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Qualities and functions ascribed to urban cemeteries across the capital cities of Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT

Cemeteries are not only burial places that provide a public service. They are also green urban spaces with cultural and natural qualities and could be integrated into the green infrastructure planning system. In this study, we explore the extent to which environmental qualities and functions are ascribed to urban cemeteries in the municipal master plans, green infrastructure plans and websites of the capital cities of Scandinavia. In addition, we conduct a focus-group interview in Oslo with six municipal employees representing green space planning/management, cultural heritage and cemetery administration/management, focusing on a broad perspective of qualities ascribed to urban cemeteries. The document study shows that, across the Scandinavian countries, cemeteries are mainly included in the concept of green infrastructure but they are not ascribed qualities similar to those ascribed to public green spaces; instead, most qualities are related to cultural history. However, Copenhagen municipality has a more inclusive approach, describing the cemeteries as green spaces and inviting people to use them for recreational purposes. The municipality even has a policy document with a strategy on how to combine the primary function of a burial site with new needs for recreational space. In the focus-group interview, cemeteries are described as *static places*, *peaceful and quiet places*, *green spaces*, *spaces in which to experience darkness*, and *places for all (multiple use)*. There is relatively high agreement among interviewees about the recreational qualities of cemeteries, even though the cemetery administration/management emphasizes several times that its main focus is on accommodating the bereaved and their relatives. In the discussion, we focus on differences between the different Scandinavian countries in the qualities and functions ascribed to cemeteries, and examine potential explanations for why cemeteries are mostly described as green spaces, part of the green infrastructure, but treated as private green spaces in the urban planning context.

1. Introduction

Urban cemeteries in Scandinavia are green spaces in the cities. In most cemeteries, vegetation has had a chance to develop over time. This has resulted in species-rich environments with, for example, mosses and mature trees that provide important habitat for wildlife (Kowarik et al., 2016). Urban cemeteries are also culturally valuable landscapes that mirror the history of the community and provide windows onto memories and past times (Francis, 2003). Some cemeteries are tourist attractions that attract high numbers of visitors, such as the World Cultural Heritage site Skogskyrkogården in Stockholm (Sweden), which has about 400,000 visitors a year (Larsson et al., 2014). However, even lesser known or smaller cemeteries, such as Gamlebyen cemetery in Oslo (Norway), have a relatively high number of visitors and have been shown to be used for a variety of everyday activities, such as dog-walking, socializing and cycling (Evensen et al., 2017) which are all examples of ‘active’ recreational activities. However, cemeteries may

also be used for more passive recreational activities, such as relaxing, sitting on benches, thinking and reflecting, and therewith provide possibilities for mental restoration (masked for blind review). In being recreational spaces, cemeteries can, like several other green spaces, contribute to public health (WHO, 2016) but as far as we know, research on the multifunctional use of cemeteries is sparse.

The public cemeteries in the Scandinavian capitals are maintained by a special division of the municipal cemetery administrations in close cooperation with the national church. Elsewhere in these countries, it is most common for the church itself to be responsible for maintenance and development. The cemeteries we refer to in this study are located in urban built environments. They are publicly accessible spaces, but with privately owned graves, thus representing a public-private dichotomy (Swensen and Brendalsmo, 2017). In Scandinavia, public cemeteries facilitate burials for all denominations and religions, even if the majority of the population choose a Christian ceremony. In most cemeteries, burial space is recycled. This means that after a certain number

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of years, the burial space can be reused by a different family under circumstances where there is no owner who wants to extend the use of the burial space.

In this study, we set out to explore the role that public urban cemeteries play as green spaces in the urban planning context. Our focus was on Oslo, whose municipal plans we compared to those of Stockholm and Copenhagen. We found a comparison with the other Scandinavian capitals interesting since there are several similarities, related to burial traditions, management and design. In addition, we conducted a focus-group interview with employees from different divisions of Oslo municipality. In this way, we hoped to contribute new knowledge about the role cemeteries play as green urban spaces.

1.1. Cemeteries as urban green spaces

A cemetery is different from a churchyard in that there is no consecrated building, such as a church, at a cemetery. In line with other Scandinavian research (Kjøller, 2012), we use the word ‘cemetery’ when referring to both cemeteries and churchyards. The municipalities of Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen manage twenty, eleven and five cemeteries, respectively. Together, these cemeteries amount to a significant proportion of the green space in the cities. For example, the twenty cemeteries in Oslo cover 183 ha of land (Oslo municipality, 2016), which is 7% of the total protected green space in Oslo (Oslo municipality, 2010). The cemeteries in Stockholm and Copenhagen cover, in total, 174 and 130 ha of land, respectively.

Cemeteries in Scandinavia, as elsewhere, are magnificent historical green spaces, sometimes referred to as gardens or parks (Kjøller, 2012), with a strong architectural order (Kragh, 2003). Many cemeteries are surrounded by hedges or stone walls that facilitate a peaceful enclosed environment. Most cemeteries have large open areas that are divided into smaller spaces by neatly cut hedges, bushes or trees. The grounds are often covered in grass, but can also be gravel, especially in older cemeteries. In Denmark, only a quarter of the ground is used for graves (Kjøller, 2012) and the amount of burial spaced is decreasing due to fewer coffin graves and an increase in cremation (Copenhagen municipality, 2015c). Some cemeteries are closed during the night time, while others are open all day and night. To provide a peaceful atmosphere, most cemeteries have rules posted near their entrances. These rules describe what activities are allowed, as is the case in Copenhagen, or not allowed, as in Oslo. The design of the individual graves varies widely (Søndergaard Holm, 2015), depending on trends and cultural differences.

The Scandinavian cemeteries are often well-maintained spaces compared to other green spaces in the cities. Researchers from other parts of Europe have found that poor management of cemeteries can cause negative perceptions among local inhabitants (Tudor et al., 2013). Keeping the cemeteries well-tended accounts for a large proportion of the municipal budget for green space management. The standard of maintenance and the variety of plants at cemeteries are highly appreciated by visitors (Nordh et al., 2017).

Research on cemeteries covers topics such as design (Clayden et al., 2015; Søndergaard Holm, 2015; Wingren, 2013), contamination of soil or water (Fiedler et al., 2012; Żychowski, 2012), biological processes in the disposal of human remains (Santarsiero et al., 2000), conflicts related to the creation and planning of new cemeteries (Bennett and Davies, 2015; Santarsiero et al., 2000), location of existing cemeteries (Tudor et al., 2013), cultural and historical perspectives on cemeteries (Francis, 2003) and people’s use and experiences of cemeteries (Francis et al., 2000; Evensen et al., 2017; Francis, 2003; Nordh et al., 2017). As others have pointed out (e.g. Woodthorpe, 2011), the interdisciplinary interest in cemeteries means that the literature is fragmented, with publications spread between various discipline-specific journals. To our knowledge – and supported by others (e.g. Kjøller, 2012) – research focusing on cemeteries as urban public green spaces is limited.

1.2. Qualities and functions ascribed to urban green spaces

One of the roles of urban planning is to identify, develop and provide for green spaces. These can serve to provide many benefits, including natural and cultural, that might afford recreational use. The concept of green infrastructure planning evolved in the early 21st century. According to Benedict and McMahon (2006), green infrastructure includes a ‘network of natural areas and other open spaces that conserves natural ecosystem values and functions, sustains clean air and water, and provides a wide array of benefits to people and wildlife’ (p. 1). On the basis of this broad definition, cemeteries should be part of the green infrastructure, and policy documents and plans should acknowledge the importance of these urban green spaces from an ecological and recreational point of view. The green infrastructure plan (GIP) is a plan that aims to identify, evaluate and develop urban green space (Sandström, 2002; Thorén and Saglie, 2015). The GIP mainly focuses on public spaces, although all kinds of green space should be included in the definition of green infrastructure. Mapping and evaluating green spaces has become particularly important as pressure on urban green space increases due to urbanization and densification (Benedict and McMahon, 2006; Thorén and Saglie, 2015). This is particularly the case in the Scandinavian capitals and surrounding areas. As stated, cemeteries in Scandinavia are green spaces that offer both natural and cultural qualities, thereby facilitating recreation. In this study, we therefore set out to explore:

- The extent to which cemeteries are included as green spaces in municipal master plans (MMPs) and GIPs in the municipalities of Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen. In addition, the qualities and functions that the municipalities ascribe to the cemeteries in these plans.
- The qualities and functions that different divisions within Oslo municipality ascribe to urban cemeteries.
- Whether the cemetery administration in Oslo carries out any measures to facilitate the recreational use of urban cemeteries.

2. Method

The methodological approach was based on a combination of document studies and a focus-group interview. In the document studies, we analyzed MMPs and GIPs, or similar ‘green’ policy documents, from the three capitals. In addition, we analyzed the presentation of the cemeteries at the municipalities’ websites (see Fig. 1 for an overview of the documents analyzed in the respective municipalities). To gain a better understanding of the qualities ascribed to cemeteries and attitudes to multifunctional use, we conducted a focus-group interview at which we brought together people from different divisions of Oslo municipality.

2.1. Document study of MMPs, GIPs and websites

To begin with, the MMPs for Oslo (Oslo municipality, 2014), Stockholm (Stockholm municipality, 2010) and Copenhagen (Copenhagen municipality, 2015b), and the GIPs, or similar green policy documents, of the respective municipalities (Copenhagen municipality, 2015a, 2015c; Ministry of Environment, 2013; Oslo municipality, 2010; Stockholm municipality, 2004, 2013) were screened for the keywords *grave* and *church*. All hits were marked and explored for potential qualities ascribed to the cemeteries. Results from this search are presented in Section 3.1.

Thereafter, we studied the maps attached to the MMPs and GIPs. We registered the qualities or functions ascribed to the cemeteries in the maps. The municipalities used different categories of quality and function. In the presentation of results from this analysis (see Section 3.2), we use the same categories (wording) as the municipalities do. Therefore, we present the results from each municipality individually.

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