorities seem vested in the status quo, particularly for this land use.²⁷

So, while Sydney desperately needs more affordable and accessible burial spaces, the paradox is that many communities do not want these cemeteries located near them. In this context, the future location, design and use of urban cemeteries in Sydney will be dependent on how they are perceived and valued by the communities that use them. Ultimately, Sydney's "burial space crisis" is not only a question of space, but of social and cultural perceptions of space. As such, attempts to address the burial issue not only require the provision of more space, but a reconceptualisation of the cemetery as an integral and important part of the social and cultural life of the city. The following discussion evaluates the potential of renewable tenure to begin this process of reconceptualisation, by challenging the concepts of stasis and separation that have characterised the cemetery institution thus far.

The re-emergence of renewable tenure

While the problems posed by limited burial space are common in many cemeteries throughout the world, the means of addressing this issue varies considerably between countries. From burial skyscrapers in Brazil, to floating cemetery islands in Venice, "green burial" landscapes in Tasmania and the placeless virtual cemeteries springing up in cyberspace, the emphasis has often been on providing more space for burial and memorialisation, rather than reusing existing cemetery space. While countries such as Italy, Belgium and Germany have traditionally recycled graves as the preferred method of managing limited burial spaces, within New South Wales (NSW) the practice had not been generally used until the passing of the NSW Cemeteries and Crematoria Act of 2013.²⁸ This landmark bill introduced a new series of regulations governing the practice of renewable tenure in NSW, including imposing minimum (25 years) and maximum (99 years) periods of tenure, determining the processes for returning tenure to cemetery management, placing limits on the retrospective practice of renewable tenure and developing a code of practice for its future application.²⁹

Under the new statutory framework, renewable tenure in NSW involves the removal of skeletal remains from a gravesite after a set time has elapsed, commonly 25 to 50 years, followed by reuse of the gravesite. Upon expiry of tenure, one of three things might happen to the gravesite and remains. Firstly, if the relatives decide to refinance the original tenure, the grave remains in its current form. A secondary option involves a process known as "lift and deepen," where the remains are disinterred and collected within a smaller receptacle, then placed back at a greater depth within the original grave. A third option occurs when the relatives do not renew the grave tenure. Following disinterment, remains could be relocated to ossuary landscapes, communal graves or cremated and returned to the relatives as ashes.³⁰ Grave monuments would also need to be relocated according to advice provided in consultation with heritage experts.³¹

Despite the promotion of renewable tenure as a solution to Sydney's burial space issues, community opposition to the practice remains widespread.³² There has been particular

concern that renewable tenure would make burial prohibitively expensive for the economically disadvantaged,³³ mainly by extending the costs of burial to future generations. Beyond economic concerns, research on the challenges of planning for future cemeteries in Britain reveals that any proposed changes to burial, funerary and mourning practices tend to be contentious.³⁴ From this perspective, renewable tenure may simply encounter resistance because it is different to the now familiar traditions, practices and forms of the nineteenth-century cemetery landscape. Given that renewable tenure in Australia is seen as a necessity, regardless of community concerns, it becomes important to discuss the ways in which it impacts on the way we see, use and regard the cemetery within the broader urban context. Here, three dimensions of change will be discussed: the impact of renewable tenure on ideas of perpetuity, the importance of the individual grave and the architecture of memory as located in the memorial.

Perpetuity

Perpetuity implies that the cemetery is a place apart: strange, magical and somehow immune to the temporal changes that characterise other places of the living. The condition of perpetuity has tended to emphasise social perception of the cemetery as a timeless place requiring preservation. Here, the cemetery with its abandoned and weathered graves may be seen as one of Alex Wall's landscapes of "pastoral innocence,"³⁵ its passivity and stasis cemented in both tradition and law. In perpetual burial, the memory of the individual is firstly inscribed upon the landscape in the act of burial, initiating a process whereby place and person become inseparable in the dissolution of the body into the earth over time. The permanence of this relationship is symbolically represented within the grave memorial, made of durable materials such as concrete, stone and metal to form the shrine and place of pilgrimage for the living. In contrast, the introduction of renewable tenure fundamentally changes the established relationship between the body and the gravesite, disrupting the perception of stasis and reframing the cemetery landscape as an active (and potentially threatening) place.

The future removal and consolidation of human remains foregrounds the concepts of decay, loss of integrity and bodily dissolution over time. Renewable tenure involves exposing, collecting and relocating the bones. The unity of the skeleton, as a reminder of the living body, is disturbed as bones are stored in consolidated form, or are cremated. While this loss of integrity also happens underground following perpetual burial, renewable tenure draws specific attention to the condition of decay by disinterring the corpse, according to Kristeva, "the utmost of abjection."³⁶ Thus renewable tenure instigates an important shift in the conceptualisation of what happens to the body after death – from the certainty offered by the perpetual fusion of site and person, to an exposure of the ultimate fragility and impermanence of the human body set against the relentless passage of time.

As such, the removal of the remains from the grave indicates that memory is only temporarily located in the landscape, and subsequently, that memory is only located in the landscape as part of the perceptions of the living. The moment of removal of the body from the earth

thus signifies an important moment of possibility; a type of Benjaminian “lightning flash,” where previous associations between landscape, history and memory are broken apart in an opening up of possibilities.³⁷ As such, the effect of disturbing the buried corpse is in fact a powerfully symbolic moment that challenges the notions of control – of the body, of time and of death – that form the foundations of the nineteenth-century cemetery institution.

The individual grave

Renewable tenure also draws into question the tightly controlled spatial arrangements that characterise the cemetery and its place within the broader urban realm. When the individual grave is removed, a gap in the grid is created. Certainly the cemetery is filled with such ‘gaps’ in the grid, the result of people failing to take up purchased plots, the natural overgrowth of vegetation or the removal of monuments for a variety of reasons. However this gap is different. Because it is the result of exhumation, it is filled with residual memory relating to its previous occupant, the absence of the body and the opening up of possibilities regarding its future use. Even if another body and an identical memorial is later inserted into the gravesite, the act of momentarily disturbing the grid in this manner represents a powerful gesture that is suggestive of an array of possible futures that lie outside of the scope of the grid.

This is significant when considered in relation to the ways in which the design of the nineteenth-century cemetery became a representation, as well as a reinforcing feature of, certain scientific and rationalist ideals concerning death, decay and the body following the Enlightenment.³⁸ Within an ideological context, the perpetual grave becomes the material displacement of anxiety about our own mortality. According to sociologist Peter Johnson, in the cemetery as conceived by nineteenth-century landscape architect J. C. Loudon, control is enacted via the spatial techniques of segregation, compartmentalisation and the positioning of the individual grave within a grid; features which enable institutional surveillance and control of disorder and death.³⁹ Renewable tenure disturbs this spatial order by disturbing this system and introducing a sense of temporal uncertainty within the cemetery. However it is not so much the corpse that disturbs us, but the realisation that the corpse, in its ambiguity, lies beyond this system of order. As Julia Kristeva has said,

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life ... It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.⁴⁰

So while the corpse is ambiguous in its quality of being simultaneously human/not human, and reminding us of what we are/will become; the relationship between the body and the gravesite is also rendered ambiguous via the spectre of the communal grave. One of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century cemetery reform was to make individual burial available to a broader section of the population than it had been previously, limiting the use of communal graves in public cemeteries to all but the poorest of society. Yet, arguably, the threat of the

communal or mass grave still haunts the collective imagination and this is potentially one of the reasons that renewable tenure has been so stridently resisted. In the case of renewable tenure, the ideal of the individual grave with its attendant notions of purity, sanctity and individuality is fundamentally disturbed by the insertion of another body and potentially *many* bodies over time. Here the additional body(ies) can be likened to a type of contamination or 'dirt' that threatens the cohesiveness of the individual subject,⁴¹ where, the threat of other bodies is also the threat of the formless non-body and attendant loss of agency, as found in death.

The monument

Grave monuments, like institutional memorials, might be thought of what Pierre Nora has called *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), or places where memory "crystallizes and secretes itself" as part of the ongoing construction of history.⁴² Here, the grave as a site of memory comes into being through the performative rituals of burial: the funeral rites, the lowering of the body into the grave and insertion of the grave monument. The political and social function of memorials as sites that both reinforce, and demonstrate resistance to, social institutions has been well discussed in recent years. However, as much as memorials are sites of creation, they may also be seen as sites of omission. For example, John Stephens has written of the function of war memorials in Australia as sites of "collective amnesia," or as places where we are encouraged to embrace and celebrate certain historical stories and to forget others.⁴³ While the gravesite presents a different context to war memorials, they can be seen as similar in that they reinforce certain ideological messages concerning death, the body and the role of the landscape. From this point of view, the grave monument not only commemorates the individual and (certain aspects of) their life, but also reflects the broader human desire to immortalise identity within a fixed, localised place, and to forget our own insignificance in relation to time and the landscape. The removal of grave monuments as part of the process of renewable tenure not only disrupts the permanence of memory, it also destabilises history as it has been constructed. Once again, this becomes a moment of knowledge where *what is not-there* is suddenly revealed. At the same time, this momentary disruption in the institutional framework of the cemetery institution reveals the possibility for alternative expressions of the memorial within the cemetery landscape.

As much as the (grave) memorial may represent various facets of institutional power, it may also function as an important site of resistance. This potential for creative resistance is reflected in research that has considered the meaning of alternative or spontaneous sites of commemoration, places that SueAnne Ware refers to as "anti-memorials."⁴⁴ These are found in sites that arise formally or informally such as roadside memorials⁴⁵, vernacular memorials and shrines of memory⁴⁶, virtual memorials⁴⁷ and what Maria Tumarkin refers to as "traumascape" or "concrete, material sites, marked by the recurrence of pain, loss and violence, and constituted through the experienced and imagined repetition of trauma."⁴⁸ While these studies describe diverse types of experiences and forms, what many of the sites in question have in common is their capacity to draw attention to what is missing or absent in traditional expressions of death. As Ware writes, "Anti-memorials critique the

illusion that the permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of the idea that it commemorates.⁴⁹ It is this loss of permanence implied by renewable tenure that both challenges and opens up the institution of the cemetery to new possibilities.

Conclusion

The burial space crisis in Sydney has recently led to a resurgence in public debates around the question of cemetery design, planning and management. Recent legislative changes concerning renewable tenure in NSW cemeteries represent a significant step away from static and controlled ideals of cemetery space, towards the implementation of sustainable modes of planning and designing the cemetery landscape. Despite these moves, community resistance to changes in traditional cemetery expression is likely to continue.

It is apparent that the burial space crisis is not only a question of space, but also a question of the relevance of the traditional cemetery institution within densely populated cities like Sydney that are experiencing shortages of land. Specifically, the cultural importance ascribed to the notions of grave perpetuity, the importance of individual graves and the permanency of the monument has been contradicted by a failure of the state to provide sufficient urban space or long-term planning for cemeteries that have upheld such ideals. Here, the lack of available space for new burials may be seen as a symptom of a widening ideological gap between the representation of the cemetery on one hand as a peaceful, static place that remains separate from the city and, on the other, the temporal, abject and disturbing qualities of death that eventually impact upon us all. Yet it is precisely because of the necessity for change brought about by the burial crisis that new, sustainable expressions of the cemetery landscape may find room to emerge. By firstly seeing renewable tenure as a type of catalyst that disturbs and disrupts the status quo, it also becomes possible to see how new forms of design, planning and management of cemeteries in Sydney could find room to emerge within the ongoing evolution of the cemetery institution.

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