Revitalizing Cemeteries: Interventions for American’s Aging Urban Burial Places

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by

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Abstract

Urban American cemeteries encounter several problems as they age. While these problems vary by place, there are some emergent general trends. Among these, two prominent challenges concerning contemporary cemetery corporations are their ability to maintain their sites’ physical appearance and safety and their ability to engage and manage relationships with visitors and the surrounding community.

“Revitalizing Cemeteries: Interventions for American’s Aging Urban Burial Places” employs a series of semi-structured interviews with cemetery managers, operators, board members, academics, historians, and other death-industry related professionals to address three questions: What are the main challenges facing urban cemeteries in America now and in the near future? Are there replicable models to address these problems? What technical, programmatic, and policy interventions have been implemented that have positive or promising results that can be used or adopted at other sites?

The researcher identified many interventions that have been attempted, with varying degrees of success, in cemeteries in the United States and the United Kingdom. There are a variety of strategies – such as alternative interment options, accessibility accommodations, nature conservation and educational program offerings, recreational activities, regulatory amendments, investment reforms, and grave use policies – that cemeteries have implemented or could apply to address their evolving needs and become more functional assets for their communities.
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I. Aging Urban American Cemeteries: A Primer

Current American planning practices and policies create a distinct spatial barrier between the living and the dead. Though there are several causes of this, the outcome is that spaces that enclose and commemorate the dead are often underutilized by local residents and are disconnected from the cities and communities in which they are located.

The inevitability of death has not translated into good planning for its eventuality. Current cemetery capacity estimates are vague at best, and Americans’ shifting body disposal preferences thwart experts’ ability to accurately predict demand. Cemeteries are loosely regulated across federal, state, and local governments and no centralized census of available interment space exists (Biegelsen 2012). Diminishing grave capacity and high real estate values have increased the cost of burial in cities. For many New York City residents, the price of an in-city burial is out of reach. More than 50,000 people die annually in the city, but “two-thirds of those who choose earthen burial are now interred outside the five boroughs” (Wallace 2016). Even if the cost of a local burial was not prohibitive, the available burial space cannot always accommodate current or future demand under the current policy framework.

American cemetery practices are based on the burial “in perpetuity” model, in which a cemetery agrees to leave the decedent’s body interred and maintain the gravesites and grounds indefinitely. The implications of this approach will be explored in more detail below, but one obvious problem with this model should be stated up front: a cemetery encompasses a finite amount of land; once its lots are sold, a major source of its revenue (burial lot sales) disappears. This undermines the financial viability of the enterprise and strains cemeteries’ ability to operate.

Cemeteries that reach capacity tend to fall into disuse and disrepair. The burial in perpetuity model hinges on cemetery administrators managing funds properly and investing a portion of lot sales in a perpetual care fund to cover ongoing maintenance costs. However, these funds are not always managed well and without additional sources of revenue cemeteries often find themselves in a financially precarious position.
Two broad problems routinely encountered by aging cemeteries were identified through stakeholder interviews; as cemeteries age, it is increasingly difficult to (1) maintain their physical appearance and safety and (2) engage and manage relationships with visitors and nearby residents. Well-resourced cemetery administrators and staff can sometimes get ahead of these challenges. Some forward-thinking cemeteries, both in the United States and abroad, have expanded their services as their available burial space diminishes. These strategies will be outlined in more detail below.

This thesis will expand on some of the key historical justifications for contemporary American cemetery practices and some of the policies that perpetuate them. This history and policy overview is not intended to be comprehensive and readers primarily interested in this facet of cemetery planning would do well to consult other texts, such as Percival Jackson’s *The Law of Cadavers and of Burial and Burial Places* (1950). Though this paper will provide adequate contextual information about the evolving cemetery landscape in America, the aim of this work is not to assess or predict burial space needs or determine the causes of shifting burial preferences. Rather, this thesis examines the difficulties older urban cemeteries face as they approach or reach burial capacity, evaluate the relationship between these spaces and urban residents and visitors, and suggest interventions that could help cemeteries maintain or increase their relevance for these people. It will explore both implemented and planned technical, programmatic, and policy interventions that could address the challenges facing contemporary American cemeteries.
II. The Problem’s Relevance to Planners

The depth of the historical connection between urbanism and cemeteries can probably not be overstated. According to the respected historian Lewis Mumford, the city’s very origins stem partially from early humans’ ritualistic return to landmarks erected to house and commemorate the dead (Mumford 1961, 9-10). The earliest human settlements were often founded near places that had been used as human burial grounds; in fact, “the dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling…. The city of the dead antedates the city of the living. In one sense, indeed, the city of the dead is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city” (Mumford 1961, 7).

Cemetery land use currently receives little attention from planning professionals. However, cemeteries have ties to several central concerns in the planning field, from land use considerations and environmental quality, to economic equity and social cohesion. Cemetery development and burial practices have developed along much the same lines as American residential development in general; as public health concerns over urban density and proximity to the dead rose, transportation made it easier for cemeteries to be located at some remove from town centers (Sloane 1991; 11-12, 68, 93). In the twentieth century, land on the periphery of urban areas could often be acquired for a song, and cemeteries’ tax-exempt status made their operation quite profitable (Mitford 2000, 83). Relocating cemeteries outside urban areas not only created a symbolic separation of the dead from the living, it also removed cemeteries’ social, cultural, and economic functions from cities.

Many of the cemeteries discussed in this thesis were constructed in the 19th Century on land that was then on the outskirts of town. As city populations expanded, these cemeteries, which had been constructed far from townspeople intentionally, were once again located in the heart of communities. The renewed physical proximity between the living and the dead has not led to a reintegration of these spaces in people’s lives. This is a missed opportunity because
these places could provide communities with an important cultural and historical resource and supplementary open space.

The considerations that drove cemeteries from city centers are characteristic of city planning principles from previous eras. In the 19th Century, legitimate public health crises brought on by disease outbreaks and the resultant unprecedented number of deaths justified the relocation of burials to city limits. Improved understanding of the causes of the spread of disease, however, no longer necessitate this removal. Strict separation of land uses, the gospel of 20th Century city planning, once inviolable is no longer sacrosanct. Reintegration of formerly distinct land-use categories – “mixed-use development” – is the contemporary watchword of city planning. Most urban cemeteries are still dominated by the conditions of the period in which they were constructed, but there is much planners can do to adapt these spaces to better meet the needs of 21st-century city-dwellers.

The time is ripe, therefore, to reconsider how cemeteries are regulated, managed, and used. As cemeteries reach their burial capacity and mourners’ use of these spaces declines, planners must ask themselves who these spaces serve. Beyond that, they should contemplate who can and should benefit from them in the future. Most planners have not even posed these questions, let alone addressed them. It is difficult to imagine another urban land use receiving so little thought or attention from this discipline.

Truly, cemetery planning has something of interest for every planner. Land-use planners should consider the implications of selling land in perpetuity for burial use and weigh the potential value of expanding the functionality of these sites. Some cemetery administrators are already exploring recreational and cultural uses beyond their codified commemorative purpose, but planners could better support this work and find ways to extend it to other sites. Environmental planners should consider the ecological and health impacts of American funerary and burial practices on land and people. Community development practitioners should identify the needs of people living near cemeteries and find ways to incorporate these considerations
into cemetery programming and design. Researchers can help identify additional capacity in urban cemeteries, the oldest of which often have inaccurate records of the numbers and locations of burials. They can begin to whittle away at the amount of unknown information still surrounding these places. Scholars can gather more knowledge about these spaces, their management, and the communities affected by them so that a clearer path forward can begin to be laid out. Scanty though the current planning literature is in this area of study, there is sufficient reason to believe in the value of these spaces to justify additional investment in planning for them.

Bridging the gap between these spaces and people who could potentially make use of them requires a better understanding of the constraints and challenges of operating these spaces. The subsequent areas of research were posed with the intention of discovering and identifying potential solutions to these challenges.
III. Research Questions and Method

Research Questions

In this paper, the researcher identifies the main challenges facing urban American cemeteries now and in the near future. The researcher then details technical, programmatic, and policy interventions that have been implemented in some cemeteries with positive or promising results, with a focus on those that can be used or adopted at other sites.

Research Method

This paper primarily builds on research conducted through semi-structured qualitative interviews with stakeholders in the cemetery industry with relevant knowledge of cemetery management, history, or policy. This included cemetery administrators, academics, journalists, historians, and related burial or death-industry professionals who have in-depth knowledge of the challenges facing contemporary American cemeteries. The researcher began interviews with a selection of key stakeholders from these groups and used a snowball sampling method to identify additional interviewees.

Interviewees were based in New York, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States; as well as York, Bristol, and London in the United Kingdom. Interviews took place in person or over the phone and typically lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. (A full list of the primary cemeteries referenced in this paper is included in Table 1 on page 8.) Regardless of the many differences between the cemeteries included in this study, each is of a similar age and was designed in the same cemetery style as the others. These two factors, age and design, are important for several reasons and are the basis for including them in this study. First, the period during which they were constructed is characterized by the removal of cemeteries from dense urban centers. Instead, cemeteries were constructed on cities’ edges. Later urban growth brought people back into close proximity of these spaces. As such, each of the cemeteries included in this study is nested in the current residential fabric of
the city and therefore has potential to impact those living nearby. Second, these cemeteries are designed in the rural cemetery style. More details about this will be provided in a later section, but the most important thing to note about this style, for the purposes of this work, is its park-like design characteristics. Rural cemeteries’ customary layout and landscaping made them popular destinations for leisure and recreation. Though these uses have lessened over time, their original purpose makes them good candidates for retrofitting. Not all cemeteries are designed with people’s use of them in mind. Returning rural cemeteries to their earlier mode of use will presumably be easier than modifying another, less easily adapted cemetery for this purpose.

The interview instrument is included in the Appendix. Interviewees could refuse to answer any question(s) or terminate the interview at any time without consequences. A total of sixteen interviews were conducted. The sample included twelve current or former cemetery managers, operators, or board members; one academic; one journalist; one historian; and one related death-industry professional. The interviews’ purpose was to round out the researcher’s review of the relevant literature and identify other pertinent challenges facing aging urban cemeteries, identify potential solutions for these challenges, and distinguish some of the contextual factors for these issues and interventions.
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*Table 1.* This table includes each of the primary cemeteries under consideration in this paper, as well as the location, year established, and size of each.
IV. Challenges Facing America’s Aging Urban Cemeteries

Identifying the challenges facing aging urban American cemeteries was the key first step in this research. Though each cemetery included in this study has its own unique circumstances, several of the same challenges were indicated for multiple cemeteries, and some broad themes emerged about the overall issues facing aging cemeteries. The most frequently cited challenges, in no particular order, were limited remaining burial space, limited or negative community relationships, security issues, unsafe or unattractive monuments and/or landscaping features, and limited funding. Some illustrative examples of each of these frequently cited issues will be provided below.

Limited Remaining Burial Space

For each of the active cemeteries (a cemetery is considered “active” if it still offers burial services) in this study, the pressure of limited burial space was indicated as a concern, though the degree to which it was felt varied in different spaces. Some interviewees felt that cemeteries would be able to compensate, at least temporarily, for dwindling in-ground burial space with alternative interment options, such as expanding columbaria facilities or establishing memorial gardens where remains can be scattered. Others, even ones with remaining burial space, felt that their cemetery’s ability to accommodate future burials was extremely limited. A couple of the study sites have added additional space since their founding.

In the last few years, Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery (Laurel Hill) has seen a somewhat unexpected uptick in demand for future burial space (Anon. 2018j). The 78-acre site was not fully developed for burial, so the administration recently committed to expanding a portion of the undeveloped land and making it suitable for future burial (Ibid). The new development is expected to open in June 2016 (Ibid). Even with this additional capacity, the cemetery only has about 1,000 remaining grave spaces (Ibid).
Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, NY (Woodlawn), already does what it can to maximize burial space. Many plots are already double- and triple-decked, with more than one occupant per grave (Anon. 2018l). This is fairly standard cemetery practice and is especially common for spouses or other family who wish to be buried together (Ibid).

Some cemeteries have been forced to get creative as available grave space diminishes. Under the New York State law, cemetery corporations may reacquire unused lots or plots if they were purchased more than seventy-five years prior (Not For Profit Corporation Law Article 15 1513a; accessed 2017). Green-Wood Cemetery (Green-Wood) in Brooklyn, NY, has leveraged this rule to increase the supply of available graves. The cemetery recently reacquired a part of the cemetery known as Cedar Dell from the Dutch Reformed Church (Anon. 2018f). This purchase amounts to about 200 additional graves (Ibid). In the 1980s, Green-Wood received permission from its board of trustees to replace some paths and roads with additional burial space (Ibid). At this time, the trustees do not plan to convert any additional land to burial space, but the cemetery employs a surveyor to examine the grounds and identify spaces between existing graves that could be used for additional burials (Ibid).

Graceland Cemetery (Graceland) in Chicago has very limited burial space left, but will be adding some additional plots soon (Anon. 2018m). The board has approved a plan for reconstructing and repairing some of the cemetery’s roads and sections of its exterior wall (Ibid). These capital projects are an opportunity to create new burial space. During the construction, the board plans to have some of the roads removed and substitute additional graves in this area (Ibid). Interestingly, the board will likely allow some prospective owners to purchase large plots so that they can construct elaborate monuments, in keeping with a style common throughout the cemetery (Ibid). Though the cemetery can charge more for these larger lots, the net income they will generate will be comparable whether they sell a few large lots or a higher number of small lots (Ibid). There is not a financial incentive for the cemetery board to prefer the sale of large lots. The monuments are not made or sold by the cemetery, nor will they charge additional
fees for the monuments to be installed. Maximizing grave space is not necessarily the predominant priority for all cemetery corporations, as demand for burial space competes with other, sometimes overriding, cultural and aesthetic considerations.

This is likely the last new grave space that Graceland will produce, as there is limited available real estate nearby that the cemetery could annex. Even if there was land available, the cost would likely put it out of the price-range that the cemetery would be willing or able to pay. Nor can Graceland accommodate the double- and triple-decked graves found in some other cemeteries, such as Woodlawn, because its soil contains too much sand and therefore lacks the necessary structural integrity (Ibid).

Woodlands Cemetery (Woodlands) in Philadelphia, PA is a National Historical Landmark District which protects it from future development, but also somewhat constrains their ability to add new grave space. The cemetery only sells thirty burial spaces each year, due to its historic status and limited grave availability (The Woodlands Cemetery Company accessed 2018). Of course, cemeteries are required by law to keep detailed records of their interments, but the exact locations of these have not been recorded with the same high level of specificity over time. Woodlands is attempting to create more detailed accounts of burial locations to determine where more graves can be accommodated between existing ones (Anon. 2018). There is also a possibility that some of the family plots or multi-burial lots are not yet at maximum capacity, which could increase the cemetery’s supply of available grave space (Ibid).

These measures prolong cemeteries’ ability to offer earthen burials, but they do not solve the underlying issues facing cemeteries with a finite amount of burial space.

*Limited or Negative Community Relationships*

Unless they have gone out of their way to cultivate a positive relationship with their community, most cemeteries included in this study have either a limited or negative relationship with this constituency. Cemeteries that have a limited relationship with their community receive
few visitors and have no or minimal intentional interactions with them; a negative relationship exists when the community feels that the cemetery is bothersome in some way, whether because it is unattractive or unsafe, or because it takes the place of something that would be more useful or enjoyable to the community. For example, a large cemetery that has many dilapidated monuments, limited hours for visitation, rules prohibiting any recreational use, and a fence or other barrier that prevents people from traversing it easily, would likely, though not necessarily, have a negative relationship with the community.

“Community,” of course, has a variety of meanings. As one interviewee put it, “I always chuckle when people ask me about ‘the community’ because there are many communities when you’re talking about a cemetery. You could be talking about the people who have family buried there or the people who live nearby, who live in the city, people who visit the cemetery. Because the people who live nearby don’t necessarily use it, and vice versa. [Community] means a lot of different things” (Anon. 2018n). For the purposes of this paper, the word “community” is defined quite loosely to denote all the above, but usually refers to people who visit the space for mourning or other purposes, as well as people who live nearby.

The cemeteries in this study are situated in often quite different neighborhoods and each has a unique relationship with its community. London’s West Norwood Crematorium and Cemetery (West Norwood) is perceived primarily as a commemorative space, not a community one (Anon. 2018c). West Norwood is one of seven cemeteries that was established with the passage of an 1832 bill, “An Act for establishing a General Cemetery for the Interment of the Dead in the Neighbourhood of the Metropolis”. As opposed to other cemeteries created by this bill, such as Nunhead Cemetery (which is heavily used by local residents), West Norwood’s visitors are primarily mourners (Ibid). Since the cemetery is unable to accommodate many more burials this could become more of a concern as the space loses even these visitors. An interviewee lamented that West Norwood was unable to attract the visitor numbers seen by
other cemeteries, but acknowledged that their rules and regulations were more strict than these other sites.

Woodlawn falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum regulating behavior. The cemetery permits people to walk their dogs if they are on leashes (Anon. 2018I). Bicycling is not allowed, except for one day each year when an annual Bronx bike ride cuts through the cemetery, but visitors can walk their bikes through the cemetery (Ibid).

West Norwood suffers perhaps more from the community’s perception of its rigidity rather than from actual rules governing its use (Anon. 2018c). Its rules and regulations are in line with those of Woodlawn, but the ways the communities use these spaces differ quite markedly (Anon. 2018c; Anon. 2018I). Whereas people from Woodlawn’s community walk through it, for either recreation or convenience, West Norwood’s neighbors only minimally interact with the space (Anon. 2018c). Woodlawn’s design, with multiple entrances and seventeen miles of roads, and the management’s intentional rebranding of the cemetery as a multifunctional space (Anon. 2018p), compensate for some of its behavioral restrictions which deter potential users from similarly regulated spaces such as West Norwood.

Some cemeteries with strict rules also have high visitor rates. Green-Wood Cemetery’s rules are more restrictive than most. Pets, “jogging, biking, and other recreational activities are not permitted,” and “strict rules” govern the placement of flowers and decorations (“Visiting Green-Wood” accessed 2018). As recently as 1987, even personal photography was banned in the cemetery, but this rule has been relaxed since then (Anon. 2018f). Professional photography still requires a permit, but casual photography is allowed, though it seems to be encouraged because of its free advertising potential. (“If you are posting [photos] on Instagram, tag us with the hashtag #greenwoodcemetery or post to our Facebook page, The Green-Wood Cemetery, @historicgreenwood,” their website reads (Visiting Green-Wood accessed 2018).)

London’s Highgate Cemetery (Highgate) is the most tightly regulated cemetery in this study. The cemetery is divided into two separate parts, the East Cemetery and West Cemetery.
Visitors are welcome to walk freely on the East side, but must pay an entrance charge; the West Cemetery is accessible only by paid, guided tour (“About the Cemetery” accessed 2018). Like Green-Wood cemetery, pets are not permitted, nor are bikes, which must be stored on racks provided at the entrance (Ibid).

Green-Wood and Highgate have stricter rules than the other cemeteries in this study, but they also have higher visitor rates than the others. Upholding rigid rules and regulations seems to be less of a barrier to high visitor rates for cemeteries that have enough notable burials and cultural cachet to rely on formal tourist audiences, such as Green-Wood and Highgate.

Security Issues

Security is a concern for most of the cemeteries, but the exact nature of the concern varies by site. Most cemeteries’ security issues are partially determined by their ability or desire to manage their border with either physical or personnel barriers. Cemeteries, according to Rugg (2000), all share some defining physical properties, the “most immediate of [which] is an established perimeter” (261). This boundary can be marked by a planting such as a hedge, but usually “a more substantial structure is used: either a high wall or railings or a combination of the two. The boundary structure is by no means an incidental feature of the site” (Rugg 2000, 261). Together, cemeteries’ (often quite grand) entrance gate and the boundary delineate the cemetery “as a separate place with a special purpose” (Ibid). Sometimes this separation, originally established primarily for public health and safety concerns, prevents the easy adaption of this space for other perhaps no less important purposes.

When Woodlawn first opened, security officers posted at entrances would only permit plot owners with proof of ownership to enter the space (Anon. 2018I). The cemetery has relaxed a great deal since then. Now, visitors can enter without showing identification and do not need to be a lot owner to enter the space (Ibid). There are two entrances, both overseen by security
guards, but these staff members also act as de facto docents, answering visitors’ questions and helping them navigate the space (*Ibid*).

Mount Moriah Cemetery in Philadelphia, PA (Mount Moriah) occupies one extreme end of the security spectrum in that the site has no official security staff or firm physical barrier to entry. The site is currently in a receivership which is empowered by the Court to act on the behalf of the Mount Moriah Cemetery Corporation, the legal owner and now defunct nonprofit cemetery corporation (“Recent History” accessed 2018). Several issues plagued the cemetery prior to its virtual abandonment, including an outstanding water lien of approximately $74,000, a lawsuit brought against the cemetery corporation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission, and a dearth of funding to perform basic maintenance (Anon. 2018n). No less significant, in the opinion of one interviewee, was the cemetery’s size and the corporation’s inability to oversee and manage such a vast space. Mount Moriah is “so big, which was the downfall of the cemetery because there’s nowhere you can stand in any one part of it where you can see the whole cemetery. Could you put cameras up? Well sure, if you could afford to, but then there isn’t electricity, so what are you going to do?” (*Ibid*).

With virtually no security, the site has no rules or regulations governing the space. Typically, cemeteries that felt they had limited or negative community relationships had either unclear or very rigid rules and regulations. In Mount Moriah’s case, it is not clear that the lack of rules or regulations is the reason people do not use the space. The local Friends of Mount Moriah Cemetery group keeps an eye on the site, but members do not have legal authority to bar people from entry or to prohibit certain behaviors. Still, not many people enter the space (Anon. 2018k).

The researcher asked an interview participant about what types of rules are posted at the site and whether there is clear signage alerting people to the fact that they are welcome in the space. The interviewee responded that the Friends group that manages the site does not generally encourage people, especially in writing, to use the space because they cannot
assume that it will be safe (Anon. 2018n). They elaborated, “It’s different on workday events when we have more volunteers to watch people” (Ibid). Posted signs prohibit the placement of artificial flowers, walking of unleashed pets, and dumping trash – this latter act was an especially expensive nuisance in the past (Ibid). But again, the cemetery lacks any means of enforcing these prohibitions.

Despite the fact that the cemetery abuts a populous residential neighborhood, the space has not become a popular recreational site, even though many residential lots’ rears open directly onto the cemetery site (Anon. 2018k). This cannot be wholly explained by the site’s unkempt state, since there are other highly frequented recreational facilities nearby, such as a bike path and Cobb Park (Anon. 2018k; Anon. 2018n). Although local residents might currently prefer these facilities, their use of them also indicates a desire for open space. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that they might use the cemetery for some of their recreation, if the space were better maintained.

Even some cemeteries that no longer have strong security concerns were plagued with them in the past. In the 1970s, Laurel Hill Cemetery was in such dire financial straits that it could not maintain a full-time staff and had to dismiss most of its grounds crew (Anon. 2018j). The skeleton crew that remained could only keep the cemetery open about 12 hours per week and the number of visitors severely declined (Ibid). The members of the cemetery corporation board “realized they would lose the space if they didn’t turn it around” so they “founded the Friends group to get community members and volunteers involved” in the space (Ibid).

Similarly, Green-Wood closed its gates to everyone except for lot owners in the 1970s (Anon. 2018f). For almost twenty years, the cemetery functioned with minimal foot traffic and the overwhelming majority of visitors were mourners (Ibid). Like Laurel Hill, Green-Wood now welcomes visitors for a variety of purposes, but security at Green-Wood is still somewhat a concern. The site has four entrances (Anon. 2018g) that are open during the cemetery’s operating hours. “It would be difficult to have a more porous border there, though,” one
interviewee said (Anon. 2018i). For one thing, “it gets really dark inside at night; for that reason alone, [the board] would want to close the space at night. There also has to be security [personnel] at every entrance” (Ibid).

Unsafe or Unattractive Monuments and/or Landscaping Features

The presence of unsafe or unattractive monuments and landscaping features was noted most strongly by the cemeteries in London. The demand for grave space is more acute there than it is in the United States, with predictions that “London’s cemeteries will be completely full within the next 20-30 years” (De Sousa 2015). London’s Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park (Tower Hamlets) and West Norwood both have significant monument and landscaping restoration needs.

Tower Hamlets was officially closed to new burials in 1966 by an act of parliament, though the cemetery still fields about 100 burial inquiries a year (Anon. 2018e). There are no active burial spaces in the community of approximately 300,000, so people inquiring about burials are often redirected to nearby Newham (Ibid). (Newham charges fifty percent more for accepting burials from outside the borough (Newham London accessed 2018). Tower Hamlets has several monuments in need of restoration (see Figure 1 on the next page). Numerous headstones on single plots and larger gravestones covering family plots are in disrepair. Several headstones have been removed, purposely or otherwise, from graves. Some lie in place, but many were piled in out-of-the-way parts of the cemetery (see Figure 2 on the next page).

The graves in London’s West Norwood are densely packed. Many are dilapidated, and sections where the ground is buckling have been roped off to protect visitors. The road through the cemetery’s front entrance is lined with wooden benches that have been donated (see Figure 3 on the next page), most often from families who have buried a loved one in the cemetery (Anon. 2018c). After donation, the bench becomes the responsibility of the cemetery which, in
turn is the responsibility of the borough of Lambeth (*Ibid*). Unfortunately, the maintenance of benches, like the maintenance of the grounds in general, puts a strain on the cemetery’s tight budget and the borough is unable to keep them in perfect condition (see Figure 4 above). One interviewee noted that West Norwood’s entrances were not particularly inviting to the community (*Ibid*). There is only one pedestrian entrance to the cemetery, a fact that was noted both by the interviewee (*Ibid*) and by two visitors the researcher and interview participant passed during their survey of the site. Although the cemetery’s managers would like to maintain the gate because of its architectural significance and because it draws attention to the site, they also see its imposing appearance as somewhat of a barrier to people’s use of the space (*Ibid*). Near the front entrance there is a wide paved driveway with some landscaping elements, but they are purely decorative and do not serve as functional greenspace for the community.

Only one of Graceland’s five original public entrances remain (Anon. 2018m). A second entrance permits the passage of construction and maintenance equipment, but the cemetery does not plan to reopen any additional entrances to visitors (*Ibid*). Increasing access at these former entrances would require the cemetery to hire additional security staff, which the board is not in the financial position to do (*Ibid*).
Parts of Mount Moriah Cemetery have been overtaken by natural growth (Anon. 2018k). Although some parts of the cemetery have been well-maintained by the federal government due to the presence of military graves (Papa 2013) others have been left to run wild. An interviewee observed that it is hard for visitors to gauge the location of graves or the amount of burials because the grass and brush is so overgrown in some areas (Ibid).

**Limited Funding**

A common refrain in the interviews conducted in this study was that cemeteries, even the ones that are perceived as thriving, are under-resourced. The disrepair experienced by some of these sites in the above examples is just one of the outcomes of this. Some of the interviewees thought that the most seemingly stable cemeteries were victims of their own success, in a way, because their public perception masked their deeper financial precariousness and need (Anon. 2018o; Anon. 2018g). Cemeteries find themselves in a double-bind: if they do not maintain their sites well, visitor rates may fall, leading to fewer donations and even fewer resources to fund repairs; if their sites are in a state of good repair, they might not appear to need additional resources which could also lead to fewer donations and greater strain on their perpetual care fund.
Cemeteries that are financially strapped also typically cannot afford to hire the quantity of people they would like or people with the qualifications they need. In the words of one interviewee, “hands down, our biggest challenge is resources. We have three full-time staff and one part-time and a whole bunch of volunteers, but we can’t do it all. People think that we receive public funding; they think we’re a part of the city’s official park system, but we’re not….

We also don’t have any expert restoration staff, so some of our monuments aren’t maintained properly. Visitors sometimes think there’s neglect of the site, so we have to educate them about the requirements of maintaining this space, but it’s hard” (Anon. 2018o). This comment about visitors’ mistaken assumptions about the cemetery’s affiliation with municipal services such as the park system was shared by others. Interviewees generally thought that the public does not understand how cemetery ownership and financing work and has little appreciation for the overhead expenses involved in perpetual maintenance.

In the United States, cemetery corporations are usually non-profit entities. Some states, such as New York, require that cemeteries operate only on a non-profit basis, with the intention of protecting citizens’ well-being, promoting the public welfare, and preventing cemeteries from falling into disrepair or becoming a burden on the community (New York State Dept. of State, Office of General Counsel accessed 2018). Most non-profit cemetery corporations, which operate under the 501(c)(13) status, also maintain separate 501(c)(3) corporations. The former organization handles the actual cemetery business including lot sales, interments, site maintenance, monument restoration, long-term planning, perpetual care fund management, etc., while the latter directs other activities that are more distantly related to the cemetery, such as program development, community outreach, membership solicitation, historic fund management, etc.

This 501(c)(3) entity is variously structured as a “friends group,” as the cemetery’s “historic fund,” or sometimes the 501(c)(13) and 501(c)(3)s’ work overlaps to such a degree that the distinction exists primarily on paper, rendering a practical distinction between the two
corporations quite difficult. In practice, though Woodlands technically maintains both a 501(c)(13) cemetery corporation and a 501(c)(3), the employees for each are the same (Anon. 2018o). Staff members keep records of hours worked to bill the appropriate corporation for tasks completed for each separate corporation, but the demarcations between work performed for one entity versus the other is something of a false one because the parts overlap so much (Ibid).

Cemeteries are responsible for funding burial ground maintenance through burial fees and the returns on the investment of these fees. However, the current investment model poses significant challenges for long-term financial planning of cemetery funds, the first of which is that the sheer size of the funding required is quite considerable. “While there are a number of different approaches that can be used to estimate the size a care fund needs to be in order to properly maintain a cemetery over the long term, assuming a proper level of maintenance and taking into account the impact of inflation, there is no question that the amount will be substantial” (Lapping 2003a). Many cemetery corporations do not adequately plan for their financial future. “If we were to survey all cemetery care funds, we would likely find that very few are currently of a proper size in relation to their cemetery’s life cycle” (Ibid).

While interviewees did not express fear for their respective cemeteries’ imminent future, they each recognized that current policies leave cemetery corporations very little financial flexibility and that wise investments are necessary to continuously care for the properties in their charge. Some worried that the State has little interest in changing the current financing structure or other policies that could impact cemeteries’ revenues. “The State cemetery board could embrace the dilemma that cemeteries are in with their limited [remaining burial] space. Cemeteries are forced into thinking too creatively just to stay afloat. People who run these cemeteries aren’t always doing a very good job of looking that far into the future, which is a pity because these places become the taxpayers problem if the municipality has to take them over” (Anon. 2018h). Cemeteries that go bankrupt in New York State become wards of the
municipality, and the responsibility for their maintenance falls on local taxpayers (Rubinstein 2002).

Some of these issues facing cemeteries contribute to the others or are mutually reinforcing. Security issues can cause or be caused by limited or negative relationships with the community, for example. A solution to these problems could come from addressing either the security issue or the community engagement component separately, but would most likely involve a holistic approach that addresses both issues.

However, we cannot expect that the same intervention applied in two different spaces will have similar outcomes. Relaxing behavioral restrictions in both Woodlawn in the Bronx and West Norwood in London could have different impacts on community relationships. Cultural and community attitudes toward these spaces differ not only between nations, as in this case, but between different cemeteries in the same region or even the same city.

Cemeteries are each so different that what is considered appropriate in them varies greatly by location. As one interviewee remarked, “There’s no one doing exactly what Green-Wood [in Brooklyn] is doing and no one is doing exactly what Laurel Hill [in Philadelphia] is doing. You can do things in Laurel Hill that you cannot do in Green-Wood because they would be completely inappropriate in that space, even though we’re just talking [about the difference between] New York City and Philly” (Anon. 2018i). One of the events that the interviewee referred to as an example of an event that would not work in both spaces was Laurel Hill’s annual Gravediggers’ Ball, an event that the interviewee speculated would not be welcomed by Green-Wood’s board members (Ibid.).

Even within New York, different cemeteries face their own challenges that cannot be addressed by simply mimicking what works in another space. We can see this in the many differences between Green-Wood in Brooklyn and Woodlawn in the Bronx. “Green-Wood can get visitor numbers that Woodlawn just can’t” (Anon. 2018i). Woodlawn’s annual visitor count is by no means small at 100,000 (“Home,” The Woodlawn Cemetery accessed 2018), but is
markedly less than Green-Wood’s 250,000 (Anon. 2018f). “It’s not fair but Woodlawn faces a stigma that Green-Wood doesn’t. Green-Wood has this cultural cachet, and it’s in Brooklyn so it’s cool and hip. And it doesn’t really make sense, because Woodlawn has great art and architectural legacies, and it’s right off the train so it’s easy to get to, but it just can’t overcome that [mental] barrier people have to going there” (Anon. 2018f).

The Significance of These Challenges

Though there is a great variety in each cemetery’s particular experience of these challenges, the prevalence of similar themes across different spaces is a mark of the ubiquity of these common plights. In addition to the mental barriers mentioned in the last example that make it difficult for some to enter these spaces, there are also physical obstacles that often prevent their easy and comfortable use. Each of the five problems identified in this section (limited remaining burial space, limited or negative community relationships, security issues, unsafe or unattractive monuments and/or landscaping features, and limited funding) can exacerbate the others. When a cemetery is struggling financially, their administrators may choose to decrease their staff; fewer personnel may necessitate limiting access to the site and lead to less frequent or less diligent site maintenance, which could lead the community to form a negative impression of the space, and so on. Hopefully, understanding cemeteries’ challenges and appreciating the impact they can have on their communities motivates planners to approach this as a planning issue. This paper will now turn to interventions that have been identified to help cemeteries cope with these difficulties.
V. Recommendations Identified to Address Cemeteries’ Challenges

Several of these challenges are being addressed by the cemeteries themselves, with greater and lesser degrees of success. This section will outline the various strategies currently employed in these study cemeteries and identify potential areas where they could be adopted to address challenges elsewhere. In addition to the strategies identified and implemented in these cemeteries, others that are not currently in use in these spaces that could be attempted will be outlined. Some of these alternative strategies are in use elsewhere, while others are only proposals. Where possible, specific implemented examples will be cited.

The following recommendations are grouped into three categories: technical, programmatic, and policy solutions. Technical solutions include adaptive corpse disposal methods and design solutions, programmatic solutions consist of loosening restrictions on how the space is used or offering additional programming options, and policy solutions involve rethinking the larger life-cycle of urban cemeteries.

Technical Interventions

Until recently, burial has been the chief method of corpse disposal in the United States. Burial’s impacts come in different forms. Most Americans choose to embalm bodies before burial. Except in a few special circumstances, most states do not require embalming corpses. Roughly 827,000 gallons of embalming fluid (Yalom 2008, 296), containing formaldehyde, phenol, and other hazardous or carcinogenic chemicals, are used annually in the United States (“Funerary Processes” accessed 2017). Americans purchase nearly two million caskets and use over 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete and 14,000 tons of steel for burial vaults annually (Ibid).

Reforming these practices will involve reshaping perceptions as much as policy. Most states only require embalming in three instances: 1) when the person dies of a communicable disease, 2) when the body is to be moved across a state line, [the practice was actually
popularized in America during the Civil War (Mitford 2000, 145)], or 3) when the body is to be held more than twenty-four (or thirty or forty-eight) hours before burial (Yalom 2008, 50). Yet some states hold that embalming is not mandatory under any circumstance (Ibid). Most people believe, and many funeral directors do nothing to dissuade them, that embalming is a necessary part of burial. In this matter, public perception and not policy is at issue.

Present trends in Americans’ funerary practices indicate that a great shift in the method of corpse disposal is underway in the United States. Cremation rates rose sharply in the last few decades. The cremation rate was just 5% in the 1970s, but increased to 50.1% in 2016, outpacing burial for the first time, according to the Cremation Association of North America (CANA) (Sanburn 2017). There is still an amount of interstate variation, but the overall trend toward cremation is similar across the country (Anon. 2018p). The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) predicts that cremation rates will reach 71% by 2030 (National Funeral Directors Association 2016), though the predicted rate of increase has been underestimated historically. One interviewee with particular cremation expertise put the average rate of cremation increase at 2% per year, which is on par with the NFDA’s prediction (Anon. 2018p).

Several factors likely contribute to this uptick in cremation. Not insignificantly, cremation can cost as little as a quarter as much as standard burial (Sanburn 2013). Experts primarily attribute the widespread adoption of cremation to Americans’ increased mobility and disconnection from their family’s origins and funeral plots. Certain demographic characteristics are positively associated with cremation: Areas with high concentration of small businesses, less religious affiliation, higher incomes and education levels, and more immigrants are associated with higher cremation rates. Likewise, CANA found that areas with a higher concentration of manufacturing, greater affiliation with Christianity, lower income, higher home ownership rates, and lower education rates correspond to lower cremation rates (Sanburn 2017).
The cremation trend is expected to continue to increase in the coming decades, which could fundamentally change America's cemetery landscape.

Cremated remains (somewhat crudely compounded as “cremains” in much industry literature) can be scattered or buried (though there are laws governing where) or stored in an urn. Cemeteries often have mausolea or columbaria with niches for urns. Many cemeteries around the country, facing land (and income) shortages as grave spaces fill up, are turning to cremation and the construction of mausolea to finance ongoing cemetery maintenance, but even these will fill eventually.

The cemeteries in this study reflected the growing popularity of this practice. Woodlawn now performs more cremations than burials (Anon. 2018l) and approximately 25% of its total interments are of cremated remains (Anon. 2018p). Cremations can be done onsite in a crematory in the chapel’s basement (Anon. 2018l). Part of this shift to cremation is a result of the cemetery’s diminishing burial space (Ibid). Though the cemetery’s executive director said that it has enough room for another forty to fifty years, “cremations allow Woodlawn to put unused spaces – too small to accommodate conventional burials – to profitable use” (Barron 2017).

While in the past, many people who chose cremation expressed interest in purchasing large mausolea, this is no longer the case. An old mausoleum at Woodlawn featured a spacious interior, filled with furniture and curtain-lined windows, so that the family could come and visit often, but these types of elaborate mausolea are no longer in high demand among cremation customers (Ibid). An interviewee opined that people now have less of a desire or ability to visit loved ones’ final resting place than they had in the past: “You don’t see demand for the huge mausoleums anymore because people move so far away from their families all the time and people don’t really visit” (Ibid).

Another interviewee expressed a similar opinion about the reason for Americans’ growing interest in cremation. People, they said, are simply, not visiting graves of people they
knew at the same rate as in the past (Anon. 2018m). “Even with Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers, you don’t see as many people coming to visit because everyone is moving. People still want to see their [loved one’s] name on something, but it doesn’t matter quite so much to them whether or not their loved one is buried in the ground in a coffin that will protect their body from decaying quickly and so on” (Ibid). This interviewee believes that cemeteries will probably change a lot after Baby Boomers are gone because Millennials and presumably younger generations are not using these places for the “somber family visits” to which past generations were more inclined (Ibid). They proposed that cemeteries might start offering more memorial walls and scattering gardens for cremated remains, where mourners can still visit and place remains, but without so many of the traditional cemetery trappings (Ibid).

New York State law does not require that cremains be placed in a cemetery; they can be scattered at sea, on private property with the landowner’s consent, or on some public lands with a written permit. Part of the challenge for cemeteries, then, is that they must make a compelling case for the benefits of permanent placement in a cemetery. Doing so will require them to meet the shifting needs and preferences of potential customers as more people select cremation services. Most interviewees cited growing customer interest in scattering gardens and other commingling facilities for placing cremains. Purchasing the right to scatter cremains in a cemetery is much less expensive than purchasing a grave, which is certainly an advantage for many customers. The practice also consumes much less land per interment, which allows the cemetery to serve more customers.

For many, part of cremation’s appeal is its supposedly minimal impact on the environment, but the environmental advantages of cremation are rather negligible. Fossil fuels are typically used to incinerate the corpse and the process releases dioxin and mercury (largely from dental fillings) (“Life-Cycle Studies: Burials” accessed 2017). An Australian study found that cremation generated an average of 160 kilograms of CO₂, compared to 39 kilograms for standard burial. "But when the cost of maintaining gravesites was included (high pesticide,
water, and mowing requirements), burials released ten percent more emissions” (Ibid). The net difference between the two methods’ environmental impacts is less than most people likely assume. Cremation might even indirectly exacerbate some of the other issues some cemeteries face, such as diminishing relationships with the community and security concerns, since high visitor rates are more strongly correlated with traditional burial than with cremation (Bachelor 2004, 90).

Additionally, many people’s cremated remains are still interred in cemeteries, either in mausolea, columbaria, ossuaries, or, less frequently, in small burial plots. Many cemetery managers who think they have virtually no burial space left are surprised by how many more interments they can perform if the new interments are of cremated remains (Anon. 2018p). In New York State, each cemetery sets its own rules and regulations regarding the number of interments allowed in a grave or lot (New York State Dept. of State, Division of Cemeteries). One interviewee estimated that a typical urban cemetery could accommodate five times more interments of cremains than full-body burials on a given parcel of land (Anon. 2018p). The practice of interring cremains, though it consumes much less space than traditional burial, is still subject to the perpetual care model and so it does not represent a fundamental break with traditional American burial practice. These vessels still permanently occupy a finite amount of cemetery space and therefore cremation does not obviate the need to find other technical, programmatic, and/or policy solutions to address cemeteries’ challenges.

Alternative methods of body disposal, such as green burial, are becoming modestly more popular, especially abroad. In green burials (interchangeably referred to as natural or woodland burials), “remains are returned directly to the earth, in either plain cloth shrouds or simple coffins manufactured from nontoxic easily biodegradable materials, like cardboard or pine. Vaults are banned, embalmed remains prohibited” (Harris 2007, 161). This type of burial “creates habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitats… or improves and creates new habitats which are rich in wildlife (flora and fauna)” (Ministry of Justice 2009). Green burial thus
entails both a desire to be buried in a sustainable way and often a “wish for the grave itself to contribute to the conservation of the environment” (Yarwood et al. 2015). People who choose this method of burial may do so for religious reasons, because it can be less expensive than a conventional burial, or because they consider it a more environmentally-friendly option than conventional burial or cremation.

Like traditional cemeteries, natural burial sites vary in size, aesthetic qualities, and rules governing burials and markings. Some do not permit any grave markers, but others allow engraved stones or other modest symbols (Ibid). This willingness to be buried without a marker perhaps denotes “an acceptance of anonymity in death” (Clayden et al. 2010, 119) that goes against Western burial traditions commonly practiced in cemeteries since the nineteenth century that hinged on the “capacity to give families space for such a marker, as an expression both of grief and of status (Rugg 2000, 262, (quoting Cannadine 1981)). As Yarwood et al. (2015) remind readers, most burials worldwide prior to the last few hundred years would have resembled contemporary natural burials, and in many places they still do; “in other words, modern western society had to first denaturalize burial to then reinvent ‘natural death’” (174).

Germany and Sweden each had natural burial grounds in the early nineteenth century (Sehee 2007). In the last twenty-five years, this method of burial gained swift popularity in the UK. Since the founding of Britain’s inaugural green burial ground in Carlisle in 1993, over 270 such sites have been created (Yarwood et al. 2015, 172). Now, over 150 cemeteries in the United States offer green burials (Webster 2017) since the first natural burial ground was established by Dr. William Campbell in the late 1990s (Sehee 2007).

Sometimes the development of green burial sites encounters challenges in the planning system; in Yarwood et al.’s (2015) study of green burial sites in the UK, about a third of the sites surveyed “had encountered some form of local objection when they were establishing their site. Some objections were similar to those that might crop-up with any land-use change, such as the fear that the new use might generate more traffic for neighbors” (179). The concerns identified
by Yarwood et al. are the kind that tend to surface in planning contexts more generally and were only infrequently tied to explicit concerns about the development of green burial sites in particular. The authors note that this might be a linguistic limitation within the field of planning. “As planning objections must be phrased within the language of land use (Hubbard 2006), some of the cultural predispositions that may underpin objections to the development of green burial sites may have been disguised or dismissed by the planning system” (Yarwood et al. 2015, 179).

A number of people who choose natural burial elect to have a tree planted with their body. People who want to be buried near each other (spouses, for instance) might each choose to be buried with their own tree. An interviewee voiced concern that the tree planting arrangement sometimes favored the wishes of the deceased or bereaved at the expense of growing healthy trees, since the roots of trees that are planted too close together can strangle each other (Anon. 2018m). To maximize the eco-benefits of this approach, more education on the part of potential customers might persuade people to opt for a tree position that aligns their burial preferences with a comprehensive sustainability plan for the site.

Whereas natural burial more or less represents a return to a long-practiced method of corpse disposal, other proposals embody entirely new techniques. DeathLAB, a multidisciplinary research and design group that rethinks how cities handle death, has proposed a method of anaerobic bioconversion to convert corpses into gas that can power memorial lights. The idea is to capture the energy of several corpses, each in its own pod, in a luminous display commemorating the dead. They have proposed displaying collections of these pods underneath the Manhattan Bridge, in a Constellation Park with paths for pedestrians to gather. They have also partnered with Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol, UK, to explore the possibility of designing an installation of pods there as one part of the existing cemetery. DeathLAB’s agenda is to change urbanites’ “relationship with death, to reintegrate it in communities instead of having it be cut off from us in distant, unseen places” (Wallace 2016). Creating a new way for people to
commemorate the dead, in spaces already dedicated to that or another public purpose, is a solution that could benefit communities in the long run.

These proposals recognize that commemorative practices are not static and the appearance and use of memorialization spaces can and does transition over time. At a minimum, some changes will accrue because of natural evolutions in the maturing landscape or new trends in memorial design (Rugg 2000, 272). In other instances, “memorials are removed as they become unsafe or expensive to maintain, and the landscape may become an uncertain indicator of the identity of the deceased. Indeed, over time, cemeteries may acquire the characteristics of local parks” (Ibid). We already see this in some cases where the need for burial space has decreased or the existing cemetery has outlived its burial purpose.

The declining burial rate in many European countries exceeds that of the United States and has led to corresponding changes in cemetery design and function. In Berlin, Germany, the demand for grave space declined so much that some cemeteries have been converted into parks, playgrounds, or gardens (McMillan 2016). Grave markers have been removed in some, while in others they have become part of the park’s charm. In Leise Park, a former cemetery in Berlin, the “children all report having favorite headstones and trees in the small, walled-off garden park” (Ibid). Most cemeteries in Germany are state- or church-owned, which makes this conversion much easier than in America, where most cemeteries are privately owned.

There is precedent for adapting cemeteries in the United States to serve as parks. A neglected cemetery in Pulaski, Tennessee was converted into “a combination park, cemetery and historical monument” (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development 1971). Even in municipally owned sites, the laws surrounding lot ownership make this example difficult for other cemeteries to emulate (Ibid). A couple of the factors that made the Pulaski cemetery’s redevelopment possible were that the city was able to establish (1) the public ownership of the cemetery, (2) that the possible interests of various parties in the graves and markers would not unduly interfere with the site’s redevelopment, and (3) that the city had the authority to make
improvements (*Ibid*). Because there was no explicit law in Tennessee (as there was in Indiana and Pennsylvania) granting municipalities the right to make improvements, the city assumed some risks in redeveloping the site, but the municipal authorities determined that the advantages of beautification outweighed the risks (*Ibid*).

Importantly, the conversion of this cemetery into a combination park, cemetery, and historical monument did not require disinterment. A central cause of concern was that the plan required the removal of headstones, but though these were removed from their graveside locations, they remained on display elsewhere on the cemetery grounds (*Ibid*.). Had the redevelopment plans necessitated disinterment, the project would likely have been prohibitively expensive to build; had the removal of the headstones to an off-site location been proposed, the plan could have encountered further legal obstacles.

Another consideration in cemetery redevelopment projects is the issue of “desecration.” To desecrate something means to “treat (a sacred place or thing) with violent disrespect” (*New Oxford American Dictionary 2015-16*). A cemetery’s “sacredness” can be thought of in religious terms, but it “can also include an assessment of pilgrimage to the site, its permanence, and its ability to act as a context for grief” (Rugg 2000, 261). Because of this “sacredness,” people have certain expectations not only about how visitors should conduct themselves in the space, but also about how maintenance and reconstruction should be performed. Even in cases, like the Pulaski one, in which surrounding residents and descendants of those buried in the cemetery support the planned redevelopment (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development 1971), the method in which the construction is carried out is decisive. Not all interferences with or alterations of cemeteries count as desecrations; “typically, where the courts have found a desecration, the defendant has used the property in a manner wholly inconsistent with its use as a cemetery or has damaged the graves by digging in and around them” (*Ibid*).

In cemetery redevelopment projects like this, even small details matter immensely. For instance, in a project that required laying new electrical wire through the burial area, digging a
trench beside the grave “was found not to be a desecration where the trench had been dug by
hand immediately adjacent to the grave but by machine the rest of the way” (Ibid.) These
construction constraints need to be accounted for in the budgeting and decision-making process
as they can incur extra costs beyond a typical development project. Anticipating these additional
costs and being sensitive to these issues can preempt foreseeable community objections to
cemetery redevelopment or improvement projects. Context matters in all planning contexts and
cemetery redevelopment is no exception.

Indeed, the legal consultants who drafted a report on the Pulaski redevelopment process
cautions against universalization. In this case, they write: the benefits were clear: “A
neighborhood, once blighted, would be attractive. As a result, property values and tax
collections would increase. The cemetery itself, once an eyesore and community liability, would
become an asset and a memorial to the community’s founders. Whether or not the decision
would be the same in another case depends upon the benefits to the particular community
involved…. as against the costs and other obstacles” (Ibid.) This particular design intervention
involves a much more intensive overhaul of the space than would be possible or advisable in
most cemeteries. It was a good option for Pulaski because the cemetery was largely abandoned
and thought to have a negative impact on the community. Milder design interventions can
suitably enhance other cemetery spaces.

Some design interventions improve the quality of cemeteries for both casual visitors and
mourners alike. The most straightforward of these are landscape and infrastructure
improvements. Sites that are easier to traverse can benefit people who prefer to use the
cemetery as a throughway rather than as a destination. Some cemeteries, such as West
Norwood, have only one entrance. Pedestrian foot traffic is limited to those who are there for the
purpose of being in the cemetery, or those who mistakenly think they will find another exit.
Cemeteries in this study with multiple entry points generally see more foot traffic than those with
only one entrance (Anon. 2018c; Anon. 2018e; Anon. 2018b).
Cemeteries, whether they are active or not, seem more park-like the more traversable they are. Adding paths and entrances is one way of anticipating decreasing burial traffic and inviting other types of users into the space to extend its lifespan. Their literal permeability translates into higher rates of casual visitors. As some cemeteries have attempted to attract more visitors, they have added footpaths and entrances, increased wayfinding signage, and removed overgrown brush and dilapidated monuments. Since Tower Hamlets was formally closed to new burials in 1966, its managers have added footpaths throughout the park and increased the number of entrances. While the main entrance to the park is locked at night, the six new “kissing gates” are open 24/7 (Greenway 2018). Woodlawn in the Bronx has two entrances, one in the southwest corner and one in the northwest corner, with a path connecting them. Local residents will sometimes walk through the space, and the cemetery’s managers and operators do not discourage this practice.

Bristol’s Arnos Vale Cemetery is a designated heritage site, which limits the improvements that can be made (Anon. 2018a). They have added tarmac to some paths to make wheelchair access easier (Ibid). These changes improve the visitor experience regardless of the reason for the visit and make the site more comfortably accessible to a broader range of users.

Visual permeability is another crucial factor in people’s enjoyment of a site and their perception of its accessibility. “Views into…. cemeteries might be as important as access and daily use” (Harvey 2006). Laurel Hill is working on a plan to illuminate some of their monuments at night so that the cemetery, which sits on a cliff, will be visible to drivers on the road that runs along its edge (Anon. 2018j). Though the main goal of this plan is to increase awareness of the site, staff also believes it will have some security benefits (Ibid). This is another example of the tandem benefits of infrastructure improvements.

The principal burial function of cemeteries changes over time. Acknowledging and planning for these changes can prevent them from falling into disarray. As cemeteries’ burial
capacity decreases, some administrators like those in the above examples do what they can to introduce alternative uses into the space. Sometimes this might happen naturally, as some visitors, like those at Graceland in Chicago, respond to the space’s openness and treat it as a park, without realizing that the space is still an active cemetery.

Cemetery administrators have the prerogative to plan for and respond to changes in their sites as they wish, but there are good reasons for planners to involve themselves in these processes. These sites can be important open spaces for local residents, as both recreation and environmental outlets. A well-managed cemetery can provide environmental benefits to its surrounding community through carbon sequestration, as seen in Woodlawn and others that qualify as arboreta, and stormwater management. Impervious surfaces, such as those found in most gravesites, are important mitigators of storm surges. Once land has been designated as a burial space in the United States, it is incredibly difficult to alter its land use. Changes implemented in these spaces can therefore have long-lasting impacts on urban spaces. Making improvements there is one way that planners can enshrine a positive urban legacy.

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<th>Technical Intervention</th>
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<tr>
<td>Combination parks</td>
<td>Retrofit cemetery to serve as public park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase accessibility</td>
<td>Add footpaths; increase entrances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual permeability</td>
<td>Add lighting; create a porous border</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. A list of technical interventions that address some of the technological or design challenges facing aging American urban cemeteries.

Programmatic Interventions

Interviewees had very distinct impressions of whether or not their sites were experiencing adequate levels of use. Even cemeteries with high rates of visitors would like to increase these numbers and engage more with their community. Some interviewees were more amenable than others to adapting their cemeteries’ space, programs, or policies to achieve these goals. Interviewees commenting on the same cemetery sometimes had different ideas.
about the kind or degree of adaptations that should or could be made to meet these goals, but they all agreed about the importance of increased visitor and community engagement. No cemetery included in this study sought to decrease its visitor rate or diminish its community relations, and even those currently receiving high numbers of visitors thought growth was possible and desirable.

Several of the oldest cemeteries in this study have made significant efforts to improve their natural landscape or recreational offerings in the hopes of drawing more visitors. Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, as its name suggests, views its function as commemorative and recreational (Anon. 2018e). Nature conservation is a major focus there and the staff attempts to manage the space in a way that balances the needs of people and wildlife (Ibid). An interviewee noted that the park “has a very neighborhood feel because everyone wants access to open space, although it also falls on the tourist agenda. It’s unique compared to other parks in the area because it’s really a piece of countryside in the city” (Ibid).

The park has approximately 3,000 volunteers a year and hosts volunteer events with a wide variety of partners, such as former drug addicts, students who have trouble in school, school groups, and groups of people with disabilities (Ibid). When asked what kinds of groups the cemetery preferred to partner with, the interviewee responded that they will work with “anyone and everyone really! The cemetery can be the backdrop of the activities,” whatever those activities are (Ibid). The cemetery does indeed offers a diverse array of programs. Over the years, it has been the site of a cinema fest, a contemporary circus, art exhibits, and nature walks (Ibid). People walk their pets there, enjoy the quiet on a bench, explore old graves, and learn about nature through informational plaques placed throughout the park. These informational plaques are now seen in a few of London’s garden cemeteries (see Figures 5 and 6 on the next page). London’s Abney Park, one of the original “Magnificent Seven” garden cemeteries, is branded as “a woodland memorial park and Local Nature Reserve,” with “free public access to the park throughout the year so everyone can come and enjoy this oasis of
peace and greenery with a fascinating history” (“Home,” Abney Park accessed 2018). The park was the first statutory Local Nature Reserve designated in the borough of Hackney and several species found there are included in the City of London Biodiversity Action Plan (Ibid). The park offers classes in green woodworking and stone carving, courses in woodland management, volunteer opportunities in landscaping or burial research, and monthly guided walks that educate visitors about those buried in the cemetery and about its flora and fauna (Ibid).

Chicago’s Graceland serves an important open space function in its city, although it is not as heavily utilized as the cemetery administration staff would like (Anon. 2018m). Approximately 4,000 visitors are recorded every year, and an estimated additional 2,000-3,000 visitors come through without registering (Ibid). The cemetery is located just a half-mile north of Wrigley Field, and the cemetery offsets some of the commotion from its surrounding Wrigleyville neighborhood. From inside Graceland, you can sometimes hear the elevated train run nearby, but it is mostly quiet and people enjoy coming there just to be outside, sit, or read a book (Ibid). The cemetery has a variety of wildlife that is not commonly seen in other parts of the city (Ibid). Coyotes, owls, hawks, and sometimes deer enter the site (Ibid). The cemetery is an
arboretum and has tree maps available for self-guided tours (Ibid). The cemetery corporation does not offer any formal tours or events themselves (Ibid). Any tours that enter the space are led by external parties. Although cemetery staff would like to offer nature-education programs, such as wildlife talks or tours, the staff (both programming and maintenance staff) already operates with a skeleton crew, so these events cannot occur, at least not in the near future (Ibid).

Woodlands in Philadelphia is operated as much like a public park as possible (Anon. 2018o). Although it is located near other parks, it is the largest open space in the area and draws many local visitors (Ibid). The cemetery occupies the former estate of Andrew Hamilton, an eighteenth-century Philadelphia lawyer, whose “cultivated landscape was transformed into a ‘rural cemetery,’ …. Thousands of evergreens were planted among existing species to enhance the setting. Today’s landscape is a virtual arboretum that includes seven aged but magnificent English elms and fifteen trees that qualify for State Champion status” (“The Woodlands Cemetery Company” accessed 2018).

A portion of the programming at the Bronx’s Woodlawn Cemetery is composed of nature events. In 2015, the site was the recipient of a $42,000 Urban and Community Forestry Program tree inventory grant from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) (NY Dept. of Environmental Conservation 2015). With approximately 6,200 trees representing over 140 unique species, the cemetery is a certified Level II Arboretum (Anon. 2018p). These trees constitute an enormous resource for the area, since they provide carbon-sequestration in an emission-dense area with high asthma rates (Ibid). They have also worked with the local New York City Audubon Society on bird-watching events and tours, the New York Botanical Garden on environmental conservation events, and the New York Amateur Astronomers Association on star-gazing and astronomy events (Anon. 2018l).

Green-Wood has a rich history as an open space. Throughout its history, an interviewee contended, “Green-Wood was always both an active cemetery and park for people to enjoy”
Anon. 2018g). At both the state and local level, the cemetery has been recognized as a green space resource (*Ibid*). While “the cemetery is not a publicly-owned space, it is open to the public 365 days a year” (*Ibid*). Cemetery staff members believe that many more people are coming to use the cemetery as a green space, not to use the cemetery for mourning or remembrance purposes per se (*Ibid*).

Green-Wood’s administration has leveraged its function as an open space to secure grant funding for landscaping improvements. The cemetery is an accredited Level II Arboretum (Sutton 2017), housing almost 7,000 trees, with one of the most mature tree collections in New York City (Richman 2012). In its capacity as an arboretum, the cemetery recently received $75,000 from NYS DEC to work with Sunset Park, the neighborhood south of the cemetery, to inventory and assess the neighborhood’s street trees and another $75,000 to develop a community forest management plan (“Urban and Community Forestry Grants” accessed 2018). The cemetery has also applied for two cost-share grants to address tree maintenance and removal (Sutton 2017). The cemetery lost 300 trees to Superstorm Sandy and would like to use Green-Wood as a resource “for the community to learn about the diversity of trees and how to maintain them in the face of climate change” (*Ibid*).

Most of the cemetery managers, operators, or board members interviewed in this study see the increasing focus on programming and community use as a return to their cemeteries’ original use and purpose. Indeed, cemeteries’ role as cultural institutions was especially strong in the nineteenth century, with the rise of the rural cemetery movement. The cemeteries included in this study typify this rural cemetery design. With the advent of this cemetery style, “everything about death changed…. [Cemeteries began to be seen] as places of natural respite, not of decay and foreboding” (Jacobson 2016). Rural cemeteries, sometimes also called garden cemeteries, were designed for the living as well as the dead, and droves of nineteenth-century city-dwellers “got cozy with their final fate in bucolic grounds where the notion of beauty in death was celebrated” (*Ibid*). Wide lawns and winding paths, budding trees and picturesque views
replaced the densely packed dull grave markers of earlier graveyards. Green-Wood Cemetery was indeed one of the chief inspirations for New York City’s Central Park (Keister 1997; Bachelor 2004, 12). As civic institutions grew in number, cemeteries’ public importance wavered and then essentially collapsed. In the twentieth century, rural cemeteries gave way first to lawn-park cemeteries and then to memorial parks, neither of which were particularly welcoming to recreational visitors and even actively discouraged uses that had been encouraged in earlier rural cemeteries.

Interviewees frequently invoked a desire to reestablish these cemeteries’ functional importance in their communities. “We’re trying to get back to our roots as a rural cemetery. All the things we’re trying to do, the changes we’re making, are a strategic return to that spirit,” an interviewee said of Laurel Hill (Anon 2018j). Another interviewee said, “Green-Wood used to be an immensely popular weekend destination for New Yorkers. Not right when it opened, but a little later in the nineteenth century, people came there regularly…. It’s becoming more popular again, but you don’t see that happening everywhere. Even we’d like to see more visitors [to Green-Wood] than we have now” (Anon 2018h).

Almost every cemetery in this study has expanded its cultural programming in recent years, and hopes to do so more in the future. The cemeteries in this study that offer the most programs tend to have better – or at least the interviewees perceived that they have better – relationships with their communities. Cemeteries that offer extensive programming have staff and/or volunteers dedicated to organizing and hosting events. “Friends” groups are invaluable resources for many of these cemeteries. Many of them not only organize or host tours and events themselves, but they often also raise funds necessary to maintain paid staff positions to support these programming and membership functions.

Historical and architectural tours are the most common types of programs offered. Cemeteries routinely offer tours of their most famous permanent residents’ graves, explore the insides of mausolea, or give a general overview of the architectural significance of the cemetery,
its design, and its best-known monuments. The cemeteries included in this study are perhaps outliers in that they offer more programming than the average cemetery, but it is not uncommon for even less well-known cemeteries to offer some tours, though on a less regular basis.

Over the last few decades, Laurel Hill has been able to grow its program offerings. Their Friends group was established in 1978 to preserve and promote the historical character of the cemetery and to develop and implement educational programs there (“Mission” accessed 2018), but throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the cemetery was still operating with a skeleton crew (Anon. 2018j). The Friends could not afford to hire a dedicated program director or staff member and only history tours were available at the cemetery during this time (Ibid). In the early 2000s, the Friends were finally able to hire a staff member to lead programs and tours (Ibid). “That’s when the tour offerings expanded because they wanted to get different people in there” (Ibid).

Cemeteries’ event offerings tend to reflect the character of their community and might provide some clues as to the types of visitors the cemetery does or would like to attract. In addition to the standard fare, Woodlawn offers several tours and events relevant to the history of its home borough. The cemetery hosts tours such as “Greats of Jazz and Vaudeville: A Victrola Trolley Tour,” “Duke Ellington’s Birthday Celebration Concert,” and “The Bronx Brewery Legacy Trolley Tour” (“Events” accessed 2018). There are also holiday and seasonal events, such as Women’s History Month and Earth Day events in the spring. Their Arbor Day tree-climbing event for families is one of their most popular annual events (Anon. 2018p). Providing a diversity of programming that strikes a chord with the community is important because, outside of the public programs and volunteer events, the public is not as heavily involved in the cemetery as Woodlawn staff would like (Anon. 2018l). The programs are designed to entice people into the space, but the hope is that they will then spend some time there rather than leave immediately at the program’s conclusion (Ibid).

Arnos Vale has a strong relationship with the community. Indeed, the cemetery owes its continued existence to a group of dedicated community volunteers who saved the cemetery
from redevelopment in the 1980s-90s (“Arnos Vale Through Time” accessed 2018). In 1987, concerned locals rallied in response to an announcement that a large section of the cemetery would be cleared and sold to a developer (Ibid.) They formed the Association for the Preservation of Arnos Vale Cemetery, which later became the Friends of Arnos Vale Cemetery (Ibid). Since then, the community has had firm ties to the cemetery, which regularly hosts school groups, film screenings, live theatre, and night tours (Anon. 2018a). The community views this as an important cultural and natural resource. “Landscape use is as important as the use of the buildings,” and runners, bikers, and dogs on leashes are all allowed (Ibid). The breadth of program and activity offerings allows Arnos Vale to cater to many different users and purposes and the cemetery has about 20,000 visitors a year.

Green-Wood boasts more visitors than most, with approximately 250,000 people entering each year (Anon. 2018f); about 25,000-30,000 of those visitors attend a program or tour (Anon. 2018g). The cemetery’s visitor rate has fluctuated greatly over time, both in response to cemetery and city-wide changes. From the 1850s until the end of the nineteenth century, Green-Wood was an extremely popular destination (Anon. 2018f). However, the visitor count fell precipitously until the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1991, the cemetery started leading occasional tours, the success of which led to the creation of the Green-Wood Historic Fund in 1999 (Anon. 2018f; “About/History” accessed 2018). The Historic Fund is responsible for preserving the historic character of the site and “advancing public knowledge and appreciation of this significance,” among other things (“About/History” accessed 2018).

In the last two decades, Green-Wood has embraced its role as a cultural institution and is pivoting to offer more cultural amenities and services. Cemetery staff see their site and cemeteries in general as an undervalued resource of historic knowledge: “By law, the cemetery has to keep records of all burials, so from an archival perspective these approximately 100,000 cemeteries [across the country] are an incredible resource” (Anon. 2018g).
The cemetery is also trying to invite greater involvement from people living in nearby Sunset Park. The Historic Fund has recently hired an architect to build a new building across from the cemetery that it hopes will house an art gallery, office space, and an auditorium that community members can use to host events. They have also attempted to diversify tour offerings to better represent the rich history of the site and reach out to wider audiences. Black History tours were launched in the last few years, and soon the gamut of tours will be offered in Spanish (Anon. 2018f).

Some of the Historic Fund’s nontraditional events failed. They tried to host a movie series that drew scrutiny and complaints from lot owners (Anon. 2018f). This event series, which was unsuccessful at Green-Wood, is popular in some other cemeteries around the United States. In Los Angeles’s Hollywood Forever Cemetery, crowds of 4,000 people gather to watch films (Jensen 2017). This tradition has grown in popularity since its inception over fifteen years ago (Ibid). A film screening in Chicago’s Bohemian National Cemetery drew hundreds more people than security could allow in (NBC Chicago 2015). As the dichotomous reactions to these film screening attempts show, the same programmatic intervention can be received entirely differently in discrete contexts.

Most of the above programs make use of the cemetery’s natural, historical, or aesthetic significance, or use it as a backdrop for entertainment, cultural events, or other activities. Cemeteries have also begun to host programs that connect visitors with the cemetery as a space of death. These events invite people to “embrace [cemeteries’] reason for being: death” (Anon. 2018a). While cemeteries have long had cohorts of volunteers who help trace genealogy of burials and catalog interment records, these new events focus less on recording the facts of death or the dead and more on philosophical or cultural notions of death itself. Death cafés, where people gather to eat, drink, and discuss death, are one of the most common death-related events hosted in cemeteries. Cemeteries have also begun hosting talks about the history of cremation, different burial methods, the history of the funeral industry, etc.
There is a concerted effort in London to coordinate more death-related programming. Since 2014, London’s cemeteries have been the backdrop for the London Month of the Dead, a series of “events investigating the capital’s relationship with its deceased residents. Events will include a private view of the Museum of London’s bone archive, taxidermy workshops, macabre walking tours and… death salons with talks on subjects ranging from public dissection and body snatching to reincarnation and funereal folklore” (“About” London Month of the Dead accessed 2018). The purpose of the annual October event series, according to its official website, is “to inform, entertain, and provoke on the subject of death and London cemeteries” (Ibid). A portion of the proceeds of these events go to much-needed cemetery improvements (Ibid).

There has been an uptick in interest in these kinds of events in recent years in the United States, as well. A few years ago, Green-Wood’s programmatic focus adhered almost exclusively to the site’s architecture and history (Anon. 2018i). Although these tours discussed the people buried in the cemetery and showcased the notable graves, they emphasized the cultural importance of the site’s history and deemphasized the more morbid aspects of the cemetery’s purpose and operations. As one interviewee put it, cemetery staff wanted people to view the site as more than just a place for burial: “We were thinking, ‘Hey, we’re not just a cemetery.’ But then by the third year or so, programming attendance was way up, people were really interested in the space as a cultural site. So then we actually felt able to start talking about the cemetery as a cemetery and touch on the death side of things again” (Ibid).

For the staff and volunteer tour-guides, bringing people into the space for non-mourning related purposes has also been an adjustment. “When I first started offering tours, I felt a bit weird. I was worried about standing on somebody’s grave while I was talking about the people buried there. I thought it might look disrespectful, but then I realized that by telling their stories and bringing people in to see [the graves] we were respecting [the dead]” (Anon. 2018f). For some, overcoming mental barriers to using these spaces for purposes unrelated to burial and mourning is difficult, but as each of these cases shows, there is appetite for it.
Most cemeteries cannot provide all the programming that they would like to because their budgets or other constraints do not allow it. Chicago’s Graceland is currently unable to host its own tours and events because of a budget shortage (Anon. 2018m). There is a building on the grounds that the cemetery staff would like to refurbish and use for events, but it has a landmarked status so it must be restored in its original style (Ibid). If this building can be restored, staff would like to present a variety of programs, from education events to death-industry-related ones (Ibid). They envision that part of the space could be used as a museum (Ibid). The cemetery also has a small chapel, but it has no bathroom and its wooden floors prohibit food and beverage service, so it is inadequate for hosting events; though the cemetery occasionally receives queries about hosting weddings there, they cannot accommodate these requests (Ibid).

Most cemeteries are not able to collect much information about visitors. While almost all the cemeteries in this study have some data on program and event attendance, a few also collect general visitor counts. These tallies are made by a security person posted at the entrance. Detailed information about visitors, such as where they live, is not collected. While it is uncertain who exactly attends cemetery events, interviewees generally believed that evening events were attended mostly by locals and that daytime tours have a more diverse composition (Anon. 2018i; Anon. 2018j). While some cemeteries have international appeal, like Green-Wood and Highgate (Anon. 2018d; Anon. 2018f), most cemeteries’ reach does not extend quite that far.

Laurel Hill receives many visitors from Philadelphia, but it is a regional destination with a regional audience (Anon. 2018j). Part of the cemetery’s ability to draw this kind of crowd is due to its location. Though the site was originally outside the city, it is now within city limits, about four miles from Center City. It is close enough to the city that it is easy to get to, but far enough away that it feels like a bit of an escape. An interviewee said, “The location here is really special. [The cemetery has] beautiful views and landscape. People come here because it’s in
the city limits and it is still a destination” (Ibid). The fact that the space is pleasant and conveniently located makes it a draw, but people are attracted to more than its natural beauty. People come because “they really want to be in a cemetery. But they want to be doing something there other than mourning” (Ibid).

Interviewees generally agreed that the people who came to cemetery programming valued these spaces because they were cemeteries. One interviewee’s statement speaks to a point made by many of those involved in this study: “We don’t want to lose sight of or gloss over that cemetery aspect. The fact that it is a cemetery is important” (Anon. 2018g). Cemetery managers simultaneously felt these sites were interesting to some visitors in their capacity as cemeteries, but that others who did not attend their events were often discouraged for the same reason. While for some, cemeteries are a draw because they are cemeteries, for others this creates a barrier to comfortable use of the space. Straddling this line between being a cultural space and a place for burial can be difficult at times. Each interviewee agreed that active cemeteries have a responsibility to lot owners and their community to maintain respect for the space as a cemetery. However, everyone does not always agree about what constitutes respectful use of the space.

For many of the interviewees, introducing new people into the space was of primary importance. One interviewee said that “the point of doing these events is to get people in [the cemetery], which will get them interested in the space and then turn them into advocates of the space” (Anon. 2018j).

To build this audience, cemetery operators have had to learn to consider the visitor experience. At Green-Wood, “we’d already paid attention to the griever’s experience, and we still do, but we also looked at the visitor experience. What was it like for them?” (Anon. 2018i). Creating a positive visitor experience is explicitly part of cemeteries’ 501(c)(3) activities, not part of the 501(c)(13) cemetery corporation activities. However, most interviewees felt that although
the funding and operations of these entities were distinct, there was a “symbiosis between the 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(13) that enabled both to function” (Anon. 2018j).

Many interviewees reported a crossover between people interested in the space for burial and those interested in programs. “We do see people who come to the cemetery for one side of our offerings getting interested in the other side now,” an interviewee remarked about Green-Wood. Another interviewee commented that the people who run the Green-Wood Historic Fund are trying to find a way to introduce the people who are there for mourning to the Historic Fund and its activities (Anon. 2018f). This conversion works both ways at many cemeteries, with those originally entering the space as mourners returning for other activities, and those who first come to partake in a tour or other program later inquiring about burial, cremation, or other death-related services.

The previously mentioned unexpected uptick in burial interest at Laurel Hill occurred after they expanded their programming offerings (Anon. 2018j). Prior to that, burial demand had been declining and they did not plan to expand burial space. After more programs were implemented, the cemetery received more inquiries about burial space and more people were purchasing plots than before (Ibid). The recognition that “the Friends group has brought to the cemetery has enhanced both its cultural and cemetery use” (Ibid).

At Woodlawn, “some people get involved in the space because they have buried family there, and definitely vice versa […] The programming is part of the nonprofit [the 501(c)(3)], but it’s definitely important for the cemetery part [the 501(c)(13)] because it draws customers” (Anon. 2018l). Like the other cemeteries in this study, Woodlawn has very little burial space remaining. In recent years, Woodlawn, like Laurel Hill, has found ways to maximize land that, though originally part of the site, was not intended to be used for burial. Woodlawn hired engineers to build out part of an unused area of the site to accommodate additional burials, but the total available grave space is still limited (Ibid).
While some of the more technical aspects of cemetery management (such as burial policy and cemetery corporation structure) are largely outside cemeteries’ control, there are some simple changes that are within their wheelhouse. Cemetery corporations have the authority to set the rules and regulations that govern their space. Amending these rules can change how people use the space. Such amendments represent the “low-hanging fruit” of programmatic interventions and can be considered or attempted at almost any cemetery.

Some of the cemeteries in this study have published rules and regulations (hereafter jointly referred to as rules) while others do not. This section will provide an overview of some general trends in the available lists of rules, supplemented with commentary from interviewees about the various effects these rules have on how visitors use the space.

As discussed above, each cemetery in this study places somewhere on a spectrum of highly governed to minimally governed space. There is not a one-to-one correlation between how tightly governed a cemetery is and frequency or type of use.

When Green-Wood staff began to consider the experience of visitors, as opposed to that of mourners, they realized that many potential visitors were dissuaded from doing so because they were not sure they were welcome in the cemetery (Anon. 2018i). Green-Wood updated its signs to make it clear that they welcomed visitors and clearly advertised basic rules for using the space (Ibid). According to Green-Wood’s official website, the full list of rules and regulations is available in the office at the main entrance (“Visiting Green-Wood” accessed 2018).

The full list of rules was last updated on December 22, 1993 (“The Green-Wood Cemetery Regulations”). The opening section of the rules governing conduct in the cemetery reads, “All lot owners and visitors, employees of the Cemetery and builders, contractors, gardeners, burial vault companies and their employees are reminded that the Cemetery grounds are devoted to the interment of the dead. Strict observance of the decorum which should be observed in such a place is required. Therefore, any person disturbing the quiet or
good order of the Cemetery by noise or improper conduct will be compelled to leave the Cemetery” (Ibid).

In addition to the rules listed on the website prohibiting bikes, motorcycles, and pets, the published regulations also proscribe bringing liquor or refreshments into the cemetery (Ibid). Visitors may only walk on roads or paths, or where no such road or path exists, the space between lots or graves; lot owners may stand on the lot in their ownership, but no other (Ibid). The published rules do not explicitly forbid jogging or recreational activity, as the website does, but presumably these behaviors would violate the “decorum” mandated by the rules. The activities allowed in the space are very limited. While one interviewee said that they thought the rules were certainly more relaxed than they were 30 years ago, the fact that the rule book has not been updated since 1993 indicates that they are not much more relaxed than they were 25 years ago.

Graceland has recently experimented with relaxing some rules. This adaptation process was both top-down and bottom-up. Compared to other cemetery boards, Graceland’s is fairly progressive and is open to trying new things (Anon. 2018m). In the last few years, more visitors had been asking what kinds of activities were allowed in the cemetery, wondering if they could run or bike there, and the staff supported allowing these activities (Ibid). With the board’s approval, the rules were loosened to allow visitors to run and bike in the cemetery (Ibid). Part of the rationale behind allowing biking in the cemetery is that bicycling is gaining popularity as a transportation mode in Chicago (Ibid).

At the cemetery staff’s discretion, visitors can still be asked to leave the cemetery if they are using the space in a manner that the staff deems disruptive, especially if these visitors are disturbing people there visiting a grave (Ibid). There are still restrictions on recreational uses: skateboarding and rollerblading are not allowed (because of fears that these activities will lead to monument or headstone damage) and drone-flying, an increasingly popular activity in other open spaces, is forbidden (Ibid). Student driving, an activity commonly attempted in many urban
cemeteries, is also not allowed (*Ibid*). For their own safety, visitors are also discouraged from feeding wildlife (*Ibid*). An interviewee said that most people who behave boisterously in the cemetery “just do not realize it’s an active cemetery and don’t know [Graceland’s] rules. They’re not trying to be disrespectful. They just think it’s a park or another recreational space” (*Ibid*).

Graceland’s posted rules are and have always been vague, but the staff has tried to make them less vague as the rules evolve (*Ibid*). Providing more explicit information about what uses are and are not allowed lowers the threshold to people entering and using the space. Potential visitors who have easier access to more comprehensive information about permissible activities are more likely to feel comfortable there.

Philadelphia’s Woodlands has gone through phases where the cemetery was more closed off to visitors than it is now. In the last 5-10 years, Woodlands has cultivated a more relaxed, recreational atmosphere in the cemetery and has seen a corresponding bump in visitors, an increase that was especially noticeable in the last 3-5 years (Anon. 2018o). Like other cemeteries in this study, this return marks a realignment with the historical use of the space as a destination for Victorian outings (“The Woodlands Cemetery Company” accessed 2018).

The site has a few basic rules posted at the front entrance, but most of them are purely to protect visitors’ safety as many of the monuments and graves in the site are very old and have not all received the highest standard of maintenance due to budget limitations (Anon. 2018o). The cemetery’s informational and regulatory signs number about three, which is very low for the site’s size (54 acres), but the staff thinks it is important to preserve the feeling of “escape” that people come there to experience (Anon. 2018o; “The Woodlands Cemetery Company” accessed 2018). About 75% of visitors are local residents or workers; the spot is a popular lunchbreak destination for many from the nearby hospital and university (Anon. 2018o).

There is only one entrance to the site, which is otherwise fenced, and the cemetery does not maintain gate security staff (*Ibid*). The cemetery contracts out to a neighborhood security
force to lock and unlock the front gate, but visitors are free to come and go every day between
dawn and dusk (Ibid). The perimeter of the cemetery gets about as much foot-traffic as the
interior, with a user-generated dirt path frequented by runners (Ibid). The cemetery welcomes
people to use the site for exercise and it has become a favorite of the Philly running community
(Ibid). In addition to being an active cemetery (the site also has a large estate in the rear that
operates as a museum, so people come there for a variety of reasons (Ibid). New burials are
concentrated in a newer section of the cemetery (Ibid), which means that mourners and
recreational visitors can both use the space without much overlap, if the latter confine most of
their activities to the historic section of the cemetery.

New visitors are still sometimes surprised to see people jogging or walking their dogs in
the cemetery, but as more and more people have latched onto the site’s multi-functionality
confusion or concern about these activities has diminished (Ibid). The only significant contingent
of rule-breakers is people who let unleash their dogs, but, in the opinion of an interviewee, this
was not enough of a concern to warrant additional security and ranked very low on the
cemetery’s list of priorities (Ibid). The level of activity in and around the space ensure that there
are “eyes on the street” to compensate for the lack of official cemetery security.

Compared to many other historic cemeteries, Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill has very lax rules
and regulations. They allow people to run, bike, picnic, walk dogs, and take photographs (Anon.
2018j). This management philosophy “goes back to the roots of [Laurel Hill] as a rural cemetery.
It’s a strategic return to that spirit. Our theory is that the more people are in the space and
aware of it the safer it will be” (Ibid). The staff’s hope is that people will come into the space for
fun, become interested in it, whether as a cemetery or as an open space, and then become
advocates for the space.

While other cemetery operators are afraid to allow new uses into their sites, for fear of
disturbing community members, lot owners, or mourners, Laurel Hill’s management thinks the
risk is worth it. They have occasionally faced some resistance from the parties listed above, but
over the years, the number of people saying, ‘How dare you!’ or ‘Don’t you think that’s inappropriate?’ has drastically diminished” (Ibid). Laurel Hill even has a gift shop that is run by the cemetery’s 501(c)(3) (Ibid). When it was first introduced, it may have raised some eyebrows, but the fake skulls and other death-related paraphernalia are popular with many visitors and the shop is now an accepted feature of the cemetery (Ibid). An interviewee observed that most cemetery managers are afraid to expand their offerings based on a fear that people will think their actions are disrespectful or insensitive to the dead or the mourners’ use of the space, but that this fear is not justified (Ibid).

As noted earlier, Mount Moriah has virtually no rules regulating behavior, other than the general rules of law and order, because there is no one to enforce them. The cemetery has been in administrative uncertainty since 2004, when the last known member of the Mount Moriah Cemetery Association died (“Recent History” accessed 2018). The association appears to have been run by an Association employee between 2004 and 2011, and has been in legal limbo since the State’s discovery of this (Ibid). The City has access to the property to “abate the most egregious conditions” and the Friends continue their conservancy efforts, but approximately 60% of the site is still estimated to be inaccessible to the public due to poor maintenance (Ibid). The lack of rules governing people’s “decorum” in the space is understandable, given that most people do not use it anyway (Anon. 2018k).

The current state of affairs is in stark contrast with Friends’ Board President Paulette Rhone’s vision for the cemetery: “I see it as a wonderful green open space for the community, for the city of Philadelphia and beyond,” she says. “In the mid 19th century people came and picnicked on the graves of their family. We [would like to] have walks and bike rides and sporting events and kids learning history—learning the dash in between the birth and death date. Learning about sociology, horticulture and the environment” (Papa 2013). The above suggestions, summarized in Table 3 on the following page, are all ways that cemeteries can begin to bring about this vision.
### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programmatic Intervention</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature conservation and appreciation</td>
<td>Host nature walks, educational programs, Arbor Day/Earth Day events, etc.; partner with local Audubon and astronomy groups; arboretum certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational programs</td>
<td>Host history, architectural, and cultural events and tours; create museum space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational activities</td>
<td>Allow more recreational activities, such as running, biking, dog-walking, picnicking; create and rent community event space; host film screenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death-industry related events</td>
<td>Organize death cafés and seminars about the history of cemeteries or funerary practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updated rules and regulations</td>
<td>Relax rules and regulations to allow additional recreational uses; clarify existing rules; increase signage; post site maps and clearly indicate entrances and exits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. A list of programmatic interventions that address some of the challenges cemeteries encounter with limited community and visitor engagement.

### Policy Interventions

The primary policy limitations that cemeteries come up against are 1) spatial, and 2) financial. Cemeteries’ spatial policy limitations revolve around the burial in perpetuity model. This model is not universal and many other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and some European countries, practice term-burial in which graves are leased for a period of years. After the lease expires, the deceased’s descendants have the opportunity to renew the lease. If they choose not to, the remains are either moved deeper into the ground (often referred to as the “dig and deepen” method) or relocated. Exhumed remains are buried in a mass grave or cremated, and the grave is reused. In Singapore, Germany, and Belgium, for instance, public graves are free, but leases typically last twenty years (De Sousa 2015).

Some Britons are pushing for the country to adopt a grave reuse policy. Before the 1850s, most churchyards in London did reuse their graves, but then the number of dead outstripped the small graveyards’ capacity (Greaves 2013). People were horrified as they saw recent burials removed to accommodate more corpses. This led to the passage of the Burial Acts of 1857, which forbade grave exhumation for reuse (*Ibid*). Most cemeteries in England can
reuse some of their graves because their ground, or part of it, is consecrated, enabling them to bypass the government and negotiate directly with their Anglican diocese (*Ibid*).

This solution has yet to be widely adopted there. Although “Church of England allows cemeteries to reuse graves on consecrated land in which there has been no burial for at least 75 years, …. many cemetery owners are concerned that they may be breaking the law by reusing graves, …. a fear [that] the government could do much to allay by clearly stating that it isn’t illegal, but which it hasn’t done” (Bawden 2014). Only one cemetery in all of London, the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium, is reusing graves at a significant scale (*Ibid*). One motivating factor is the lower cost of purchasing a reused grave (*Ibid*).

None of the interviewees included in this study whose expertise was in American cemeteries thought that burial reuse was a viable option here in the near future, though many said that it could gain traction in the distant future. Some predicted that community opposition would pose too strong a barrier to adoption. “I don’t want to say it would never happen [in the United States] but the communities around these cemeteries will fight tooth and nail to prevent that from happening; people are wary of cemeteries doing anything shady or unethical, so they don’t like the idea of them changing their rules” (Anon. 2018m). Others thought the cost savings benefits might be compelling to some. “If people are choosing cremation just because it’s a more affordable option then maybe we should consider [adopting] grave reuse. It would be one way to make full-body burial a more affordable option so that people could really have their preference” without being unduly limited by budget constraints (Anon. 2018p). Only one interviewee was unequivocally enthusiastic about the possibility of grave reuse adoption in the U.S., but even they admitted that the likelihood of its introduction within the next few generations was exceedingly slim (Anon. 2018h).

The problem, according to many interviewees, is that America is too land-rich, compared to many other places that have adopted burial reuse, to appreciate the practice’s potential value. While burial reuse has some advantages, especially in terms of land conservation and
lower burial cost, the significant barriers to its incipient adoption make it unlikely that it will be adopted in the U.S. for quite some time. Cemetery corporations and planners interested in this policy’s potential in the U.S. should monitor as the process of burial reuse adoption unfolds in Britain so that the pitfalls they encounter can be avoided in the U.S.

Financial concerns are common for many cemetery corporations. Some of these are tied to the former spatial considerations because lot sales are cemeteries’ main source of revenue and trust investments. When a person purchases a cemetery plot, “the law requires a small portion of that purchase to be added to that cemetery’s Perpetual Care Trust Fund. The idea is that the income from this small portion would be sufficient to cover the maintenance needs of that particular plot and some common space” (Arizona Funeral, Cemetery and Cremation Association (AFCCA) 2017). As cemeteries’ burial space diminishes and these revenues disappear, they become almost solely dependent their investment funds, but these are not always managed well or sufficient to cover the cemetery’s ongoing maintenance costs.

Lapping (2003a) proposed three investment alternatives to address the financial shortfalls of cemeteries: increasing monetary contributions, decreasing distributions, or increasing investment returns (32). In practice, there are factors that “often prevent a cemetery from altering its current contribution and distribution policy,” and therefore cemetery corporations’ best option is to pursue increased investment returns (Ibid). While the market forces that affect investment returns over the years are not within cemeterians’ control, “many would be able to increase their long-term rates of return if they were simply free to pursue the same investment strategies as other funds with long-term goals…. Virtually all other endowment funds…. use a ‘total return’ model for investing,” which current regulations prevent cemeteries from doing (Ibid). Under the current rules in most states (excepting Iowa, Tennessee, Florida, and Oklahoma), distributions are limited to income (Ibid) and cemetery corporations are prohibited from using any of the principal for cemetery upkeep; whereas, under the total return method, capital gains would be reclassified as income instead of principal, meaning that this
value would be added to the percentage of the distribution of the account (AFCCA 2017). The total return model would make it possible for cemeteries to be less reliant on income-producing investments such as bonds (ibid) and align cemeteries’ distribution and investment policies with “the manner in which the vast majority of this country’s long-term institutional funds – endowment funds in particular – are already invested, and have been for some time” (Lapping 2003b, 39).

The importance of promoting new policies that allow cemeteries to practice total return investing was recommended by an interviewee, as well. “In the U.S., the overhead to operate a cemetery is just too much. In New York, you’re seeing smaller towns having to take over cemeteries from the corporations because they’re not able to maximize the return on their [perpetual care fund] investments. If the laws were changed to allow total return on investment, like other nonprofits are able to do, then we could invest differently to better manage cemeteries for the long-term” (Anon. 2018p). Since cemetery care fund regulation is managed at the state level and some states have already transitioned to a total return investment structure, evaluation of their cemeteries’ success could provide guidance to others interested in this intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Intervention</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grave reuse</td>
<td>Allow term burials in American cemeteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total return investment</td>
<td>Reform investment policy to enable total return investment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. A short list of policy interventions that address spatial and financial limitations of urban American cemeteries.
VI. Discussion and Conclusion

The cemeteries in this study, though all are different, face some overlapping challenges in regards to their spatial and financial constraints and their difficulty establishing or maintaining meaningful community relationships. While some people may find the idea of incorporating the above suggested changes in cemeteries distasteful, perhaps because it goes against their notions of propriety or decency, it is important to remember that these qualities and the behaviors attached to them vary greatly over time.

Cemeteries’ long history is a testament to their versatility. As Rugg (2000) eloquently puts it, “it should again be emphasized that the nature of burial space is not immutable. Even without the operation of other factors, the passage of time alone can change the nature and meaning of individual sites” (272). Several examples from this study have shown this. The seeming perpetuity of these places belies the many changes they undergo. Adapting to these processes, even guiding them, is not only possible but desirable, and planners should be at the forefront of this work.

This thesis has outlined numerous challenges facing contemporary aging urban American cemeteries, including limited remaining burial space, limited or negative community relationships, security issues, unsafe or unattractive monuments and/or landscaping features, and limited funding. A variety of implemented and proposed technical, programmatic, and policy interventions were described to address these challenges and align cemeteries with their communities’ shifting preferences and needs.

This work provides a broad array of interventions because cemeteries’ circumstances are so varied and solutions that have worked well in one space may fail spectacularly in another. As always in planning, there is not a “one-size-fits-all” panacea to address cemeteries’ problems. In advance of implementing any of these strategies in a new location, contextual evidence should be amassed and analyzed in support of the intervention.
Cemeteries can be important community assets and planners should think about how they can be leveraged to benefit urban residents, but it is important that planners remain mindful of who these assets serve. Not everyone is interested in cemeteries, for death-related needs or otherwise. While cemeteries can be a potentially valuable resource for some communities, this may not always be the case; more research about the beneficiaries of these projects needs to be completed prior to investment.

These words of caution are not intended to cause “planning paralysis.” Planners have abandoned cemeteries in both discourse and practice for far too long. The worst thing they could do is to continue to do nothing. Planners should familiarize themselves with the current state of their local cemeteries and the communities surrounding them, and assess whether or not there are additional community needs that these spaces could meet, if given proper resources. Municipal planners should work with local cemeteries to connect them to existing programs, such as the green space grants that some cemeteries in this study received, and, where appropriate, create programs that develop their capacity to serve their communities.

Above all, these spaces need to be viewed with fresh eyes. As the cemeteries in this work show, these places offer much more than a commemorative outlet. Cemeteries designed in the rural style, such as those described in this work, were never intended to be the tightly regulated, infrequently visited, solemn places that several people associate with cemeteries today. Many of these cemeteries are on the cusp of reaching burial capacity, which makes them prime candidates for reimagining the role they play in their communities.

Creativity is encouraged, and indeed it abounds in several of the sites in this study. Green-Wood’s historic and architectural tours, Woodlands’ close-knit running community, Woodlawn’s cultural programming and death-themed events, Graceland’s evolving cycling rules, and Laurel Hill’s annual Gravediggers’ Ball are all prime examples of the ways in which these cemeteries are adapting to changing times. Planners can and should support these
efforts. This work provides a set of initial steps that planners can recommend in other cemeteries to commence adapting these sites.

Burial spaces intersect with matters of environment, economic development, land use, and, most importantly, community development. More research needs to be done to understand the results that different approaches to cemetery management could have in each of these areas. America’s burial spaces still bear the marks of their birth; the rural cemeteries discussed in this work were constructed in an era in which public health concerns around corpses and disease were little understood and metropolises had drastically less real estate pressure than they currently do. The world has changed. Almost two centuries have elapsed since many of these cemeteries were founded. Planners should help usher these spaces into the 21st Century by addressing the technical, programmatic, and policy challenges they face, ensuring that the benefits that these spaces can provide are equitably distributed.

Revitalizing urban cemeteries is crucial because these spaces are in the heart of our communities, it is desirable because they contain untapped and underappreciated resources, and it is necessary because without proper planning they will become scourges to our cities.
Appendix: Interview Instrument

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

1) Can you describe how your professional experience relates to cemeteries? Feel free to touch on any relevant experience with cemetery policies, practices, or customs.

2) In your opinion, what are the major constraints on cemetery land use in urban areas? Feel free to speak about the limitations on the continued use of existing cemeteries, the creation of new cemeteries, or the use of cemetery land for additional or alternative purposes.

3) Do you think these limitations impact existing urban residents? If so, how?

4) Are there specific policies or regulations that particularly limit cemetery spaces or uses in some areas more than others that you feel are worth highlighting?

5) In your opinion, what are the impacts of grave reuse policies?

6) In your opinion, what are the most important functions of cemeteries in urban areas? What can be done to improve cemeteries’ ability to perform these functions? Feel free to be as specific or generic as you wish in your response.
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———. 2018g. Interview with cemetery manager, operator, or board member.  
———. 2018h. Interview with cemetery manager, operator, or board member.  
———. 2018i. Interview with cemetery manager, operator, or board member.  
———. 2018j. Interview with cemetery manager, operator, or board member.  
———. 2018k. Interview with journalist.  
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