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## ENVISIONING GRAVEYARDS IN DENSE URBAN AREAS IN CONTEXT OF DHAKA CITY *From preserved hallowed ground towards healing landscape for the community.*

SIKDER S.P.<sup>1</sup> & ALAM F<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>VITTI Sthapati Brindo LTD, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>1</sup>shauni.29arch.buet@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>ar.fahimalam@gmail.com

### Abstract

Graveyards or burial grounds are an integral component of civic and community life of any city. They comprise a key religious, cultural and social element with a long history that has played a vital role in constantly changing and evolving society. Administrators and planners of densely packed megacities like Dhaka often find it difficult to spare enough land for burials and have to operate with scarcity of open green space within urban areas. Nevertheless, city graveyards can be transformed from just places for the deceased to urban oases of healing, commemoration and even the celebration of city-life. Henceforth, the graveyards in Azimpur, one of the oldest residential areas, has been taken as study area. This research was principally based on observation and field survey. Books, journals, documents from websites etc. are the sources of secondary data. The main objective of this study is to explore the existing condition of graveyards of urban residential areas in Dhaka city, to look into why civic and environmental interactions with graveyards are missing and also to identify their potential as healing gardens and open neighborhood space. It is clearly stated that, visual and physical connection with graveyards create positive environmental scopes for both neighborhood and as well as commuters.

**Keywords:** *Graveyard; Urban area; Residential area; Public space; Healing Landscape*

### 1. Introduction

*"Whatever the cause, one consequence is clear; the place where we bury our dead are no longer important parts of the landscape we inhabit"*  
(Howett 9) – Catherine Howett

Graveyard is a sacred and symbolic representation of living community that reflects cultural beliefs and values of a community, both past and present. Graveyards or burial grounds, have always been a part of the human environment and as well as urban community.

Dhaka, being the capital and most important city of Bangladesh, is developing rapidly without any thoughtful planning. Most of the developments are quantitative, rather than qualitative. Due to rapid increase of population in last few decades, many planned and unplanned structural developments happened in Dhaka city to accommodate such a huge population. But enough open outdoor community space or urban spaces are not being created to provide recreational facilities for the growing population.

In terms of landscape architecture, graveyards in high density urban areas are worth discussing as they could offer alternative recreational areas to the community. As on-going high-density construction developments are built around graveyards, a graveyard loses its accessibility, permeability, visibility and degree of openness. But the graveyards can be used as an open space to accommodate activities like walking, bird watching and they can provide an area for urban forest or a visual release within dense concrete jungle. Ideally a graveyard should be a landscape that is more than a burial place for the dead but a place in which the need for remembrance and healing is addressed. A proper landscape treatment of graveyards has a significant impact on outdoor public environments that create an efficacious city environment. The main objective of this study, is to explore the existing situations of graveyards in residential areas in Dhaka city and also to identify its impact on their surrounding environment. Furthermore, this study aims to evaluate potential uses of graveyards in high-density urban environments and explore further potential uses of graveyards.

## 2. Literature Review

Historically graveyards were considered as hallowed ground where community members would gather to commemorate and recall the loss of their close ones. In the communal sense, death was once seen as an “occasion for solemn celebration” (Sloane 50). “The cemetery, by definition a place of memories, became a location for the memory of the community” (Sloane 80). Sloane (1995) indicates that when community lacks a close connection with such cemeteries, the cemetery loses its cultural significance.

The public perceives cemeteries as both a blessing and a curse (Basmajian and Coutts 2010). People in the surrounding city put sentimental feelings on the place because it is associated with historical, religious or mythical events that contribute to the culture of its community. Cemeteries become a visual reminders of mortality, alter the view shed, and produce increased traffic and noise (Basmajian and Coutts 2010). Cemeteries also provide valuable open spaces and visual release, especially in dense urban neighborhoods (Basmajian and Coutts 2010)

Graveyard design evolves from the city pattern itself and creates a connection between dead and the living. “The grid pattern, prototype for almost all city, town and farm layouts... became the dominant layout in cemeteries until very recent times, the “streets” becoming walkways, the “blocks” containing several grave plots.” (Francaviglia, 1971, p.505).

Project for Public Spaces described four key qualities of a successful public spaces, which are; accessibility, participation of people in different activities, comfortable environment and a good sociable place for mass people (Heffernan, 2014).

High demand for green infrastructure and open space in urban area, as part of social and green infrastructure systems, the most important thing is to ensure that all urban cemeteries are accessible to the public (Afla and Reza 2012).

In 1997 the Portland Audubon society published a short article, “Cemeteries as Greenspaces” in *The Urban Naturalist* (Rogers 1997). According to Rogers (1997), “Virtually all remaining open spaces, including cemeteries, will increase in value to local neighborhood and to the region. Cemeteries, especially ones owned by Metro’s Regional Parks and Greenspaces, should be managed in a way that provides multiple values, including wildlife habitat, to the community around them.”

## 3. Public Graveyards in context of Dhaka City:

A public graveyard is one that is used by the general community or a neighborhood. Dhaka, one of the fastest growing megacities in the world, is facing rapid urbanization with increasing infrastructures and high population mobility. Here, Urbanization can be defined as the social process whereby concentration of human settlements results in the expansion of an area into less inhabited or natural land (AMM Quamruzzaman).

Before 1882, there was no public graveyard in Dhaka city but there were several private or family graveyards. In 1882, the family graveyard of Purana Paltan was turned into a public graveyard by the authority of Dhaka Municipality. After the liberation war in 1990, Dhaka Municipality was renamed Dhaka City Corporation. At present there are four public graveyards under Dhaka City Corporation Authority. Among them Azimpur public graveyard is the oldest and largest of all. It covers 23 acres of land. The second and third largest public graveyards are at Mirpur and Jurain, consisting of 18 acres and of 14 acres of land respectively. Another public graveyard in Dhaka is situated at Banani covering 11 acres of land.

In Dhaka, graveyards can no longer be only a hallowed space to be visited for mournful occasions. It must be an integral part of urban open spaces.

## 4. Methodology:

This is a generalized study and it is expected that the outcome of this study would be applicable in the context of Dhaka city. The public graveyards of residential area around ‘Azimpur’ have been selected for this study. As one of the largest and oldest public graveyards “Azimpur Public Graveyard” is located within this residential area which is divided into two graveyards as Azimpur new and Azimpur old graveyard. Also another significant graveyard is located within this residential area known as Azimpur Iraqi Graveyard. Our study is focused on the prevailing conditions of these three graveyards.

The overall study has been conducted in several phases. The primary data have been collected through visual observations, photographs, field survey, sketches and field notes. Secondary data on graveyards and related aspects have been gathered through literature study. Then computer aided drawings based on GIS map and field survey have been prepared. Then the existing physical features and their relations with surrounding areas of three graveyards were analyzed. Finally, the analysis phase aimed to evaluate potential uses of graveyards in high-density urban environments.

**5. Background of the Study Area:**

Azimpur is an old region in the old part of Dhaka and the region is named after Shahzada Azam, son of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Azimpur is one of the oldest residential areas in Dhaka. The Azimpur graveyard was established on 23 acres of land in 1850. (AMM Quamruzzaman, 2009).

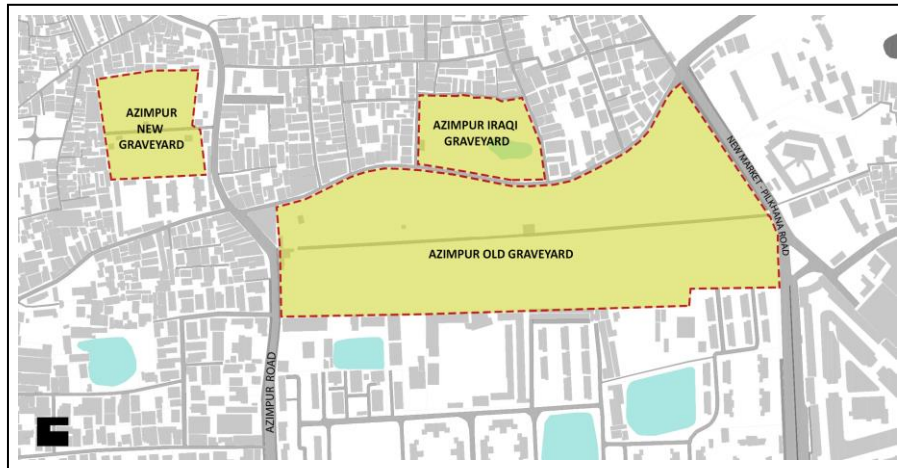


Figure 1: Azimpur residential area and graveyards (Source: GIS map)

The old part contains the mazars of Sufi Mohammad Daem, Shah Raushan Ali and Karim Shah. Sufi Mohammad Daem built a mosque here in 1769. He and other Sufis were buried near the mosque after their death. The burial place was gradually extended to form the present Azimpur old graveyard. The new part of Azimpur graveyard was a small fish market which was later occupied by the municipal authority to expand the burial ground (AMM Quamruzzaman, 2009).

At New Paltan Line in Azimpur, there is an Iraqi Shiah graveyard, property of the Iraqi Association in Dhaka. The ethnic community long ago migrated from Iraq and used to bury the dead in this graveyard. It was established in 1950 (AMM Quamruzzaman, 2009).

**6. Analysis and Outcomes:**

Azimpur was once one of the oldest planned residential areas. Now it has become very dense. Three graveyards are very important potential urban open space for the area.

Table 1: Selection and Present Condition of Graveyards

	Azimpur Old Graveyard	Azimpur New Graveyard	Azimpur Iraqi Graveyard
Establishment Time	1850	1965	1950
Area	45 Acres (Dr. Nilufar, 2000)	3.7 Acres (Dr. Nilufar, 2000)	3.03 Acres with playground
Management	Dhaka City Corporation	Dhaka City Corporation	Iraqi Association
Present condition	Active	Active	Active
Security	Secured graveyard, presence of adjacent boundary wall (7-8feet) high, accessible	Highly secured graveyard, presence of adjacent	Less secured graveyard, adjacent boundary wall is absent,

	through two gateways only	boundary wall (10-12feet) high, accessible through one gateways only	Accessible from all sides.
Mosque	The graveyard was evolved from establishment of a mosque in 1769 by Sufi Mohammad Daem. The mosque is recently redesigned for the community	There is no mosque inside the graveyard.	There is no mosque inside the graveyard, but a community building for Iraqi association is located beside graveyard.
Mausoleum	Present	Present	Absent
Landmarks	Present	Absent	Absent
Typology	Public graveyard, with both reserved and reusable graves.	Public graveyard, but most of the graves are reserved and permanent.	Ethnic community graveyard, with both reserved and reusable graves.

6.1 PERIMETER BOUNDARY WALLS AND ITS IMPACT ON SURROUNDING:

In Dhaka, most of the public graveyards are surrounded by a high wall (7-10 feet high) that separates the graveyards from public footpath and roads for privacy and protection, having a little visual connection with surroundings. But physical and visual connection between graveyards and surrounding neighborhood plays a significant role for experiencing better urban features.

Both Azimpur old and new graveyards have solid boundary wall along the edge of street, which are generally constructed for privacy and security. However, it is observed that, these perimeter boundary wall creates obstructions for social interactions and do not assure safety and security.



Figure 2: Azimpur old, new and Iraqi graveyard (Source: Author)

Rather, it is one of the reasons of anti-social behaviors as it visually disconnects people on footpath or road from the graveyards. Besides high perimeter wall creates narrow lane effect with the adjacent secondary roads. These high walls create a sense of negativity among the neighborhood and people consider graveyards as a horror place.

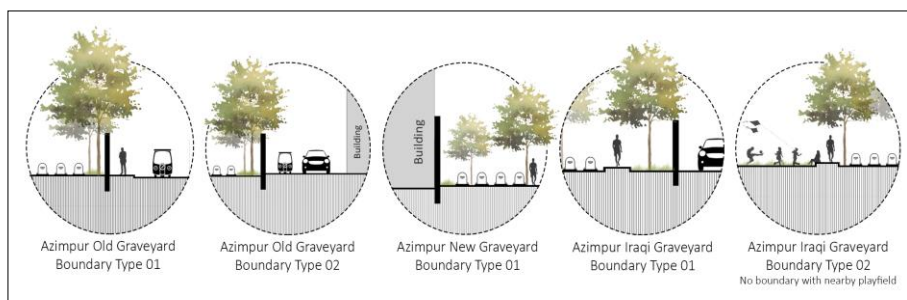


Figure 3: Different types of boundary wall around graveyard showing degree of visual connection

But in Azimpur Iraqi graveyard, there is a boundary wall only at the street side but the graveyard is accessible from other three sides. This graveyard blends into the community and has become a part of community space for the neighborhood. Public interaction is maximum in this graveyard as there is no defined perimeter wall. It is evident from the study that, the Iraqi graveyard contributes in creating a positive impact on surroundings as its edge is visually and physically permeable. Such active environment can offer safety and security for both graveyards and as well as commuters. Absence of a definite perimeter wall has successfully erased the negative effects and taboo for graveyards from people’s mind. Even children don’t fear to visit this graveyard.

6.2 ACCESSIBILITY & RELATIONSHIPS WITH ITS SURROUNDING:

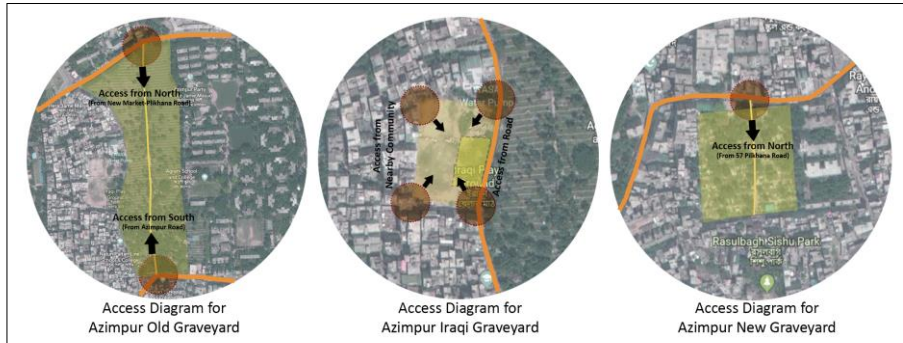


Figure 4: Accessibility diagram (Source: Google Map and Author)

Azimpur old graveyard is accessible through two gates from two primary roads, Azimpur road from south and New Market-Pilkhana road from north. Azimpur government colony is located at its east side and a secondary road connecting Azimpur and new paltan line is at its west side. Commuters can take shortcut from Azimpur to New Market through graveyard’s main pedestrian road.



Figure 5: Relationship between Azimpur old graveyard and surrounding. (Source: Author)

Azimpur new graveyard is accessible through only one gate from a secondary road: 57 Pilkhana Road. The graveyard is surrounded with residential buildings around it.



Figure 6: Relationship between Azimpur new graveyard and surrounding. (Source: Author)

Azimpur Iraqi graveyard is accessible from three sides. Only Azimpur to New Market road is on east side separated by a boundary wall.

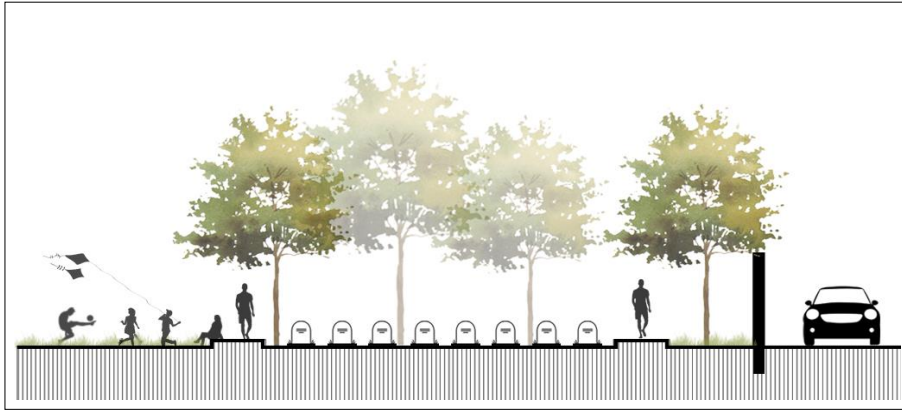


Figure 7: Relationship between Azimpur Iraqi graveyard and surrounding. (Source: Author)

### 6.3 Degree of Public Engagement:

Azimpur old graveyard is a symbol of historic memories that are laid within it. Since early ages of its establishment, people come to pray for the deceased. During major festivals, thousands of people gather here to pray and show love to their deceased relatives and close ones then the atmosphere becomes very sacred and solemn. The mosque inside the graveyard is used as a community mosque for Azimpur. The graveyard has public amenities like a sitting area, shading, etc. but due to poor physical and visual connection with surroundings it doesn't have any significant public engagement like walking, bird watching, resting, etc. The Azimpur new graveyard is so confined and the amount of reserved graves is so high that public engagement is very poor in this graveyard. People occasionally come here to pray for their close ones. Due to its high perimeter wall and lack of openness with surroundings, it sometimes becomes difficult to find its existence.



Figure 8: Iraqi, Azimpur old and new graveyard (Source: Internet and Author)

Azimpur Iraqi Graveyard is perhaps the most publicly intimated graveyards among these three graveyards. It is a small graveyard but its impact towards the community should be praised. People come here not only for remembering close ones who are laid here but also for walking, sitting and gossiping. There is a playground along with this graveyard and children come here to play regularly. There is a community building of Iraqi association with this graveyard where people gather in different occasions. Degree of public engagement is low due to social, cultural and religious values towards graveyards.

### 6.4 Existing Hardscape and Landscape:

Neither Azimpur old nor Azimpur new graveyards have peripheral walkways. There is a central spine like pathway along the north-south direction and 2ft wide secondary pathways intersect the central pathway along the east-west direction. In Azimpur Iraqi graveyard, there is a peripheral walkway that allows people to walk around the graveyard.

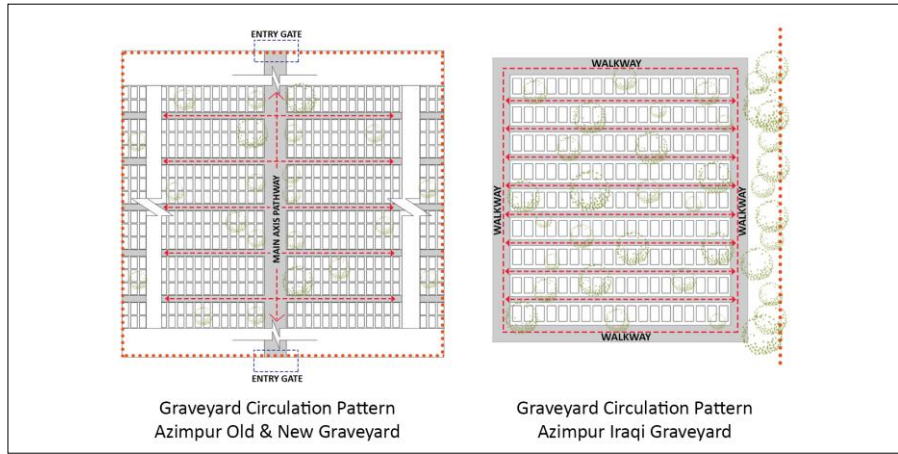


Figure 9: Existing circulation pattern and Landscape & Hardscape (Source: Author)

The secondary pathways run along the east-west direction at a fixed interval. All three graveyards in Azimpur follow grid pattern for burial arrangement. The existing landscape pattern is not well-planned and there is opportunity for rethinking the landscape. Though Islamic Shariaah doesn't allow permanent burials but most of the graveyards in Dhaka have an increasing number of reserved and permanent graves.

**7. Graveyard as Healing Landscape:**

Any landscape, designed or wild, that facilitates human health and well-being is known as a Healing Landscape. Landscape architect Matthew Berry examined the cemetery as a therapeutic environment and identified three key aspects of a therapeutic environment as outlined: physical environment, administrative environment and behavioral environment. Physical environment includes the objects in a setting; places such as the cemetery entrance, administrative buildings, monumental and lawn areas; natural features such as forests and lakes; relation between places created by such things as barriers, paths, vegetation, views and qualities such as setting, light, sound (Salisbury,2002,p.18).



Figure 10: Considering graveyards as healing landscape (source: Author & Internet)

Being a high-density megacity, Dhaka is facing the scarcity of open space and healthy community life for its citizens. With proper interventions, instead of degrading social and cultural values, graveyards could create more closeness with urban environment. In cities like Dhaka, graveyards and parks are now the only large green areas that remain. Graveyards can be an alternative healing landscape solution for monotonous city-life in Dhaka.

**8. Proposals and Recommendations:**

According to survey, most of the graveyards in Dhaka city are facing land scarcity for future burials due to increasing numbers of permanent and reserved graves. Instead of permanent burials, if natural burials are promoted, it will possess more public green space and lands can be reused. If people start planting one tree instead of building a memorial or cenotaph, graveyards will be transformed into an urban forest. Thus increasing green spaces will then improve urban climate, absorb toxic gas, reduce noise pollution, adjust human psychology and maintain biodiversity of surrounding areas.

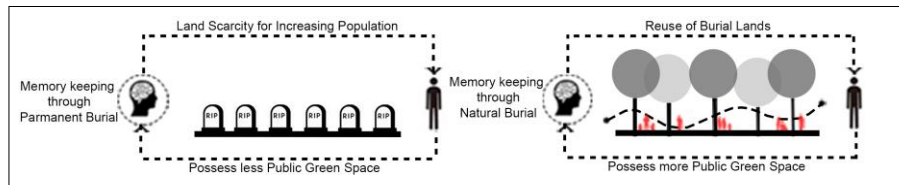


Figure 11: Diagram showing difference between permanent & natural burials. (Source: Author)

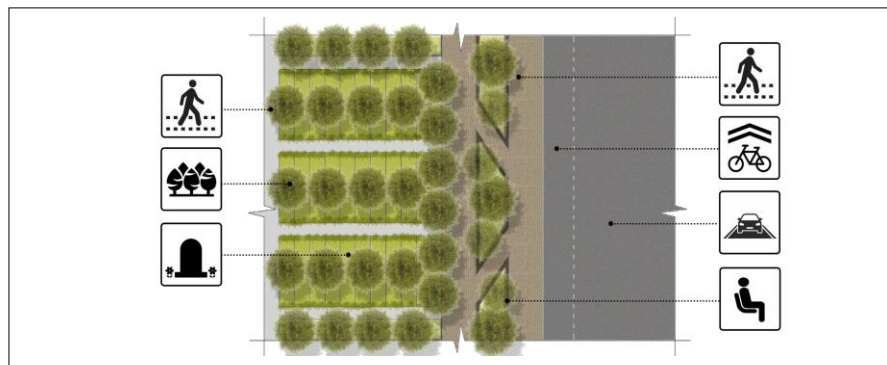


Figure 12: Desired landscape and edge treatment for graveyard . (Source: Author)

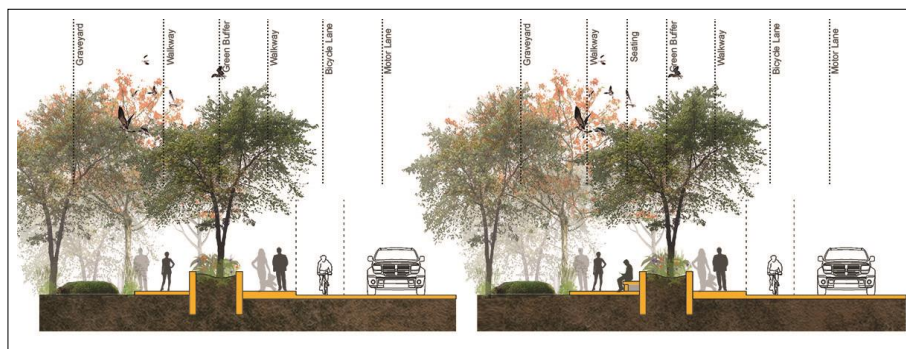


Figure 13: Desired visual connection between graveyard and its surrounding. (Source: Author)

Another important feature is graveyard edge treatment. It is evident that due to lack of visual connection with its surroundings, graveyards are not considered as a part of urban community space. Most of the people don't even imagine graveyards as urban space as they can't access the graveyards physically and visually. But Cemeteries are considered as urban space in developed countries. So it is high time to rethink the landscape, activity pattern and edge treatment of graveyards for Bangladesh. As, Graveyards are sacred spaces for Muslim community, so activity pattern and provision of public amenities should be designed considering religious values as well.

### 9. Suggestion for Future Research:

The overall findings of this study shows that there are opportunities for further research investigation for graveyards in Dhaka city. Here are some suggestions for future investigation,

- It is important to involve professional architects, urban planners and landscape architects with their ideas for alternative use for existing graveyards as urban spaces.
- Future planners should find out ways to increase connectivity, accessibility and visibility to graveyards.

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