Interpreting Cemeteries: It's Not a Dead-End Job!

Reading the Landscape of New South Wales, Australia

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We all understand cemeteries to be the spaces where we lay to rest our dead, whether that's through burial, the scattering of ashes, or the marking of memories in a way pertinent to oneself. In a physical sense, we recognize that cemeteries record the names of our ancestors and, to a limited extent, the lives of the deceased. Researchers are fortunate if headstones have stood the test of time and inscriptions are legible. Paths and boundary walls serve functional needs, benches provide spots for rest and relaxation, vegetation offers an aesthetic beauty, and there's habitat for wildlife, not to mention trees that provide shade on a sunny day. But what else is there apart from the obvious physical and functional elements?

The interpretive approach reveals that graves *matter*. It is a not just a matter of matter—the dust, dirt, stones, grass, leaves, or moss—but the matter of place. Cemeteries are places of landscape and meaning, where we aim to reveal these often hidden meanings and bring places to life through unforgettable experiences. Yet, that meaning is not held within the cemetery, but within the individual, and extracted through the act of interpretation. It's about telling the cemetery's tale and reading the landscape, but also about interpreting that one last taboo, death.

Cemeteries include both tangible and intangible heritage. The visual immediacy of tangible heritage is appealing and easy to interpret because we can see it before us; we

code that enabled the community to differentiate individuals. However, in choosing to mow the lawn one day, the council greens-man decided that it would be easier to mow an open area and thus removed all the pegs. This simple act caused great distress to the Aboriginal community, with expressions of "We've lost everyone, we've lost our people." While the scenario may have been more about the council's inability to communicate with its staff, from the local Aboriginal community's perspective, it brought up old wounds of cultural desecration and dispossession by non-indigenous people. The values and cultural identity that the Aboriginal community imbued in this place were intensely personal—a tapestry of meaningful cultural nuances. Yet for another person, the burial site looked insignificant. Meetings with the local indigenous community explored the possibility of using ground penetrating radar to find graves, and drawing on local oral history and memories to retell the story of the burial ground. By reaffirming identity through a personal approach, it was possible to help heal some wounds.

Cemeteries have an extraordinary ability to reveal not only how people died but how they lived. Not only is Australia's progress and social history reflected through epitaphs, but its history is charted within the vegetation, the cemetery layout, the materials used, monument design and the use of symbolism. In the Australian context, the word *cemetery* refers to a defined cultural landscape, laid out in a formal or informal design with paths, driveways, denominational sections, plantings, and buildings. The term also refers to a churchyard, family cemeteries, or a lone grave on a rural property.

However, there are also sites where no headstones are present; the bodies lie *in situ*, but all above-ground markers have long gone, lost to weathering, vandalism, fire, or livestock damage. Accordingly, in these circumstances, it is vital for cemetery interpreters to be able to "read" the landscape and determine

know it's there—for example, a row of graves or a magnificently carved grave monument. Yet the cemetery's intangible heritage is more complex, taking shape as invisible meanings and values attributed by people. These values do not exist out there on their own; more precisely, they exist because we create them and attribute a personal meaning. Accordingly, the tangible heritage of the cemetery only becomes important because we, as

humans give it worth. Thus for the cemetery interpreter, the notion of intangible heritage is critical.

To demonstrate, in New South Wales, Australia, one Aboriginal community's burial ground presented as a flat grassed area. Each burial was marked by a small wooden peg—no name, no formal layout, no vegetation, no paths. There is just a grassed area with a handful of simple pegs, each marked discreetly with a

stories through burial patterns and remnants of human activity.

In southern New South Wales, Australia, our team was led to what the landowner believed to be a lone grave; a few pieces of hewn stone on the top of a rise. Burials on hills are not uncommon; it's the perfect location with commanding views over the deceased's property. The suggestion of a grave was also supported by two nearby trees, both exotic species. Rather than being left over from clearing paddocks of native vegetation for grazing, the trees had probably been planted as grave markers. What was unusual, however, was that we were told that this was the lone grave of a shepherd who had worked the property in the 1860s. This didn't seem to fit, as such a commanding position would undoubtedly have been reserved for the landowner. As burial patterns tend to reflect family associations, it was unlikely that the landowner would be buried in the same cemetery as their worker. Knowing that family graves were commonly laid out in a diamond pattern, we looked for any signs of other burials on the ground and discovered another three sunken graves which formed the diamond pattern - no headstones, but clear indicators that other burials


Broken hewn stone close up.

were likely to be present. It wasn't a complete story, but our exploration of the landscape formed the basis for further interpretive research and taught us a valuable lesson about not relying on information provided, but using our own interpretive skills.

Similarly, burial patterns can reveal the intentions of the family at the time of burial. On country properties, where a grave is located in the center of a fenced area, it is assumed that the family only ever intended one burial. Where the grave was located in the corner, it was likely that the family intended to use the cemetery for future generations. The large size of Australia meant that it could be a long time before a minister of religion was close enough to consecrate land, so it was only sensible to allow for future burials. In visiting the grave of a seven-year-old boy, we found a headstone in the corner of a large fenced area. An abandoned homestead lay within sight of the grave and as the cemetery appeared to be devoid of other burials, we wondered if the death of the child had been too much to bear and whether they had left the land soon afterwards.

Most importantly, the skill and responsibility of the cemetery interpreter lies in determining when meaning is not self evident. A

challenge arose recently when working on a disused Jewish cemetery with almost no known community interest beyond the immediate stakeholders of the client, the local Rabbi and the funders—a common problem for the interpretation of old cemeteries. Often there are no living memories, community interest has waned, and the cemetery has fallen into disrepair, but because it continues to be a sacred place for the dead, the cemetery remains untouched from development. Interpreters are then charged with the role of re-igniting community interest and developing interpretation that does not impact the cemetery's visual amenity or historical significance.

In this case, the progressive decline in numbers of the Orthodox Jewish community and the struggle of the few surviving members of the local Hebrew congregation to maintain the cemetery meant that freehold had been transferred to a new national charity whose aims were to develop a long-term strategy of future management and audience development as an enduring symbol of the Jewish community; a community that once thrived, yet now amounted to six very old individuals. The burial ground of approximately 140 burials is hidden behind very high
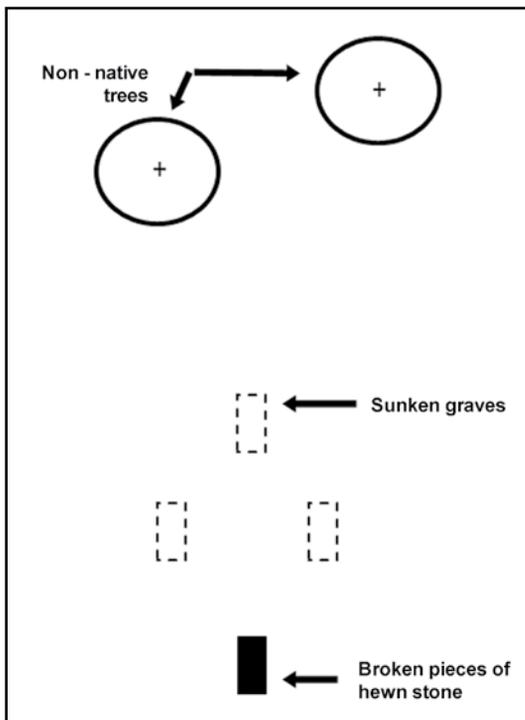
A layout of the cemetery shows a diamond pattern and exotic trees.
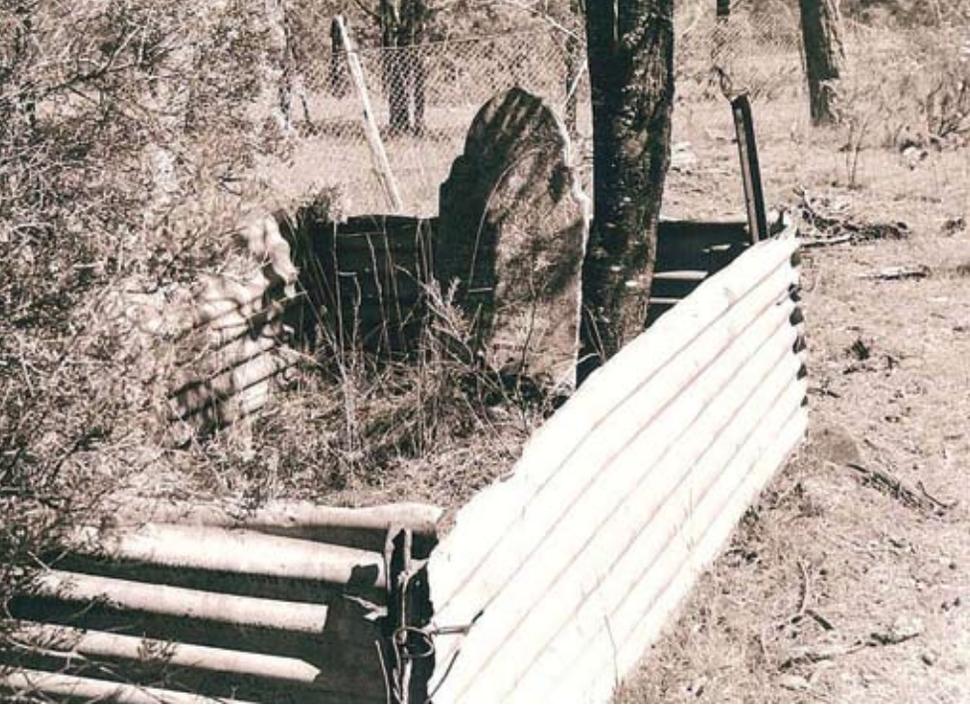
The headstone and grave of a seven-year-old boy.

of reference, we were then able to make recommendations that were befitting to the site's Grade II listing, its future use and potential audience development. There are always stories to tell. It's just a matter of finding them.

Cemetery interpretation can be rewarding. Cemeteries speak their own language, a language of death that can say much about life to the interpreter who is able to translate it. As complex landscapes of tangible and intangible values, cemeteries reveal a hidden, often forgotten source of history. The quirks, commonalities, and stories they divulge enable the community to create meaning in association with their own lives. Cemeteries offer anything but a simple translation of history; indeed they offer an opportunity to develop a dialogue with the past and offer a window into the exploration of identity, belonging, and social and individual well being.

For More Information

Barthes, Roland. 2009 Mythologies. London: Vintage Books (Random House).

Hein, G. E. 1991. "Constructivist Learning Theory" [online] Exploratorium: Institute for Inquiry. Available from <http://www.exploratorium.edu/ifi/resources/constructivistlearning> [5 April 2012]

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walls that enclose the entire site. So hidden in fact is the cemetery, that the city council's conservation team only rediscovered it in 2005, five years after the last burial. The cemetery had also fallen out of favor with the Orthodox Jewish community since the designation of a Jewish section in the municipal cemetery in 1965.

So how do you start to create meanings for a place when no one much seems to care? How do you make the essence of the burial ground tangible? We chose to focus on its history and to build a story around a social construction of the past, addressing the intangible values and their cultural associations of old and new audiences. Or more poetically,

we served to deal "with the goodness of wine, not with the wine itself," to borrow a phrase from anthropologist and philosopher Roland Barthes.

So, our story began to take shape, revealing tales of Jewish immigration into the UK, generous acts of philanthropy, and a case of grave-robbing by two colliery workers. There were stories of "shadowy figures in dark clothing through the gates" and all that "seemed rather mysterious," not to mention the practice of Jewish faith and law in the local area, the survival of Jewish people from persecution, and the cultural richness of a community and of coal mining of northern England amongst many other interpretations. From this point