

Paper 3

From Research to Design

Proposals for the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery

Table of Contents

Introduction – Design motivation	3
The Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery – poised for change	4
Summary of Research Methodology and Preliminary Findings	5
Changing Site Context	
Urban Morphology	
User Focus	6
Burial practices	
Theory	10
Design Approaches	12
Between Ground and Surface	
Advantages of the Singapore context	13
Establishing the Columbarium	
Rethinking the Tombstones – A new ritual	14
Landscape	17
Conclusion: Creating a Lieux de Memoire	17
References	19

Introduction – Design motivation

“There is no end in sight for Singapore’s cycles of make-over. There are mega-projects lined up well into the next century that will transform the landscape entirely [...] The population will shift too, as whole new residential areas are developed. [...] Such incessant and dramatic change to one’s surroundings must have some effect on the Singaporean psyche. You could say it turns Singaporeans into a nation of nomads. Except that it is not the movement of the people that make it such, but the shifting of the land. Even if they stay put, the country moves around them, and Singaporeans find themselves eventually in a new place, clinging only to ghosts.”¹

In the few essays I have written on Singapore, I have found myself returning time and again to this excerpt from Singaporean writer Cherian George, each time seeking a better way to answer the dilemma he puts in front of us. George’s text, taken from his book *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*, is deceptively provocative, because it implies that Singapore’s state of change is inherently incompatible with engendering a sense of rootedness in her people. Part of this discussion has already been touched on in Paper 2, but it must be reiterated here to emphasize the significance of this context in driving the Graduation Project. More so, George’s text takes the state of constant change as one of total normalcy for Singapore, an urban condition so dominant that its impact on Singapore’s residents is one of totality, such that there is little room to create a different, perhaps more liberating reading of this urban condition, or to even redefine and shape what the characteristic urban condition of Singapore should be. Elsewhere in the book, George contends, “Even more disconcerting is the fact that the place you grow up in will not be the place you grow old in, and that you can never go back, because what was there then is here no longer ... Thus, in my own life, the basic coordinates of my mental map of the world ... have since been completely rearranged.”²

This image of Singapore as a compact, dense and rapidly changing city is perhaps shared by most major cities, and increasingly one that belongs to a growing Asia. Asian cities are experiencing a boom in growth and change. In an attempt to play catch-up with the modern cities of the largely Western hemisphere, Asia has perhaps overextended itself; in 2010, nine of the 24 megacities were located in Asia, but by 2025 this number is projected to sharply rise to 21 of the 39 predicted megacities,³ Singapore not being one of

¹ George, 2000. 193- 194.

² George, 2000. 190.

³ Collingridge, 2014.

them. If Cherian George's text truly encapsulates the sentiments of present city-dwellers, then the social psyche of today, alarmingly, one of utter anxiety, is now becoming a direct product of the built environment.

The aim of this body of research has therefore been to ask: how can one create threads of continuity between the past, present and future in an endlessly shifting environment? And, if the physical form can no longer be taken as a constant, is there perhaps another means of manifesting significance of place, the creation of rootedness, that lies apart from the form?

The Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery – poised for change

The Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery was so chosen because it neatly epitomizes these questions. The site had previously been the subject of significant urban transformation, and is now in a state of lull before the end of its 99-year lease contract for the land poises it for a new phase of change. The association's desire to initiate this has jumpstarted the last process, and has created an opportunity to address these stated questions in a design project. More significantly, as discussed in Paper 1, the changes that the Ying Fo Fui Kun has experienced lies not just in physical change. Rather, the reconstruction of its physical form has paralleled society's changing values and social structure; the dominance of clan associations in governing Chinese society has since dissolved in the wake of the birth of a new nation, and modern development has appeared to threaten the rituals and practices the Chinese community traditionally engages in. The function of the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery as a burial facility has brought focus to burial and commemorative rituals specifically in this project, but as the Chinese community has transformed from migrants to citizens in a multi-racial society, adapting to a country continually challenged by land constraints, there are certainly other practices that have similarly undergone a process of evolution. Regardless, the urban transformation of the city exaggerates these changes in practice and social psyche, imbuing them with physicality, and in turn heightening the effects of urban change such that it appears more pervasive in both speed and scale. With all this in mind, the question of how to navigate this complex environment becomes more challenging to answer.

One thing for sure is that any intention of preserving the form of the cemetery as it is now is perhaps a little too naïve given the pressures of Singapore's rapidly changing environment. The project must therefore ask which parts of the cemetery should be preserved and which parts are open to change. In this manner, the project straddles the line between redevelopment and resistance, the desire to remember pitted against our inevitable losses, and must consider a partial development of the site as a

possible means for the association and its cemetery to establish a continued presence on the land. Whatever the outcome, the project has to address the three user groups previously fleshed out in the second report; for that matter, the undertaking of the project alone unites all three: the author being in the first encampment, a member of a Singaporean society steeped in nostalgia and loss, mediating between her anxieties, the association's aspirations and the demands from its neighbouring community.

Summary of Research Methodology and Preliminary Findings

A variety of methods were thus employed to best address these questions, ranging from theoretical texts, to demographical studies, to interviews, historical records, site analyses and on-site observations. Some preliminary conclusions have already been made in Paper 1 and 2; this paper thus summarizes their findings, picking out key points that have direct impact on the design project and introducing other key frameworks necessary to approach the design process; other points of research have been detailed in Paper 1 and 2.

Changing site context

Of particular importance is the tracing of the historical development of the cemetery, from its original size at 40 hectares to its current 1.8 hectare plot. This was primarily carried out by referring to a combination of aerial photographs and survey maps from Singapore's National Archives, whereupon the extent and exact shape of the land given up for the construction of the housing estate becomes much more apparent. The inclusion of topographical maps further emphasizes the drastic changes made to the land itself, and cements the difference in context the cemetery finds itself in, from its first inception to its embedment in a public housing estate today. Nevertheless, though these physical changes render the original territory of the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery unrecognisable, mapping the presence of its original form proves vital to understanding the plot that remains. Such an analysis then expands the boundaries of 'site' to include the spaces in the residential development. We are no longer confined to the physical boundaries of the cemetery's current form, but can instead consider its original context as a larger territory of the site.

Urban Morphology

In tangent, a study of the morphology of the larger urban area, again carried out through a series of mapping exercises, reveals the pattern of urban development as executed by the state. Such a study hopes to discern the thrust of future planned development, to situate changes made to the cemetery against this new context. Here we must carefully distinguish the limitations of the design project: it is

impossible to predict the decisions to be made by the state concerning both the cemetery and the housing estate's future, without the state revealing their proposals beforehand. What can be concluded from the morphological study is this: that the larger urban area has been increasingly densified, and the presence of open space increasingly a luxury. (Fig. 1)

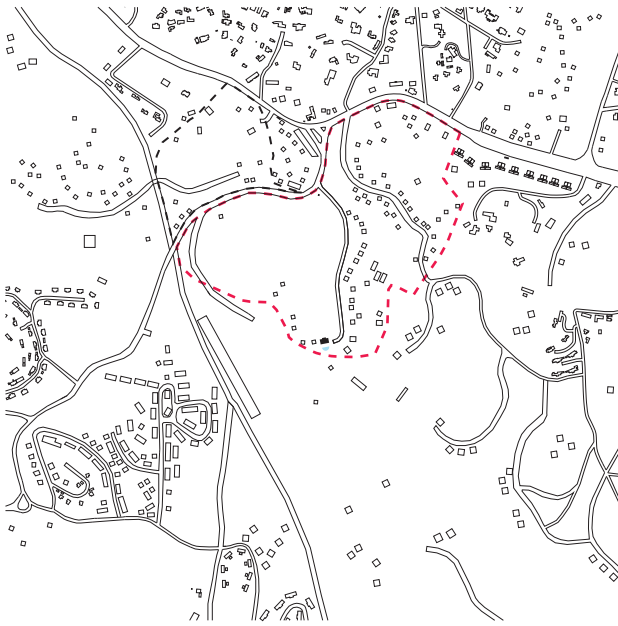
User Focus

At the same time, the changing attitudes of the public are also of central concern. For this, newspaper articles on the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery and other burial sites in Singapore become important, but more so are the interviews conducted with both the members of the public and members of the Hakka association, as explored and elaborated on in Paper 2. These diverse sentiments were then compared against on-site observations carried out in mid-September 2016 to gain a clearer understanding of how the cemetery is currently being used. Similar to the remarks made by former cemetery supervisor Loh Kwan Ling⁴, the on-site study confirms that the cemetery could do with better maintenance, though it is hardly overrun with weeds, and that it receives few visitors. Certainly, the place garners a greater crowd during commemorative festivals or events held by the Ying Fo Fui Kun, but this indicates a pattern of high activity for brief periods of time before swinging back to drastically low usage for most of the year. Instead, and rather interestingly, the cemetery is used most regularly by its neighbouring residents who cut through the land on a daily basis to access the housing estate. In this way, the cemetery functions primarily as a path rather than a destination. Future undertakings of the site must then consider this path-node symbiosis and question if the current balance is one to be reshaped.

Burial practices

In a similar way the evolution of burial practices is another factor to consider. Current burial practices in Singapore have adapted to the challenging land constraints the country faces and the imposition of specific spatial practices from the state. By mapping out the changing territories of burial sites, from the large land-bound cemeteries owned by various Chinese clan associations before Singapore's independence, to the current adoption of columbaria established by both state and private (often religious) institutions post-election as a replacement for the mostly exhumed cemeteries, it becomes obvious that the dead are becoming increasingly marginalised in a modernising Singapore.

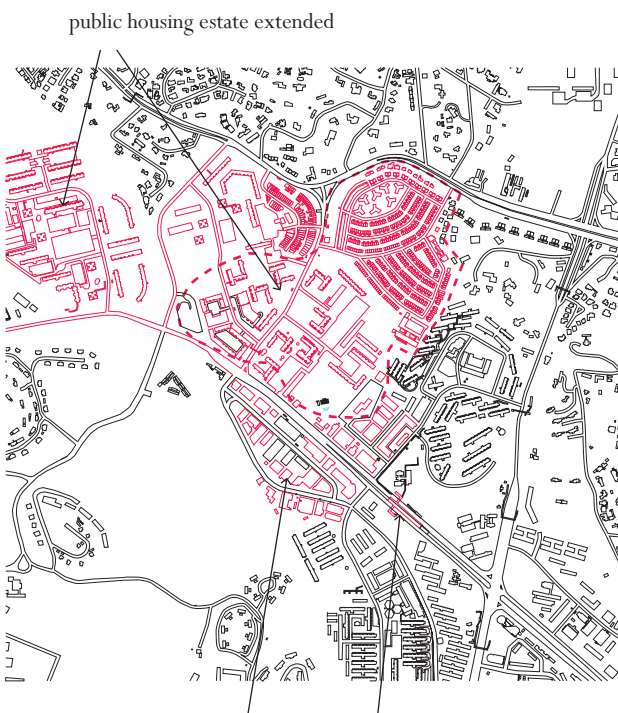
⁴ Teo, 2016.



1953



c. 1960



1975



2016

Fig. 1: Development of site

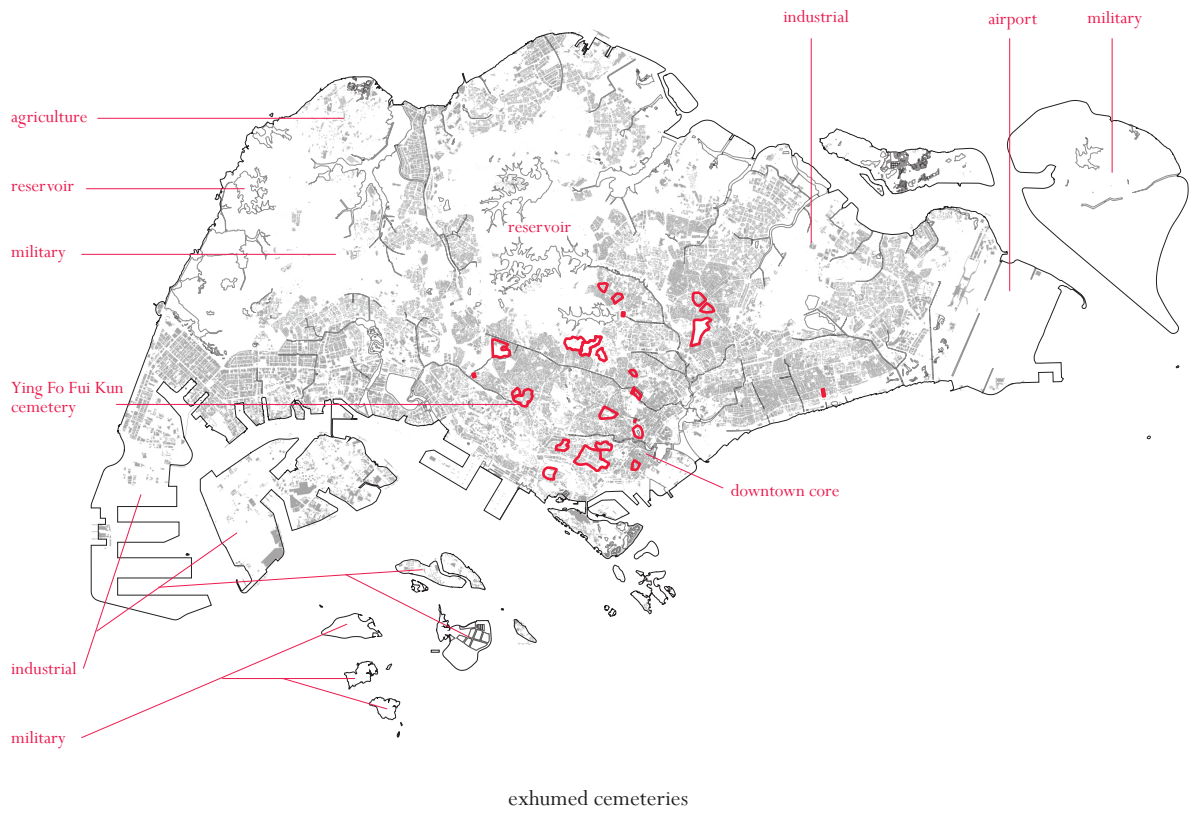


Fig. 2: Territorial marginalisation of burial sites

The incumbent government's strategy of its successive Master Plans and the carried notions of specific land zoning practices directly implies a prioritisation of land usage that conforms to established state ideals. A quick survey of these land use plans proves that cemeteries were exhumed largely in favour of commercial and residential developments; significantly, a large portion of Chinese cemeteries were clustered around the heart of Singapore, the area defined by the location of the Singapore River⁵ rather than the country's geographic centre, and now the location of Singapore's major financial and commercial districts. Burial sites have thus been dispersed to the peripheries of Singapore, having been accorded a lower priority in the state's allocation of land usage. (Fig. 2)

But the significance of the study of evolving burial practices lies not so much in the location of these burial sites but in the resulting intersection between the sites' physicality and the Singapore social psyche. These spatial practices, surveyed largely through academic studies and research papers, discuss how burial rituals have been compressed both in time and space, adapting to the new context of the narrow corridor in columbaria facilities rather than the wide expanse of land of old cemeteries. At the same time, the dispersion of burial sites to the fringes of the island creates psychological distance between the subject of death and society that mimics the spatial distance inadvertently created from state planning. It perpetuates the notion that death – occurring, commemorated and revisited away from the home and the nexus of our daily activities – is a foreign entity largely removed from social consciousness. This unfortunately encourages attitudes of resistance towards the presence of death, even a suggested presence, aided in part by some superstitious beliefs that consider burial sites to be 'unlucky' as discussed in Paper 2.

More work can be done on this subject. Though research has been conducted on how burial practices have changed in Singapore, it has so far stopped short of exploring how they could continue to evolve in the future. Research text like "No Place, New Places: Death and its Rituals in Urban Asia" by Lily Kong discuss how land scarcity has become an urban condition shared by other Asian cities, and similarly impacted ritual-making. For example, woodland burial in Fude Public Cemetery, in Taipei, Taiwan, places the ash in biodegradable urns in the earth typically marked by a tree, freeing up the land for future burials upon complete decomposition of the urn.⁶ Commemorative rituals in China have partially transitioned to virtual space; due to the difficulty of travelling great distances across the country to honour the deceased, web portals have instead been established, as an alternative, to commemorate the

⁵ The mouth of the Singapore River used to be the Old Port of Singapore in the 1800s. It became the centre of trade, commercial and financial activities, and also the primary entry into Singapore by migrants. Many clan associations and other religious and ethnic groups established their property in close proximity to the Singapore River. In Singapore's Master Plans, this is now understood as the Central Region of Singapore.

⁶ Kong, 2012. 423-424.

dead online.⁷ In a similar fashion burial rituals in Singapore are malleable, and can be further shaped to advance the project's objectives, such as closing the psychological distance between the subject of death and society. In addition, by hypothesizing a new expression of the ritual, perhaps by referencing the evolved practices in other countries, the design project would have established a guide on the sequence and shape of spaces these rituals are to be mediated in.

Theory

Discussions on theory are so powerful because they provide the vocabulary with which one delves beyond the immediately tangible - the empirical - creating new perspectives and narratives that can be used to understand the larger socio-political or ideological forces meted out on site, providing opportunities for either encouragement or subversion. This project likewise relies on a collection of texts to provide it with its theoretical underpinning, vital in shaping one's own attitude on how to think about the site.

Here, we refer back to Cherian George's extract in the introduction, where the writer associates the changing landscapes of Singapore with an undercurrent of anxiety that pervades the country. His concern of the modern metropolis is not unfamiliar. In *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, writer Ackbar Abbas states, "Architecture, because it is always assumed to be *somewhere*, is the first visual evidence of a city's putative identity."⁸ And yet, fast-paced cities like Singapore and Hong Kong problematize the visual, destabilizing the image of the city, and producing "*the unfamiliar in the familiar*."⁹ In George's text, the city is presented as an archive, with each element in the built environment serving as a repository of memory that has now been continuously placed under threat.

The greater narrative is then this: the perceived immediate repercussions on identity through the physical act of destruction imply that a specificity in the form of the landscape exists; it prevents the migration of the associated identity into its successor and thereby necessitates its death with the landscape. In turn, new activities and memories specific to the new landscape arise. Form-specificity trumps all. The history of the Ying Fo Fui Kun cemetery and the tussle for its land precisely builds into this narrative. And yet, how can so much significance be given to the form of the landscape, when it itself has become something so easily modified and almost inseparable from human activity? Rather, the

⁷ Kong, 2012. 427.

⁸ Abbas, Ackbar, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 1997, 64.

⁹ Abbas, 1997, 78.

complexity of the contemporary city reduces clarity in the visual, and therefore demands that new ways of reading the city must be proposed. As such, just as we demand new ways of reading the cemetery, this question is ultimately tied to a more fundamental concern: a new way of reading 'form'.

In this regard, Joshua Comaroff's text "Ghostly topographies: landscape and biopower in modern Singapore" proves vital, as it presents the notion of the "ghostly historical topography" – essentially, the immaterial – exerting a valid identity over the landscape via the presence of commemorative rituals.¹⁰ The introduction of the ritual becomes doubly important, not simply because it is an ongoing spatial practice that the Chinese community still engages in, but because it is precisely through its status as a spatial practice that it can become an equal carrier of identity transfer, transferring significance from the physicality of the landscape to itself. As a new signifier of identity, the ritual may never be the "first visual evidence" of a city's identity. But perhaps, just as Ackbar later references Edward Gibbon's observation in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it is the absence of camels that proves to Gibbon the authenticity of the Koran, for they were a part of the lived reality of its author Mohammed, who as a local "had no reason to emphasize them".¹¹ In a similar way, though the medium of the ritual may not be the most obvious manifestation of an identity, it could be the most enduring and perhaps the more authentic form.

At the same time, Schama's *Landscape and Memory* is a reminder that the physical form of the landscape is perhaps not as unstable as Abbas and George suggest. Schama questions the absolute notion of disappearance and erasure, highlighting the possibility of an enduring piece of the repository despite changes made to its surroundings. The uncovering of the Ying Fo Fui Kun ancestral hall's identity as a reference to vernacular Hakka architecture (as discussed in Paper 2) supports this claim, and further points to the notion that the user equally plays a role in acknowledging and discerning the narratives active on the site. In sum, the body of texts used becomes particularly useful when critical of existing assumed narratives on site, and serves as a guide in expanding or challenging them.

¹⁰ Comaroff, 2007: 66.

¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition", *Labyrinths*, trans. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), 181. Quoted from Abbas, 1995, 13.

Design Approaches

With these studies, the thrust of the project is perhaps obvious on a few fronts:

Firstly, the burying of one's ancestors, now continually being pushed out of the landscape, demands for new ways to bury and remember our dead that are compatible with the changes these sites will face. It is perhaps impossible to revert to traditional practices of having bodies buried in the ground, or having large areas of the land taken up by monuments that signify remembrance. Instead, the project needs to develop something that remembers in a different way.

Secondly, and, continuing from the earlier discussion of the destabilized image, this research must exert this conclusion: that significance can lie in the event rather than the form. A design that focuses on rethinking the ritual opens up this dialogue, where significance is not embedded in the continuity of form but in the continuity of practice, and perhaps the only way to create continuity in the context of a site that will always undergo change.

Between Ground and Surface

And yet, this does not mean the project should abandon the narratives that were associated with past spatial practices, but instead consider the divorce between narrative and form as a liberation that allows the narrative to be re-appropriated by new spatial practices. As mentioned in Paper 1, the traditional Chinese burial of placing the ancestor in the earth creates the notion of land becoming imbued with power and myth. The descendant was always aware of his connection to the symbolically-charged ground, reinforced periodically through the act of commemorative rituals. Even the design principles of the *wei long wu*, the vernacular Hakka architecture that the on-site ancestral temple references, demands that its structure be placed upon the landscape in relation to a sloping terrain, such that it must always be understood with the earth.

The implementation of the public housing development over the site and the change from burial to cremation has practically severed this narrative. Rather than ground, landscape is now read in terms of its surface. The public housing block first suggests this by creating surfaces suspended in the air, and reinforces it via carefully designed landscaping between the housing blocks, such that one reads the landscape through what is placed on it – the covered walkways, the aligned planting, the pavilion – rather than the ground that lies beneath it. It is perhaps also this reduced understanding of ground to surface

that has allowed Singapore to so callously pursue endless redevelopment projects; redevelopment can be compared to a cosmetic treatment of the landscape – almost akin to a rearrangement of furniture – with no perceived repercussions on the landscape. And yet, it has completely interfered with the symbolical nature of ground itself, an attitude that would give pause to any calls for change to the landscape.

Though the move away from burials cannot be changed, this narrative between the person and the ground need not be lost, and can instead be re-appropriated by new forms of rituals or a design that brings to the fore an awareness of the landscape. Certainly the narrative may be altered (and it should evolve), but it nevertheless allows the community to establish a line of continuity, and one that privileges the event over the form.

Advantages of the Singapore context

The advantage of the Singapore context lies in the fact that its society, even in the face of its modernity, remains aware and sensitive to notions of the spiritual. If a space is recognised as spiritually imbued – perhaps someone was buried there, although the burial site no longer exists – acts to commemorate and signify the dead are carried out in the space, even if the current purpose of the site is completely unrelated to burying. One can find joss sticks planted in the strips of grass lining the roads, or altars set-up along the corridors of the public housing apartments. Here, the Singaporean social psyche is shown to be receptive to the immaterial invading the banal, as a lived experience that perpetuates daily life.

Establishing the Columbarium

As suggested in Paper 1, the design project can take the form of an extended columbarium, preserving the existing use of the site and extending it to the larger Chinese community. This could be possible given the need for burial sites in Singapore and the neighbouring residential community's acceptance, albeit a reluctant acceptance by some, of the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery. In addition, the cemetery's history gives it an advantage: it had existed before the housing estate was developed and can claim precedence to justify its existence.

At the same time, subsequent analysis of the Ying Fo Fui Kun's ancestral hall in Paper 2 reveals its cultural significance, and highlights its poor emphasis on the cemetery grounds. Rather, the immediacy of the rows of tombstones have replaced its role in creating the site's imageability, standing as direct signifiers of markers of memory. More can be done to centre the ancestral hall on site, such as re-routing the path

to the hall to include its half-moon pond, where a frontal approach confronts the viewer with the ancestral hall set against the housing blocks – a layering of the old against the new. At the same time, built extensions to the columbarium can consider invoking and restoring the initial relationship between architecture and some sort of terrain. (Fig. 3) The visual layering of the site thus parallels a layering of time – the act of presenting a historical, traditional relationship in a new physical form thereby creating an architectural intersection that straddles the past and present.

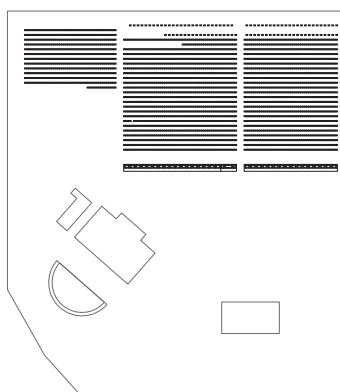
Rethinking the Tombstones – A new ritual

Similarly, future developments of the site must carefully consider its attitude towards the tombstones. Given the nature of its inception by the state, the tombstones can be viewed as mere replacements – vessels for the dead. They are, essentially, the original graves of the cemetery compacted, where the adaptability of form suggests that they can in turn be further compacted via the columbarium, and are thus perhaps the aspect on site most vulnerable to change. And yet, the power of the tombstones lies not just in its signification of memory, but that it is also a physicalization of the pressures of the rapidly changing urban environment of Singapore. These tombstones thus capture a moment in time where the need for change had a direct, visual impact on the built environment, thus recognising not just the past and present, but also the mediation between the two as an equally important state of being.

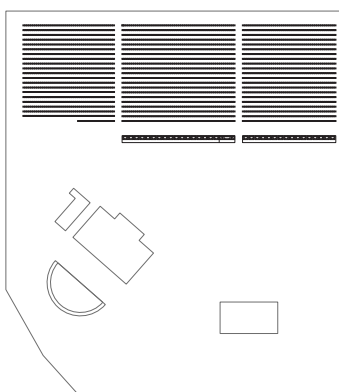
Much of the process of the Graduation Project had tussled with this dilemma – preservation or removal of the tombstones - and perhaps unwisely so. Such a debate ignores the notion of change being a process, and falsely assumes an instantaneous switch. Instead, the Graduation Project can consider a problem mentioned in Paper 2, that only 20 per cent of graves now are still tended to, and use that to design a process whereby a gradual exhumation of untended graves allows, perhaps, a new landscape open to the public to take over. Up until this point the research papers had collectively suggested the introduction of a new ritual, assumed to be burial, to reinvigorate the site, but such a process confines the experience of the ritual to the mourners of the dead and once again isolates the site to a specific community. Instead, the reverse process of exhumation can potentially open up the site to its neighbouring community, thereby establishing a new ritual that transfers ownership of the land from the clan association to the public, connecting these two communities, and playing with the visual wax and wane of dominating and receding landscapes. (Fig. 4)



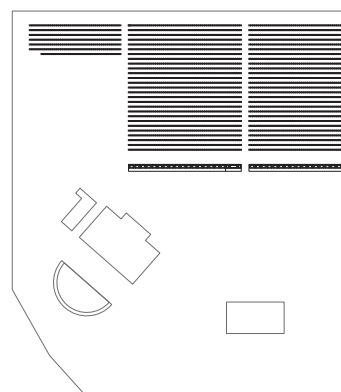
Fig. 3: Imagining the presence of Double Dragon Hill



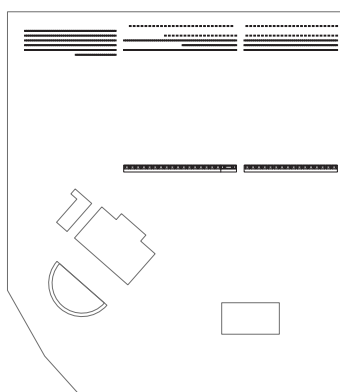
original



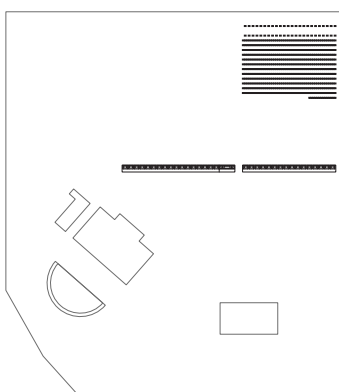
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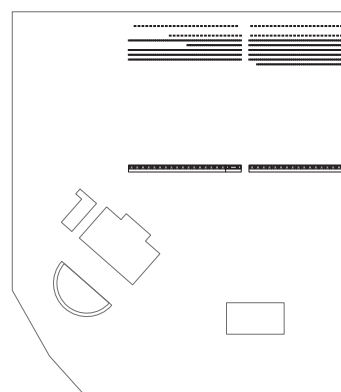
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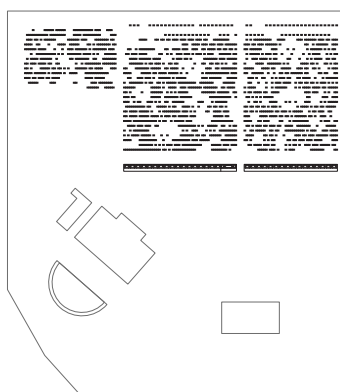
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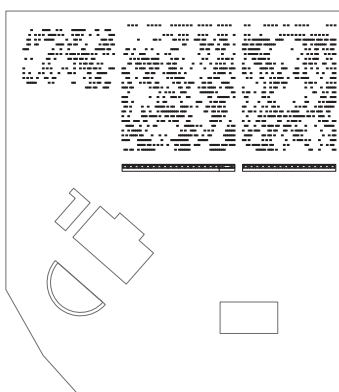
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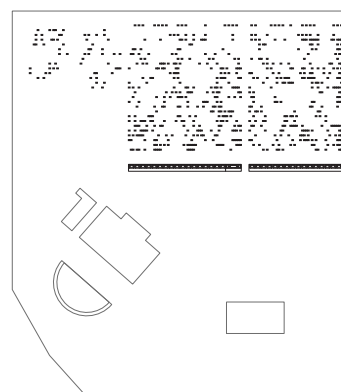
20 %



60 %



40 %



20 %

Fig. 4: Tombstone Study

Landscape

The Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery thus acts upon the housing estate, such that it is the internal changes to the cemetery that influence the creation of public space in the neighbourhood, and how the neighbourhood becomes perceived, accessed and used.

In a similar way, the redesign of the cemetery can in turn expand to a redesign of the landscape between buildings. Recalling that the extent of the original cemetery spreads into the housing estate, the landscape found in the latter can thus be obliged to carry meaning, a design of a new ground that remembers or evokes its past physical form. Such a design would thus consider constructed elements - paths, clearings, seating, shelters – but equally also the environmental conditions of the land: planting, water management, the provision of shade and the tempering of the environment. To this effect the project then seeks to find new ways in which a burial ground and housing can co-exist, mediating between something as banal as public housing and something as spiritually charged as a religious site.

Conclusion: Creating a Lieux de Memoire

In *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire*, French historian Pierre Nora proposes the idea of a *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, that gain value precisely because the conditions under which they exist now face the threat of loss. *Lieux de mémoire* can be either physical or non-physical in nature (perhaps, rituals)¹², but exists only when “an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears.”¹³ Here Nora continues, “Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable.”¹⁴ The desire to remember, to establish continuity to a past, becomes more urgent under the threat of loss and change. More interestingly, it is precisely these conditions of the contemporary city that allow even the most humble of objects to take on significance; they become more easily perceived as meaningful because of change, and may not have gained such a similar value in the context of a static environment.

¹² Nora (1996),Xvii – xviii.

¹³ Nora, (1989) 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 11-13.

The rethinking of the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery speaks exactly of this. The site itself is perhaps a *lieux de mémoire*, but as it too undergoes a process of change, new *lieux de mémoire* are proposed on site to give testimony to its past physicality and the narratives of topography and ritual associated with it.

The research for this Graduation Project has largely focused on tracing the changes to the site, both in terms of its user group (and the resulting conflicts) and in its physical form. Ultimately, the Graduation Project asks how the cemetery can be re-grounded in its significance, in both its own Chinese community and in the larger perspective of the public, and through both encouraged spatial practice and designed architecture.

A large part of this research has suggested that any new *lieux de mémoire* manifest through ritual, prioritising the event over the form, and in doing so, questioning what form this ritual should manifest in. Where exactly does the ritual start? And must it be understood to occur only within the boundaries of a burial site? Our earlier discussion suggests not – in terms of commemorating and burying, perhaps the ritual starts not when one enters the site, but after the person to be remembered dies, ends not when one leaves the site, but when one forgets about the person; and so the importance of the commemorative ritual – it demands the griever to return again and again to the grave to remember. But at the same time, our earlier discussion suggests this ‘ritual’ need not entirely be spiritual, though if not spiritual, it should certainly be meaningful. Perhaps ‘spiritual’ need not be understood only in terms of death or religion, but in an elevated awareness of one’s surrounding environment. And so the two rituals can be interwoven into the same landscape, mediating between the perceived banality of public housing and the exclusivity of a spiritually-charged cemetery site.

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List of Figures**Figure 1** | Development of site

p. 7

Author's own.

Figure 2 | Territorial marginalisation of burial sites

p. 8

Author's own.

Figure 3 | Imagining the presence of Double Dragon Hill

p. 15

Author's own.

Figure 4 | Tombstone study

p. 16

Author's own.