

Highgate: The Living Cemetery

Our vision for Highgate Cemetery envisages a place of coexistence for all life and all death - human and non-human, local and global. Karl Marx is joined by the last white rhino; the Victorian mass common graves are accompanied by mausoleums for stag beetles; and contemporary ecological death practices nourish the earth for future generations.

Highgate has long been home to some of the greatest men and women of London's history. It is also a place where nature has coexisted alongside human burial for centuries, but it has done so coincidentally. In our vision the site will now also be home to the greatest non-human species and actively managed living systems.

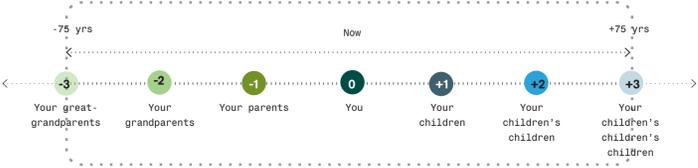
We look to a future of fully integrated natural systems where the cemetery is managed as a circular, zero-waste woodland; to the gradual growth of a future climate-adapted forest; where communities are invited to learn and work with the woodland; and where human death cycles are aligned with ecological life. This is the instigation of an evolutionary approach to stabilise a highly delicate and complex site. At Highgate, we embrace the restorative power of nature in both life and death, for past and future generations

A historic cemetery of the 21st century: Seven generation stewardship

Learning from the Native American Iroquois philosophy, the concept of seven generation stewardship urges our current generation to look both backwards and forwards three generations beyond our own lifetime - to the peripheries of the people we have encountered. In doing so, we can better understand the implications of our actions and take responsibility for them - designing for the long term.

For the East Cemetery, seven generation stewardship is transposed into seven gardens, a structuring device defining distinct character areas, woodland management approaches and rituals for remembrance. In the more historically sensitive West Cemetery, it is transposed into seven management actions that underline and complement the historical character.

This forms the basis for an evolutionary design system - a progressive and long-term approach to stabilising the delicate balance of the cemetery. Each 'generation' develops over time, allowing for review, reaction and evolution that looks simultaneously forwards and back.



Ritualised Ecological Design: An evolutionary management tool

Ongoing assessment and responsive management is vital to understand the delicate balance between ecological, historic, subterranean and emotional needs. There are many contradictory requirements, which must be continuously acknowledged throughout an ongoing process of restoration, redesign and management.

We propose the development of a management tool through which to assess and prioritise what interventions should be carried out where and when. Such a tool could be used to inform micro-interventions as part of a much larger vision of Highgate's long term future. It will allow the Cemetery to simultaneously look backwards and forwards throughout its evolution, and could be linked to an interactive digital map to continually assess sites for interventions. The below diagram offers a simplified version of this system which would be further developed through the design process and in consultation with the Friends of Highgate Cemetery, Grave Owners and key stakeholders. Crucially, the tool would allow for plural outcomes rather than predetermine one finite design.

The masterplan illustrated on the following pages presents one worked example of how the tool can be implemented on site. It is not fixed and its details can be interchangeable in their scale and position.

A Whole Earth Cemetery: Ecological and human life and death cycles

Through embracing ecological transformation, Highgate Cemetery has the opportunity to lead in changing burial expectation, practice and experience of death. This can help address the cultural trauma and common disjunction in how Britain currently deals with death.

Highgate Cemetery is already home to many different religious, non-religious and spiritual movements including Egyptianism, communism and Christianity. We propose working with nature to underline this spiritual sense of place and provide non-exclusive spaces for the general expression of grief. This will be experienced by the individual, such as planting trees in commemoration, the collective, such as remembering London's Lost Rivers, and the global, such as commemorating extinct species.

As an active burial ground, Highgate has a unique opportunity to put new burial and grieving methods into practice. Participating in woodland transformations will engage with mourning as a slow process, allowing families to contribute to the landscape and become part of nature's transformation alongside their own.

Through expanding its reach to partner other institutions such as Bath University Future Cemetery, The Museum of London, Kew Gardens and The Serpentine General Ecology project, Highgate Cemetery can contribute to a wider city and country-wide knowledge dividend.

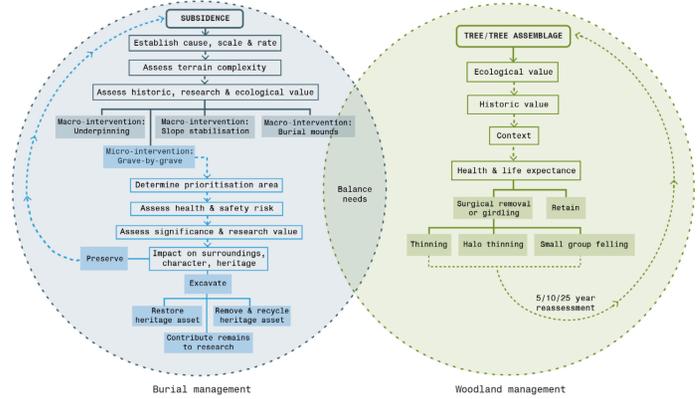


Diagram of the evolutionary management tool

