



Research Paper

A peaceful place in the city—A qualitative study of restorative components of the cemetery



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Being away
Compatibility
Extent
Fascination
Graveyard

ABSTRACT

Cemeteries in Scandinavia are culturally and historically valuable places. In addition, they represent well-maintained green spaces in the urban fabric. The combination of nature, culture, and history makes cemeteries interesting to explore as restorative environments. To our knowledge, no published studies have yet focused on users' perception of the cemetery as a restorative environment. This study therefore set out to initiate research on the topic. A qualitative explorative approach was applied in which we interviewed 59 visitors to a cemetery in Oslo about their use and experiences of the cemetery. This explorative approach was used because we did not want to impose any thoughts about restoration on the users. It turned out that visitors' experiences and descriptions of the cemetery corresponded well with the definition of a restorative environment. We therefore used the restorative components as described in the attention restoration theory: *fascination*, *being away*, *extent*, and *compatibility* as the basis for analyzing the interviews. The findings support the notion that the combination of nature, culture, and history, as well as respect for the deceased and others visiting graves, contributes to the description of the cemetery as a restorative environment, and makes the cemetery different from other green spaces in the city in that these qualities can foster relaxation, reflection, and contemplation.

1. Introduction

Urban green spaces are important to city dwellers' quality of life. A growing body of literature suggests that the health benefits of green spaces are due to their potential to reduce stress and support recovery from mental fatigue (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2016). An environment that supports the process of mental recovery can be defined as a restorative environment (Hartig, 2004). The restorative potential of different natural environments is explored in the literature, including forests and natural areas (Sonntag-Ostrom et al., 2014), parks (Nordh et al., 2009; Nordh, Hartig, Hagerhall, & Fry, 2009), gardens (Tenngart Ivarsson & Hagerhall, 2008; Van Den Berg & Custers, 2011), a zoo (Pals, Steg, Siero, & van der Zee, 2009), and even elements of nature indoors (Raanaas, Evensen, Rich, Sjøstrøm, & Patil, 2011). However, in the restorative environment literature, limited attention is given to the context of the natural environment, or the specifics of particular environments, which is something that should be explored further in relation to different types of green spaces. To our knowledge, no studies have yet focused on the users' perceptions of a green cemetery as a restorative environment.

It may seem surprising that cemeteries, places associated with

death, should be regarded as restorative environments or places that can evoke positive affect. However, cemeteries in Scandinavia are well-maintained green lungs in the urban fabric, they are thereby one, though very specific, type of green space. In addition to being green spaces, cemeteries are shown to be perceived as culturally and historically valuable places (Woodthorpe, 2011). Others have found that cultural and historical urban settings (Hidalgo et al., 2006; Hidalgo, Berto, Paz Galindo, & Getrevi, 2006), museums (Arvidson & Tell, 1997; Kaplan, Bardwell, & Slaker, 1993; Packer & Bond, 2010), and monasteries (Eriksson & Wiklund-Gustin, 2014; Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005) can be restorative environments. The built environments mentioned above are to some extent related to the cemetery. The presence of graves, monuments, and consecrated buildings makes cemeteries historical and cultural places. Furthermore, cemeteries are open air museums, sometimes even tourist attractions, and, like monasteries, it is not unlikely that cemeteries can contribute to spirituality, and thereby provide a restorative environment (Ouellette et al., 2005). As discussed above, the combination of nature, culture, and history makes cemeteries particularly interesting to study as restorative environments.

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1.1. Restorative environments

In order to study the restorative qualities of cemeteries as green spaces, this study draws on two psychological theories that explain the restorative potential of natural environments. The stress recovery theory (SRT) (Ulrich et al., 1991) states that non-threatening natural environments can initiate a restorative process through positive affective responses. It is argued that people have an innate positive response to greenery that blocks or reduces negative affect. SRT is sometimes used as an explanation for scenic beauty or preference for an environment. The attention restoration theory (ART) (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995) also argues that the presence of natural features has significance for restoration, but takes a cognitive stance. According to ART, mental fatigue occurs as a result of staying focused on a task, thereby taxing the capacity for directed attention. The theory is based on the premise that environments that encompass features that do not put demands on directed attention, but rather trigger undirected or effortless attention, can initiate the restoration process. This enables the restoration of the capacity for directed attention. Any type of environment can trigger effortless attention, but natural environments more often encompass components that support mental restoration than do built environments (Berto, 2005; Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Kaplan, 1995).

According to ART, an environment supports restoration through the four restorative components: *fascination*, *being away*, *extent*, and *compatibility* (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). *Fascination* happens when the environment catches one's interest spontaneously and without effort, stimulated by features or patterns in the landscape. This psychological mode of involuntary attention is often referred to as soft fascination, which gives people an opportunity to restore their attention capacity and, hence, rest from other demanding thoughts. *Being away* refers to an experience of psychological distance from everyday worries. A change of physical and psychological setting can divert people's attention away from everyday routines and demands, thereby further facilitating the restorative process. *Extent* refers to coherence/order in the environment, as well as sufficient scope for exploration. *Compatibility* is the ability of the environment to meet people's current psychological needs or achieve the purpose of visiting it, making it a place in which one can do things one likes, and an environment that supports visitors' desired activities.

Several instruments have been developed to measure the restorative quality of an environment (see, for example, Han, 2003; Hartig, Korpela, Evans, & Garling, 1997; Korpela, Ylen, Tyrvaainen, & Silvennoinen, 2008; Lehto, 2012; Pasini, Berto, Brondino, Hall, & Ortner, 2014; Purcell, Peron, & Berto, 2001; Van den Berg, Jorgensen, & Wilson, 2014). These instruments mainly build on the ART framework and are composed of a number of statements that describe the different restorative components, such as "This place is a refuge from unwanted distractions" (Being away) (Purcell et al., 2001). As pointed out by Korpela et al. (2008), these instruments have limitations, and a qualitative approach is suggested as a supplement to identify the determinants of restoration.

The SRT and ART theories focus on different environmental features and different mechanisms explaining the restorative process. The present study is mainly guided by ART, because ART enables a broader exploration of the impact of the physical properties of the cemetery, in that it focuses on both natural and built environments, and goes beyond the mere focus on natural features outlined in SRT. While SRT focuses solely on the presence of natural environments or elements as an initiator of the restorative process, ART is more concerned with the people-environment interaction and hence allows for a more contextual analysis of the restoration process that is relevant to the experience in a cemetery. This is also mirrored in the aforementioned instruments measuring restorative quality.

The restoration process involves different stages, from clearing the head to attention restoration and reflective mode (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Studies show that exposure to natural

environments can better support everyday problem-solving and reflection than built environments can (e.g., Herzog, Black, Fountaine, & Knotts, 1997; Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Dolliver, 2008). The potential of the cemetery as a place to rest, as well as a place to reflect on life issues, hence seems relevant to explore from a cognitive perspective using the ART framework. However, in the discussion, positive affective appraisal as an initiator of the restorative process, as described in SRT, is discussed as another potential explanation of people's experiences in the cemetery.

1.2. Design and use of cemeteries

Many cemeteries in Scandinavia contain both nature elements, such as trees and wildlife, and cultural-historical elements, such as grave-stones and sculptures. Cemeteries in Scandinavia originated in around the year 1000 CE, and were established for the burial of Christians. Over the years, cemeteries have been used for a number of different "official" activities, ranging from business and judicial proceedings, as was the case during the Middle Ages (Brendalsmo, 2014), to the more recreational purposes we see at some cemeteries today (Evensen, Nordh, & Skaar, 2017; Swensen, Nordh, & Brendalsmo, 2015). The design of cemeteries as well as their use has changed with changing views of death and bereavement (Jacobsen, 2013). In a pilot study from Gamlebyen gravlund (The Old Town Cemetery) in Oslo, we noted that many people visit the cemetery to tend graves, plant flowers, light candles, and to remember the deceased (Swensen et al., 2015). Some people visited the cemetery when grieving and during life crises, others with happy memories. Some people came to the cemetery without having a grave to visit, but because they saw it as a beautiful place that they, for different reasons, felt attached to. Parallels can be drawn to a Finnish study on imagined restorative perceptions of a favorite place, in which place attachment and positive autobiographical memory were shown to predict restoration (Ratcliffe and Korpela, 2016; Ratcliffe & Korpela, 2016).

In Norway, there are rules prohibiting some activities in cemeteries. These rules are posted near the entrance to most cemeteries. It is not permitted to drive a vehicle (without permission), run, cycle or sunbathe in cemeteries. Dogs are welcome, but must be kept on a lead. Hence, the rules signal activities that promote a calm atmosphere. The cemeteries' design, as well as the above-mentioned rules, help to inform people about what behavior is expected.

The greenness of cemeteries is a quality that clearly makes them attractive for purposes other than visiting a grave. A variety of activities carried out at urban cemeteries was presented by Evensen et al. (2017), who registered people's everyday use of two Norwegian cemeteries. In Scandinavia, cemeteries have a lot of vegetation compared to cemeteries in, for example, the Mediterranean countries. Most Scandinavian cemeteries have lawns and a network of paths, and the grave-stones are laid out in a grid-like pattern. This is also the case in the cemetery we will present in this paper. Many cemeteries are enclosed by either hedges, stone walls, or fences. Hedges are commonly used to create walls or "rooms" within the cemeteries. Compared to parks, cemeteries may have a higher number of flowering plants (Andersson, Barthel, & Ahrné, 2007; Kowarik, Buchholz, von der Lippe, & Seitz, 2016) and are often better maintained. The standard of maintenance at a cemetery is important to visitors. An unmaintained grave signals lack of care and lack of meaning (Berglund, 1994). According to Berglund (1994), who conducted a study of people's perception of cemeteries in the 1990s, a cemetery is a place for both the deceased and the living, and its design should support people who are in grief. Cemetery design has become a niche within landscape architecture, but there is only limited research literature on cemetery design and how it is experienced by visitors (Sommer, 2003; Søndergaard Holm, 2015). There is also a lack of empirical studies that explore which specific types of cemetery landscape design might support mental restoration and reflection among visitors.

The rationale for studying the cemetery as a restorative environment can be summed up as follows. First, cemeteries are park-like

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