



by Jordan Gass-Poore'

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Last spring, when I was on assignment at a speed-dating event in London, I met a sandy-haired guy I called Jake.



He was in his mid-20s, and as we struck up a conversation, he told me something that surprised me: He said he enjoyed long bike rides through cemeteries.

As it turns out, his hobby is somewhat common. There's a shortage of parkland space in cities around the world, and people are making use of what's available to them. In the U.S., cities are trying to keep cemeteries alive by encouraging the living to use them as recreational space.

The idea dates back to the Victorian era. Before there were public parks, cemeteries were places full of art and plant life in cities and became a major attraction, said Keith Eggner, Professor of Architectural History at the University of Oregon and author of the "[Cemeteries](#)." As more parks were built, the recreational use of cemeteries fell out of fashion.

Lucky for all of the cheapskates of the world, some cities have thousands of acres of public cemetery land they've converted into parks, which may meet the demand for open space. Peter Harnik, former director of the Center for City Park Excellence with the Trust for Public Land, wrote about this trend in his book, "[Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities](#)."

Most public cemeteries are managed by a parks or public works department. Almost all public cemeteries are actually open to the public, but they differ in the kinds of activities they allow (so, be sure to take notice of park rules before packing a picnic or bringing a glass bottle of wine, because that's what people do on dates, right?).

Here are a few cemeteries that have turned into parks:

–**Evergreen Cemetery** in Portland, Maine, welcomes all souls. This 236-acre municipally owned cemetery is not only run by the city's park division but also happens to be much larger than the city's largest "regular" park.

Besides gardens and ponds, Evergreen also contains the largest and reputedly healthiest urban forest in the state of Maine. The cemetery is pushing the movement forward by opening its gates to everything from picnicking and biking to cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing. A group called Portland Trails, which now owns the cemetery, wants to bring the spot into the citywide trail network.

-New York Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez and Corey Johnson, speaker of the New York City Council, are working to turn **Hart Island** — the largest public cemetery in the country — into publicly accessible parkland. Last year, he re-introduced a bill in the City Council to transfer the [potter's field](#) to the Park's Department. A similar bill was rejected in 2016.

Every year, 1,000 bodies are interred on the island's potter's field for the marginalized dead. Currently, it's run by the Department of Correction, so access involves more security than it does at other cemeteries. Prisoners at nearby Rikers Island bury the dead.

Hart Island represents the history of the U.S., Rodriguez said. It's the final resting place for more than one million people who, for many reasons, didn't have the resources to be buried in another cemetery he says.

"I think the city should show that we have compassion," he said, adding changing management of the island would protect the dignity and respect of those buried there.

-While the inhabitants of **Congressional Cemetery** in Downtown D.C. are resting in peace, visitors can try to find some themselves. This 35-acre green space has some of the most famous graves in D.C., outside of Arlington Cemetery, having been the first national cemetery. Some of its most high-profile residents include FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Belva Lockwood, the first woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Getting back to their Victorian roots, Congressional Cemetery allows dog-walking, picnicking and regularly hosts the "Tombs and Tones" book club.

-**Cedar Hill Cemetery** in Hartford, Connecticut, is one of many cemeteries in the country embracing more public use. They allow visitors to run, bicycle, and walk dogs. Among their robust calendar of social events, there are jazz concerts, lantern tours, bird walks, and movie screenings on the grounds to honor famous residents like actress Katherine Hepburn. These events are great ways to introduce visitors to the city's history, said Beverly Lucas, director of the Cedar Hill Cemetery Foundation.

-You probably won't spot any ghosts at **Grandview Cemetery** in Fort Collins, Colorado. But it'll be hard to miss the birds. The cemetery draws birdwatchers from across the state, hoping for a chance to spot great horned owls among the hundreds of trees. The site's dirt roadway also attracts joggers and cyclists. For history buffs, the cemetery offers tours among the headstones.

-Take a stroll through Atlanta's past at **Oakland Cemetery**. The site, owned by the city's parks department and run by a foundation, is one of the city's oldest public spaces. The cemetery has figured out ways to raise funds for maintenance and restoration work by tapping into its complex and contentious history. It's the final resting place of notable city leaders, whose lives and legacies are remembered on guided walking tours of the grounds.

-**Green-Wood Cemetery** in Brooklyn gives new meaning to the term living history. The historic cemetery is the final resting place for many New Yorkers and, in recent years, has become energized by the living as a hot date night spot. Yearround, the cemetery invites people to take a themed trolley ride around the 478 acres of hilly land, sign up for whiskey tastings, tour the catacombs, and watch old movies.

During the 19th century, Green-Wood was a destination hot spot for those seeking a respite from city life. It was so inspiring that it served as a template for Prospect and Central parks in New York City, said Charlie McCabe with The Trust for Public Land.

-**Forest Hills Cemetery** in Boston has gone to the dogs. Visitors can not only walk their dogs around the grounds, but they can also go on dog walk tours of the cemetery's animal sculptures. Forest Hills was one of the city's first

parks and places where people could view art, McCabe said.  
Back from the Dead

The idea of cemeteries as parks isn't new. Cemeteries were some of the first public parks in America and even served as inspiration for New York's Central Park. As green space becomes limited, cemeteries are now being revived as communal spaces for the living.

In this way, visitors can enjoy recreation and history. Every gravestone has a story to tell and, like in any other park, cemeteries are full of beauty and tranquility.

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