THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

DeathTech Research Team

The Future Cemetery Workshop 2019

Workshop Summary

March 2020

Executive Summary

The first Future Cemetery Workshop took place in December 2019, as a meeting of diverse parties invested in addressing the future challenges of death care and redesigning Australia's memorial spaces. The workshop was hosted by the DeathTech Research Team at the University of Melbourne as part of the Future Cemeteries Project funded by the Australian Research Council, with their linkage partner the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (GMCT) (Grant no: LP180100757).

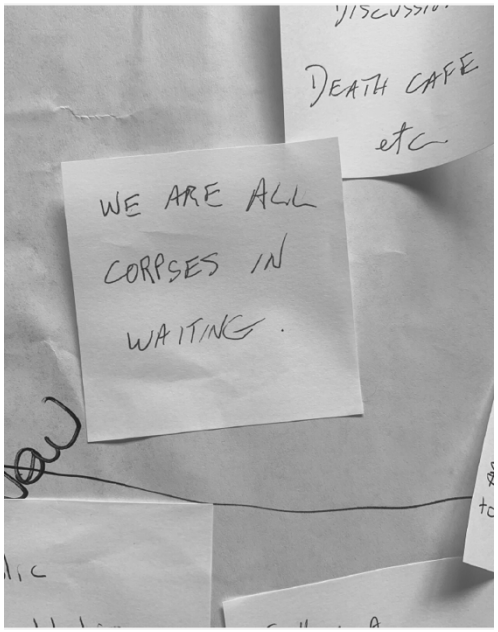
Through three design-thinking tasks, participants worked collaboratively to generate original visions of Australia's cemeteries, revealing new interconnections, roadblocks, and designs. The workshop was framed as a collaborative brainstorming session, with parties encouraged to push the envelope and dream big. This document is a summary of the diverse views contributed by multiple different parties and is not representative of any one organisation's opinions, or an endorsement of any one vision of the future cemetery.

The Key Findings from this workshop are as follows:

- The challenges facing cemeteries are highly interconnected, such that meaningful change requires collective action
- Distinct visions of the ideal cemetery exist within the community and these visions are sometimes in opposition to one another
- A diversity of cemetery designs and diverse offerings within single cemetery sites are both required
- Cumulative change is required across all dimensions of death care, including legislative, cultural, and technological innovation
- Finding partnerships and allies for change outside of the industry bubble is crucial

The workshop is the first of three planned annual events to be hosted by the DeathTech team. The outcomes will feed into a wider project of research, which includes surveys of the Australian population and the development and testing of new technology prototypes for cemeteries.

Updates on the project can be found at www.deathtech.org



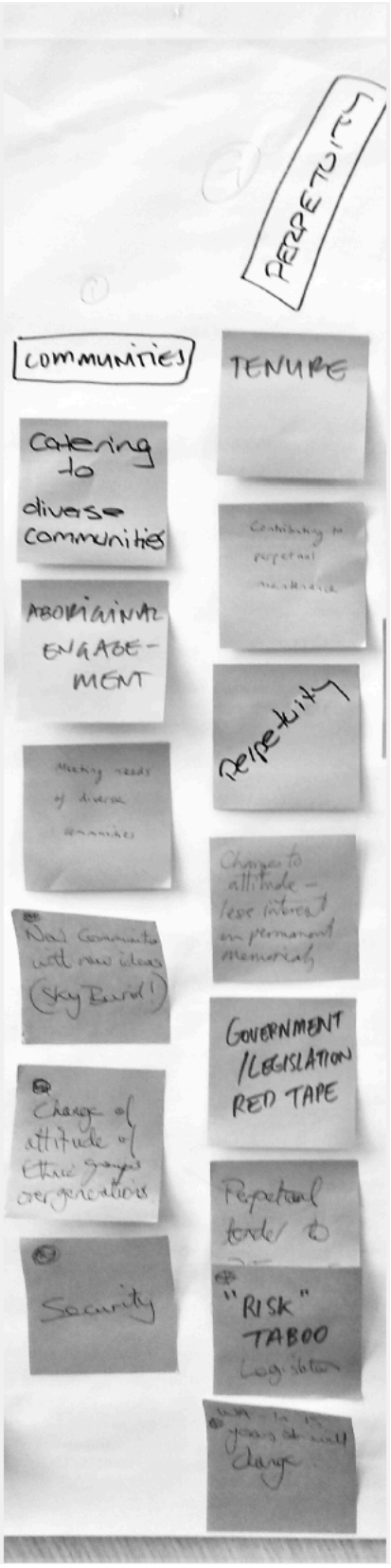
The DeathTech Team

The DeathTech Research Team is a multi-disciplinary group of scholars at the University of Melbourne who research and teach the sociology of technology, cultural and material anthropology, media and communications studies, and information and interactive systems design. Over the past decade, the team has worked across a number of major projects funded by the Australian Research Council Grant Scheme that examine death and technology.

The team's first major project, 'Digital Commemoration' (DP140101871), explored how the internet is changing the ways we approach death and commemoration.

The second major project, 'Death and Disposal: Beyond Burial and Cremation' (DP180103148), investigates innovative and scalable alternatives to body disposal, and elaborations on conventional burial and cremation.

In 2019, the team commenced a third major project in partnership with the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (hereafter 'GMCT'), entitled 'The Future Cemetery' (LP180100757), which will run over three years.



The Future Cemetery

The contemporary Western cemetery, dedicated to the dead and their memorials, has become more than a pervasive urban landmark. It is also a central site in the emotional lives and cultural histories of local communities. However, this model faces several challenges, including growing environmental concerns, maintenance costs, and the increasingly complex range of public desires for death care.

Around the world, cemeteries have begun to adopt new technologies to improve their visitors' experiences, reduce their facilities' environmental footprints, and extend the personalisation of services in response to diversifying community desires. These technologies include the potential for digital augmentation of grave management and visitation, alternatives to conventional burial and cremation, and new designs for landscaping and flora.

The Future Cemetery project will identify and critically assess the potential of innovative technologies to enhance the public's experience of the cemetery, diversify service offerings and strengthen community connections, all in the context of rapidly changing circumstances.

The First Workshop

Structure and Goals

In December 2019, the DeathTech Research Team hosted the first in a series of planned annual workshops for the Future Cemetery Project at The University of Melbourne. Representatives from government, industry, community groups and academia came together to assess the challenges and opportunities facing Australian cemeteries in the twenty-first century and to generate new visions for the future of our memorial spaces and activities.

The workshop guided participants through interactive tasks designed to provoke new thinking around contemporary disposition and memorial spaces. The conversation greatly benefited from the distinct expertise, experiences, and opinions of the participants and from the collaborative and egalitarian manner of discussion. Chatham House Rules were employed to encourage a free exchange of ideas.

Workshop Participants

A broad cross-section of the death care sector was invited to the workshop and the team was pleased that so many agreed to participate. The team will actively pursue even more diverse representation at future workshops.

The following organisations were represented at the first Future Cemeteries Workshop.

- Australasian Cemeteries & Crematoria Association
- Cemeteries and Crematoria Association of Victoria
- Cemetery Sector Governance Support (DHHS)
- Deakin Law School
- Die Wisely
- Friends of Coburg Cemetery Inc
- Geelong Cemeteries Trust
- Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (GMCT)
- Green Burial Council
- Health & Human Services Authority (DHHS)
- Lasala & Lasala Design Studio
- Lonergan & Raven Funerals
- The Melbourne Chevra Kadisha
- Modurn Group Pty Ltd
- Portable
- Remembrance Parks Central Victoria
- RMIT
- Soulful Ceremonies
- Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (SMCT)
- Stephanie Longmuir
- Swinburne University of Technology
- The Last Hurrah
- The University of Melbourne
- The University of Tasmania
- Upright Burials

Understanding the Challenges

Summary of the first workshop task

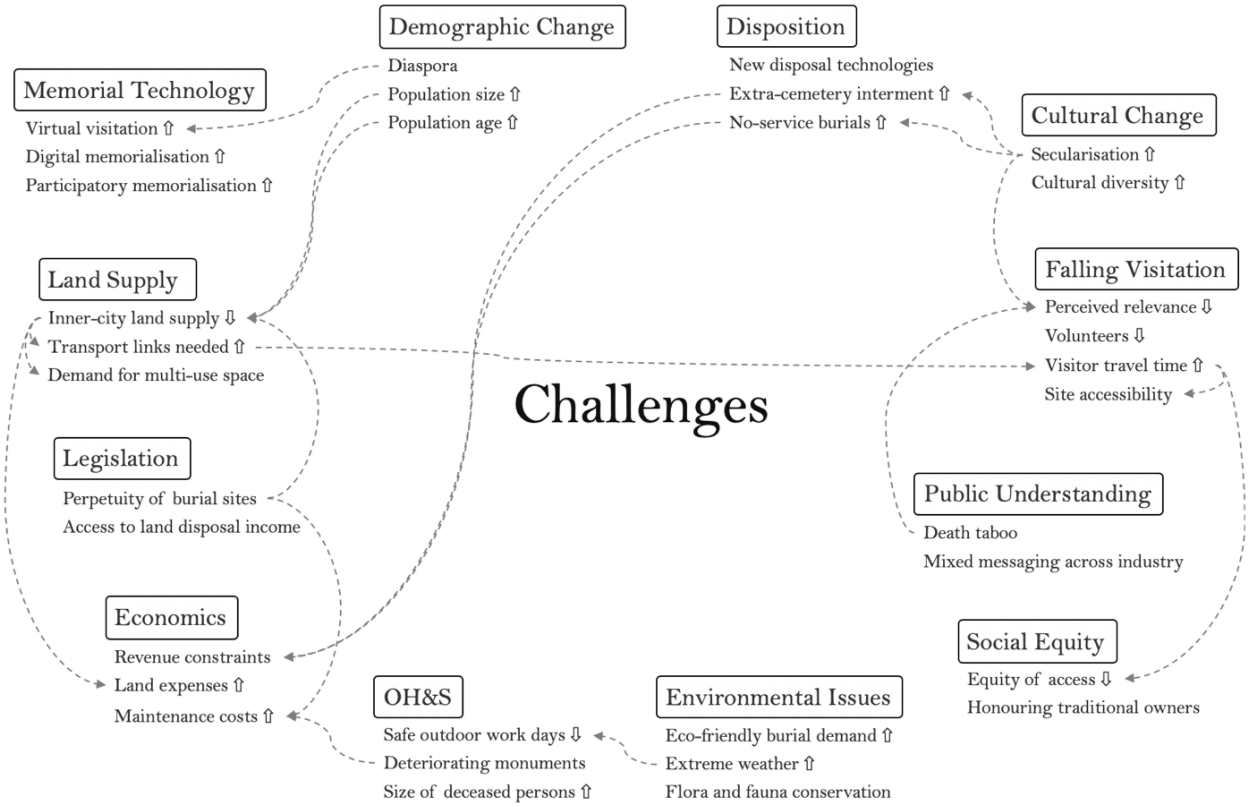
Understanding the Challenges

In the first task, participants worked collaboratively in small groups to map out the challenges the Australian cemetery sector as a whole is expected to face in the twenty-first century.

Several stand-out challenges were named by many participants, such as the growth and ageing of the Australian population and the difficulties in securing land for cemeteries. Other issues were raised by only a few participants, such as the social and psychological implications of no-service burials, reflecting the different domains of knowledge represented by those present.

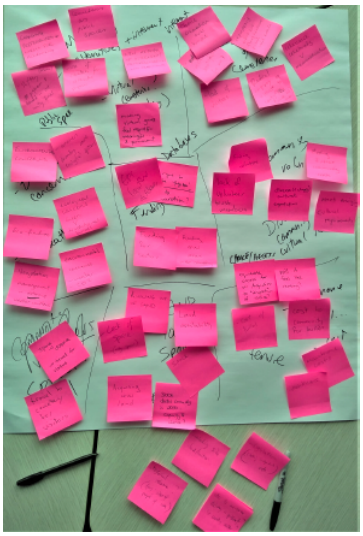
The responses were collated, and a diagram was created. This is not an exhaustive picture and future research by the DeathTech team will consider the exact nature of the drivers of change and their relationship. One striking thing about this diagram is the interconnected nature of the challenges facing Australian cemeteries. The arrows depict just a few of the causal links that connect seemingly separate issues. This helps to illuminate the dependencies that underpin the sector. To give one example, the potential impact of climate change and increased extreme weather events may have implications for the occupational health and safety of workers digging graves, which in turn reduces the number of days in which deceased people can be safely interred.

The complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges, across a variety of domains, suggests a need for strong and open communication between organisations to ensure that there is a well-coordinated response to address the challenges facing the sector effectively.



The Challenges

- **Demographic change**: the challenges of an increasing and ageing population for demand and provision cemetery services;
- **Land Supply**: the challenge of existing and future demand on cemetery land provisions, especially with cemeteries reaching capacity and demand for more land within reasonable travel distance.
- **Legislation**: the challenge of legislative impacts, especially of perpetual maintenance on cemetery land use;
- **Economics**: the challenges associated with the costs of managing cemeteries and land in perpetuity, and potential uncertain future costs or need to hold adequate funds;
- **OH&S**: the challenges for staff managing cemetery sites and materials that may be ageing, heavy, unsafe;
- **Environmental issues**: the challenges of climate change on cemetery land use and management, including drought-resistant flora and eco-friendly interment options;
- **Public understanding**: the challenges associated with lack of public engagement or literacy of death and cemetery services;
- **Social equity**: challenges associated with effort to provide equitable access to cemetery services for disadvantaged, marginal, or Indigenous peoples;
- **Falling visitation**: challenges associated with maintaining social relevance and/or connection to cemeteries and memorial spaces;
- **Cultural change**: challenges associated with increasingly diverse religious and cultural groups, as well as increased secularisation, on cemetery service offerings;
- **Technological change**: the challenges associated with increasing demand for, or alternative use of, technologies for memorialising;
- **Disposition**: the challenges associated with the provision of new disposal technology options, or demand for alternative and low-cost disposal and interment options.



Visualising the Future Cemetery

Summary of the second workshop task

Visualising the Future Cemetery

For the second task, groups of participants envisioned a future cemetery that would address one or more of the challenges identified in the first activity.

Using written descriptions, drawings, and even physical models, participants depicted their ideal future cemetery, considering what it would look like, how it would feel to visit, and how visitors would interact with it. Each group created an annotated representation of at least one ideal future cemetery and discussed the vision and purpose of their cemetery with the wider group.

From the ideas presented, we derived five general models that reflect the imaginations of the participants regarding the future cemetery. Each model is an abstraction of a general theme or principle that informed the proposals. The models are thus descriptive categories of the workshop content, rather prescriptive recommendations for the development of cemeteries. Most of the future cemeteries that participants described combined elements from at least two of these models. Future workshops and research could investigate questions such as why a particular model would be attractive to cemetery operators or whether the public would significantly favour one model over another.

The five models are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but certain models do seek to pull the future cemetery in opposite directions. The first model focuses on continuity and tradition. A second model focuses on nature and the living environment. A third model focuses on visitor engagement and activities for the living. A fourth model focuses on using space efficiently to adapt to a crowded urban setting. The final model focuses on the use of digital technologies, both to enhance the experience at cemetery sites and to distribute 'the cemetery' as a repository of memory beyond the bounds of cemetery sites.

1. The Traditional Cemetery

The cemetery as a bulwark of cultural heritage.

For some participants, the ideal cemetery already exists. Amongst workshop participants were a small but vocal number of supporters of the traditional Australian cemetery, which straddles the archetypes of churchyard and memorial park. Many participants expressed their admiration for at least some aspects of this model. They valued its sense of solemnity, its connection to the past, and the special significance of its memorials and practices within their religion or culture. These participants pointed out that their existing cemetery had already been carefully designed to suit the needs of their community, and worried that this could be lost if the central role of grief and memorialisation were de-centred from cemetery planning. As one participant summarised:

> *'Don't turn my cemetery into a park, because I'm not trying to turn your park into a cemetery.'*

Despite some defence of the traditional cemetery, many participants recognised the growing challenges that may render this model untenable or unattractive in the future. This suggests a need to diversify cemetery offerings, such that certain locations could maintain a dedicated cemetery according to the traditions and preferences of a particular community, while other locations could provide alternative cemetery models such as those below.

2. The Nature Park Cemetery

The cemetery for people, plants and animals.

The nature park model responds to two challenges identified by participants: growing demand for 'natural', ecologically harmonious burial practices and landscapes, and increasing demand on cemeteries to provide multi-use spaces due to diminishing land supply. This model meets these demands by breaking down the boundaries between cemetery and nature, both conceptual and physical. In this model, a single location would comprise zones for burials,

native bushland and general public usage. These spaces were imagined to have permeable borders, such that visitors could wander freely between different zones.

Participants suggested that this model might have implications for cemetery governance, with the site administered in collaboration with Parks Victoria or similar. The cemetery would provide amenities such as walking tracks, bike tracks, dog parks, nature activities such as bird-watching, and a light transport system to facilitate movement between and around spaces. There was a great deal of overlap between the nature park model and the socially activated cemetery model (below), with various proposals striking a different balance between bushland, burials and public event space.

An important feature emphasised by participants in the nature park model was that the future cemetery should be resource-neutral, through the provision of low-resource-intensity methods of body disposal and the use of carbon offsetting. Native plantings would reduce water consumption compared to the traditional lawn cemetery. Some areas of bushland would provide burial sites for those who desire a 'natural' burial, emphasizing the contiguous line between humans and the land. Multiple workshop participants additionally mentioned waterways as a desirable feature.

3. The Socially Activated Cemetery

The cemetery for the living and their leisure.

The socially activated cemetery model was proposed by participants to address the issue of falling visitation, amid a broader perception that cemeteries have declined in relevance to the living in an increasingly secular age. At the same time, this model responds to the challenges of land acquisition by cemeteries, by diversifying the uses of the cemetery.

The socially activated cemetery model makes space available within the bounds of the cemetery for visitors to engage in social activities that are not specifically related to commemoration, mourning or death. Participants suggested a range of entertainment facilities that could be incorporated into cemeteries, including playgrounds, skate parks, bars, concert venues, function rooms, petting zoos, formal gardens, food trucks and cafes. Educational facilities were also suggested, ranging from a small community centre up to a formal school of botany, situated within the wider context of a botanical cemetery.

The historical significance of the cemetery was also identified as a potential resource to be tapped, in activities such as walking tours and public classrooms. The overarching theme of this model was that the cemetery would become more a place for active social engagement, wellbeing, and leisure, and less a site dedicated to memorialisation and grief. It was noted that this is not an entirely new role for cemeteries, which have historically served as green spaces that allow people to escape urban environments or congestion.

4. The Urban High-rise Cemetery

The cemetery for the needs of the city.

A very small number of participants advanced the idea of a multi-storey high-rise cemetery, in opposition to the traditional spread-out lawn cemetery, to provide a space for people to visit loved ones in cities and areas of urban density.

The primary advantage of the urban high-rise cemetery model is that it requires a minimum of land. As a result, it could allow the deceased to be laid to rest in relatively close proximity to their loved ones. This model addresses the challenges of displacement and distance between the living and the dead that are created by the confluence of urban sprawl, population growth and governance issues that restrict the cemetery sector's capacity to secure future land. Currently, poor public transport links to cemeteries further exacerbate issues of equity and access.

However, while this model was suggested during the workshop, it was notably not used as the basis for any of the detailed visions of the future cemetery that were developed as a wider group. In most cases, the 'ideal cemetery' for participants still revolved around the image of a park, not a building, and the use of large areas of relatively open land.

5. The Digital Cemetery

The cemetery on the screen.

Embedded within many visions of the ideal future cemetery was the idea of a 'technology layer' dedicated to memorials for the deceased, which would co-exist alongside or possibly even replace the traditional cemetery.

This 'digital cemetery' would contain a collection of photographs, recordings and stories, curated by the deceased person's loved ones or even prepared in advance by the deceased themselves. These audio-visual memorials could be tied to specific locations at a cemetery, using technology such as GPS coordinates or Bluetooth beacons, and accessed by visitors to that location. One participant described this by analogy to geolocations in the augmented reality game Pokémon GO.

Alternatively, these memorials could be available everywhere through the internet, providing a virtual 'space' for commemoration that loved ones could 'visit' from any location. This would help to ameliorate the challenge of increasingly geographically disparate family and friend networks having fewer opportunities to visit the physical resting places of their deceased loved ones.

Steps toward the Future Cemetery

Summary of the third workshop task

Steps toward the Future Cemetery

For the final activity, participants explored the steps that could be taken to implement their own visions of an ideal future cemetery.

These steps were mapped on to a group timeline, from actions that could be taken immediately with sufficient organisation and will, to actions that would lie furthest into the future. This section of the report presents an aggregated summary of proposed future steps, thematically categorised by 'domains of change'. Some of these steps are specific to one model of the future cemetery, while others are more generally applicable.

The following should in no way be taken as a cohesive roadmap or a concrete set of recommendations. The content here is descriptive of the workshop content rather than comprising prescriptive recommendations. Given the diversity of future cemetery visions generated, the summary below gives insight into the breadth and depth of the domains of change that future cemetery planning will have to contend with. An overall breakdown of the domains within broad time periods is given on the following pages.

Participant Suggestions for Immediate Changes

1. Community-led change

1.1. Put forward a bold vision that responds to community needs
1.2. Increase community engagement and engage in robust co-creation processes
1.3. Improve data collection and sector knowledge about disposal and interment

2. Inter-industry collaboration

2.1. Strengthen allegiances between cemeteries and funeral services
2.2. Conduct training and skill-building within the cemetery industry

3. Research and define what 'healthy grieving' means today and what services and products contribute to it

Participant Suggestions for Short Term Changes

1. Education and Advocacy

1.1. Increase ‘death literacy’ via support for pre-need campaigns
1.2. Remind the community of the value of memorialisation
1.3. Change public perceptions about the cemetery and its uses
1.4. Maintain the reputation of cemeteries as neutral and trusted institutions

2. Legislation and Regulation

2.1. Advocate for cemetery planning as a core part of government land use and infrastructure planning
2.2. Secure funding for pauper burials
2.3. Prepare to engage with the public when cemeteries become the focus of media attention

3. Equity and Opportunity

3.1. Investigate environmental issues around future cemetery planning
3.2. Introduce a broader range of services to suit more cultural traditions
3.3. Introduce more options for low-cost interment
3.4. Introduce more complementary services, including caring services such as mental health care and bereavement counselling

Participant Suggestions for Medium Term Changes

1. Legislation and Governance

1.1. Push for more flexible and future-focused legislation that allows for recycling or cemetery land and resources
1.2. Push for standardisation of cemetery legislation between states
1.3. Streamline the process of land acquisition
1.4. Re-engage transport authorities such as VicRoads and public transport operators in planning for transport to cemeteries

2. Equity and Opportunity

2.1. Set up an industry think tank
2.2. Attain significant government funding for low-cost services
2.3. Consider long term funding models for the cemetery sector

3. Education and Advocacy

3.1. Engage in a real-world test of public demand for alternative forms of disposal, interment and memorialisation
3.2. Develop a world-class future cemetery model as a pilot

4. Service Offerings

4.1. Introduce more interactive memorials and a 'technology layer' to existing cemeteries

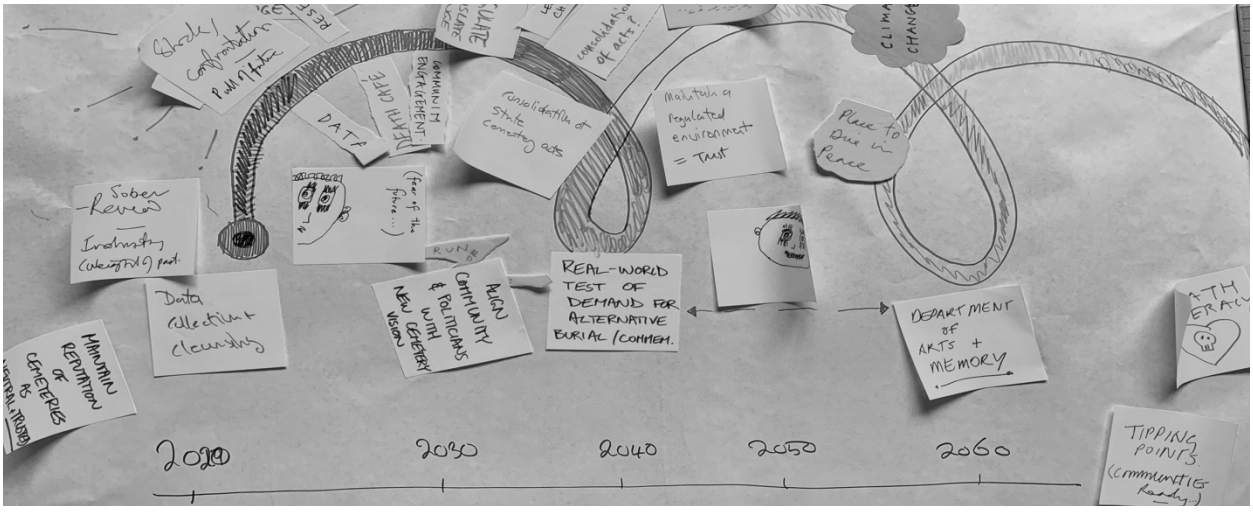
Participant Suggestions for Long Term Changes

1. Continuous community engagement that directly shapes management

2. Ensure proper oversight of the sector through a governmental body such as a cemetery ombudsman

3. Implement regulations for re-use of land on cemeteries that collapsed or are closed, including decontamination procedures

4. Encourage cultural change via a 'Department of Arts and Memory' or a Death Education curriculum in schools



Acknowledgements

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For project updates and further information, visit www.deathtech.org or contact deathtech-research@unimelb.edu.au

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