Ann Sharrock, Landscape Architect
Ian Fisher, Course Leader, MA Landscape Architecture

Happiness and Public Space

Paper submitted for workshop held on May 21st 2015 as part of the Biennal of Public Space in Rome

This paper considers how natural burial in an urban/suburban context can give people a sense of well-being as well as a significant, distinctive experience that gives rise to both positive and poignant emotions, all facets of happiness. The cemetery once provided a community's connection to itself, its history and its environment, but has been removed both physically and emotionally to the fringes of our society. We are proposing that burial sites should be brought back into community life with designs that accommodate multiple uses. They would contribute to a community's green infrastructure at the same time as conserving that green space and generating respect and responsibility. Land use plans could direct future cemeteries away from the community fringe and encourage incorporating burial facilities into redevelopment or infill projects.

Cities are 'alive' environments, and like social reactors, they attract people and accelerate social interaction and social outputs in a similar way to stars that burn brighter and faster the bigger they are. (Bettencourt, 2013). People are bombarded with visual and aural stimulation as purveyors of goods and services, offered as fulfiling aspirations and expections, compete to attract consumers. Desires and needs can be instantly gratified, at the fast food outlet, on the mobile phone and by affordable flights. Studies suggest that the bigger the city the faster people walk, perhaps due to high productivity and hence higher values on time.

The burial site is a punctuation in this flow of networks. It gives us distance, physically and psychologically from demands and drains on directed attention. (Gilchrist, 2011)

The pace of change in the city is accelerated, whereas in an urban burial site, it is slow. The cycles of nature: life and death, decomposition and regeneration, growth and decay, are subtle and sometimes hidden but perceptible. The cycle of emotions experienced is also subtle: happiness, poignancy, sadness.

An area of approximately 1000m^2 holds approximately 216 graves. In natural burial sites, memorialisation is through trees, shrubs, bird boxes etc and a site of this size could hold approximately 66 trees. The environmental benefits gained from a stand[1] depends on the trees planted, the size of stand and its relationship to the built environment. The natural burial site will support a mixed age, mixed species stand.

Value can arise from people's contact with the natural burial site in several ways. Pleasure and happiness arises directly from the colours and textures and the biodiversity, which contrasts with the proportion, geometry and density of the built environment. Trees have an

[1] The term 'stand' is used here to denote an aggregation of trees or other growth occupying the natural burial site, which is mixed in composition, size, age and arrangement. The usual use of the word 'stand' denotes uniformity in species composition, size, age, arrangement and condition, to distinguish it from forest, which is, composed of stands.

aesthetic quality that attracts interest and draws attention (Gilchrist, 2011). They provide space for self reflection and the space is distinctive enough to feel like a world to itself (Kaplan, 1995:173).

Happiness is achieved through the burial site providing a significant experience. Relph believes significance relates to people's identity *of* and *with* place.

While recognition exists for cultural landscapes, several defined by the World Heritage Categories, many of these are not accessible to us, either because of their location or perhaps their 'grandness' and 'exclusivity'. These are not the landscapes that directly relate to our own experiences. They bring pleasure and entertainment, all considered emotions of happiness, but cannot bring us the emotion of belonging. They are outside our own realm of experience and so perhaps not fully understandable. We cannot relate to them completely. We view them from the outside, looking in. They are not part of us and we are not part of them.

The identity of an urban natural burial site is unique and provides an intensity of meaning, which will be felt in varying degrees whether or not a friend or relative is buried there. To identify with a place there needs to be a degree of 'attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place', (Relph, 1976).

The level of attachment and identity that people have with the urban natural burial site will vary but death and memorialisation relates to all cultures, classes and ages. We may wish to memorialise it differently, but we all need space and an opportunity to remember. According to Gilchrist this attribute is compatibility, and she describes it as a place where people feel comfortable or natural and where desired activities can be carried out with ease.

The landscape of death is usually associated with the emotions of sadness and poignancy. In order to feel happiness, however, it is necessary to experience that space loaded with emotions, only then can happiness be understood and appreciated. In addition within the natural environment of the burial site lies the subtle layer of regeneration and renewal and hope for the future.

Tree planting within urban natural burial sites provides services. People might enjoy these services and benefits without thinking about them consciously or knowing that they are due to trees and other elements of the natural environment.

Trees provide environmental, health, economic and social benefits. Tree planting associated with the graves will measurably improve the air quality, CO^2 absorption, reduction in the heat island effect and moderation of local microclimates along with reduction of peak run off flows and a contribution to sustainable urban drainage. They contribute to cooler summer air temperatures if planted in stands, which in turn improves air quality because emissions of many pollutants and/or ozone-forming chemicals are temperature dependent.

Economic gains are achieved through energy conservation from buildings. Trees reduce building energy use by lowering temperatures and shading buildings during the summer, and blocking winds in winter, however proper tree placement near buildings is critical to

achieve maximum building energy conservation benefits. In addition greater revenue is achieved through higher residential property values and increased retail activity.

Green space makes our urban areas more inviting for living, working and relaxing as well as improving the health and well-being of those who use them. There is evidence that supports the fact that green space can help reduce stress levels with a positive effect on mental health, and provide opportunities for informal and formal physical activity with a positive effect on physical health (UK National Ecosystem Assessment, 2011, Ch. 22). The general health dividend provided by trees has been scientifically proven – Dutch research shows that neighbourhoods with good tree cover are significantly healthier than less green urban areas, (Maas J, et al, 2008). This can create measurable savings on the NHS.

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