



Planning, provision and perpetuity of deathscapes—Past and future trends and the impact for city planners

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 February 2015

Received in revised form 25 February 2016

Accepted 28 March 2016

Available online 6 April 2016

Keywords:

Cemeteries

Land use planning

Cemetery renewal

Cremations

Perpetual care

Cremation factories

ABSTRACT

Cemeteries present somewhat of a planning conundrum. They are considered an essential piece of social infrastructure, a sacred and permanent fixture in the landscape. Cemeteries also have the capacity to incite substantial community and political opposition when proposals arise to construct a new facility or to expand or extend the use of existing spaces. The social relevance of cemeteries is being tested by lower visitation rates and changing interment practices such as ‘no service’ cremations, often linked to the emergence of cremation factories, and informal burials. Renewable tenure of individual burial sites and wholesale cemetery renewal is potentially a pragmatic land use outcome to accommodate an ever-increasing demand. However, cemetery renewal as a societal choice has been proven too socially and politically controversial. This has meant the land provided for cemeteries is locked up in a ‘perpetual care’ obligation, and sites are often subsequently abandoned. This paper examines how the private and public sectors undertake cemetery planning in Sydney, Australia. It explores the role and impact of legislative reform, how this intersects with strategic land use planning and emerging trends that may influence the direction for this sector.

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1. Introduction

Strategic planning for cemeteries is an area of policy that receives little attention (Basmajjian and Coutts, 2010; Kong, 2012) despite the fact that it has a direct impact on land use planning and social integration. This may change if an immediate shortage of land or facilities to bury the dead arises. The major limiting supply factors that impact on the location of a new or expanded cemetery are the availability of land and its physical and social context. To address these factors there has been a shift towards consolidation and intensification of use, such as the practice of renewable tenure and the introduction of new interment methods, such as cremations (Coutts et al., 2011; Niță et al., 2013). Outside the cemetery, informal burials are increasing in popularity (Kong, 2012). Both consolidation within and informal burials outside cemeteries come with their own set of political, community and religious concerns.

Cemeteries are an essential community land use and service. Cemetery and cremation services are delivered by a diversity of provider models. These range from fully public to fully private enterprises, those run by religious operators, by civil operators and

various combinations of these. However, a central issue for this sector, irrespective of ownership and governance models, is how to integrate ‘deathscapes’ (Kong, 1999) within the urban fabric. Such integration must account for the permanency of cemeteries within an otherwise dynamic land use system, continually responding to pressures such as urban expansion, consolidation and shifting community values and expectations.

This article investigates how cemetery planning is undertaken in Sydney, Australia. Four factors motivated the study. First, an emerging land supply shortage. This was documented by a NSW Government report that concluded the capacity of metropolitan public cemeteries would be reached by 2035 (NSW Department of Lands, 2008). Second, substantial opposition from local residents and politicians to proposals for new cemeteries at the rural/urban fringe. This opposition occurred despite evidence of current and future local and regional need for burial facilities. Indeed, the development assessment process also determined that the new proposals would have had a minimal social and environmental impact (Bennett and Davies, 2015). Third, reform to the sector was imminent at the time research for this paper was conducted, resulting in the passing of the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act (2013) (NSW). This legislation established much needed administrative and structural change to the sector. Unfortunately, the reform fell short of securing cemetery renewal as an option, as initially fore-shadowed, meaning many publically owned cemeteries that have

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reached or are nearing capacity are on the pathway to potential abandonment (NSW Parliament, 2013a). Fourth, while both public and private sector and religious organisations in the state of New South Wales (NSW) can provide cemeteries, only the private sector has opened any new facilities since the 1930s. This reflects the influence of neoliberalism in this sector in spite of the strong history and market share of the public cemetery (Campbell et al., 2014).

This paper considers the practice of cemetery management from multiple viewpoints, including both public and private operators. There are three parts to this paper. First it explores the management of cemeteries in Sydney. Second, the paper examines how strategic planning is undertaken, identifying shifting expectations and emerging industry and socio-political trends that impact on supply and demand. Finally, it discusses the impact of these factors from a land use perspective and provides recommendations designed to ensure current and future cemeteries and crematoria remain socially relevant and economically viable.

As an area of research, there is limited published literature on cemetery planning in the Australian context. This paper seeks to address in part, this gap and provide industry-relevant insights to support the case for perpetual cemetery provision. Through interviews with industry stakeholders, this paper uncovers some significant and emerging issues, such as the circumstances that have led to the rise in cremation 'factories' and 'informal' burials.

2. Method

This study was based on: an analysis of land use plans and strategies relevant to the Sydney metropolitan area; documents and reports by and on the cemetery industry; and semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders involved in the cemetery industry in Sydney. The interviews included individuals holding senior management or operational responsibility for cemetery and crematoria facilities owned by the NSW Government (1 interview), local government (2 interviews) and the private and religious sectors (2 interviews) as well as the author of a recent strategic review of the cemetery sector that led to the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act (2013)* (NSW) (1 interview). The limited number of interviews reflects the small numbers of participants in the sector. The interviews are approximately representative of the interests in the sector: 25% is managed by the NSW Government; 25% by private the private sector; and 50% by local government either on Crown or local government land (NSW Department of Lands, 2008).

The six interviews were held between December 2013 and May 2014. Quotes and observations from the interviewees are provided in the paper and are referenced according to the following numbering system: Int.#1 state government; Int. #2 private sector; Int. #3 and Int. #4 local government; Int.#5 religious sector; Int. #6 independent reviewer of public cemetery and crematoria services and facilities. Responses from the interviews were analysed to identify the respondents' current management approaches, their perceptions of their industry, the role and contribution of other providers, how future planning is undertaken and what emerging trends are present that may impact on the industry.

3. Cemeteries provision and management

Cemeteries are a state responsibility in Australia. At the time of English colonisation of Australia, the model of church and public cemetery that applied in England at the time was adopted by all states. Since then there has been a divergence in the models of management and ownership between the jurisdictions. Victoria and Western Australia have largely kept the church and public ownership model. The states of New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia have shifted from an exclusive public sector model

to involve the private sector through a combination of public and private sector provision or alternatively termed 'mixed-mode provision' (NSW Department of Lands, 2008). In states with a mixed mode provision, tensions exist between public and private interests; the public model is based around delivering a community service while the private model is established on profit driven business principles.

In Australia, renewable tenure is largely voluntary and cemetery renewal is not widely supported. The limited adoption of these practices has meant that cemeteries in Australia are destined to a linear life cycle. Once capacity has been reached abandonment often follows. Four phases can be used to describe a traditional cemetery life cycle (Fig. 1). First, the 'emergent' phase arises in the planning sphere and responds to forecast demand, community consultation, land use planning, development approvals and subsequent construction. This phase can also include the early use of the cemetery for burials. With limited burials both visitation and revenue are low. The 'transition' and 'continuing' phases are the active periods of the cemetery. The 'transition' phase is characterised by peak sales and visitation. From a business perspective this would be when revenue is maximised. The 'continuing' phase sees the cemetery approaching capacity. Visitation starts to decline although maintenance obligations remain high. The community value of the cemetery during the 'transitional' and 'continuing' phases is high and the site is accepted as a community asset. The final phase is 'abandonment'. This occurs when there are no more gravesites. Visitation gradually declines and, along with this, its broader community value. During this phase the site owner may provide some maintenance funding to avoid relegation to disrepair, sometimes supplemented by committed heritage groups.

3.1. Public sector provision

The cornerstone of public cemetery provision in Sydney is centred on the Rookwood Necropolis, 17 km from the city centre. This cemetery is the largest of its kind in the southern hemisphere and is nearing capacity. It was constructed in 1876 to deal with the chronic shortage of burial space in Sydney and at the time was located at the periphery of the city. The cemetery conducts around 5500 burials per year (NSW Government, 2013b).

There are also a number of small to medium sized cemeteries owned and operated by the Crown (State Government) and local government. Many of these have reached their capacity and no longer accept burials rather serving as heritage spaces within the urban fabric.

An independent review of public sector cemeteries in 2013 uncovered systematic evidence of deficient business practices, misappropriation of funds, poor financial accounting and a lack of oversight (Int. #6). Crown trust board members were described as "well-meaning people who had served for long periods. . .but not skilled for business operations" (Int. #6). The business operations within Crown cemeteries lacked many fundamental governance structures. These included a lack of strategic planning and auditable reports and there was an absence of many basic management systems including information technology and human resources (Int. #6). Supporting these observations a media-led investigation found that at Rookwood Necropolis, "[r]ecords were found in sheds, the information technology systems were archaic, and money had been invested in bad shares rather than in upkeep of the cemetery" (Power, 2014). These revelations ultimately led to the dismissal of the Chief Executive Officer of the Rookwood Necropolis in 2013 (Besser and McClymont, 2013) and later the other cemetery trusts across Sydney and ultimately provided the catalyst for the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act (2013)* (NSW) reforms.

The Cabinet in Confidence report found that local council cemeteries, while smaller in scale but more prevalent in number,

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