Urban cemetery planning and the conflicting role of local and regional interests

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning for cemeteries should be one of the easier tasks for planners. Supply and demand can be estimated with some certainty. Land allocation through a zoning and assessment process should be able to identify and secure appropriate locations with minimal social and environmental impact and disruption. However the stigma of a new cemetery in a neighbourhood, irrespective of need, can be a divisive land use issue that can result in strong resident opposition buoyed by the support of their elected representatives. This paper examines past and present issues that have informed cemetery planning in Sydney and, through four case studies, traces the tensions within the development assessment process for new cemeteries at the rural–urban fringe. We conclude that regionally based planning and assessment must play the dominant role in considering this land use to balance what appears to be emotive community response to what is an essential activity within the urban fabric.

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Introduction

Cemeteries have largely been ignored by planners and are rarely considered a critical land use (Basmajian and Coutts, 2010; Kong, 1999). Strategic guidelines are decades old and not reflective of current burial practices (Coutts et al., 2011; Niţă et al., 2013). Historically, environmental and health concerns sought to provide adequate buffers between the living and the dead (Rugg, 2000, 1998; Fiedler et al., 2012). The resulting pattern that persists across many western countries has been to relegate cemeteries and other burial places to the urban periphery. Lower land values at the urban fringe have made acquisition by both the public and private sector more viable (Harvey, 2006). Over time these areas have become surrounded by houses and supporting infrastructure (Basmajian and Coutts, 2010; Niţă et al., 2013; Rugg, 1998; Thomas, 1963).

For many cultures there has been a shift in the acceptance and visibility of death that has meant cemeteries are less visited and less integral to the day to day activities of society (Matthey et al., 2013; Jalland, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Pitte, 2004). In decades past it has been common practice to clear, relocate or convert unused and neglected cemeteries for other purposes. However, in contraindication to their decreasing social connection, the total obliteration of these sacred spaces has become politically undesirable and strongly opposed by contemporary society (Harvey, 2006; Gilbert, 1980; Pattison, 1955). At a strategic level, cemetery planning could be at best described as an afterthought with little relationship to local demand let alone social integration.

Demographic projections for an ageing, more culturally diverse and growing population clearly point to the need to develop strategic plans for burial infrastructure and policy that responds to demand (Basmajian and Coutts, 2010; Zelinsky, 1994; Pattison, 1955). In Sydney, for example, an ageing population combined with advances in life expectancy will mean the number of people over 65 years will double from 500,000 in 2006 to over 1 million by 2036, with those aged over 85 years will increase from 64,000 to almost 200,000 respectively (NSW Department of Planning, 2008). As this cohort move into their later stages of life, mortality rates increase and demand for interment space will surge (Basmajian and Coutts, 2010; Coutts et al., 2011; Longoria, 2014). However, planning for cemeteries seems to be overshadowed by a preoccupation with the living through retirement planning and provision of aged care facilities (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2012; NSW Government, 2012a).

For the urban planner, there are a number of factors which make establishing new cemeteries and related facilities a complex proposition. Some of these factors are:

- a mix of public and private interests in the ownership and management of cemeteries;
- the cost and availability of suitable land that will drive location;

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- multiple and sometime conflicting laws and planning controls;
- many government agencies involved in an assessment process and or administration;
- increasing regulatory and compliance obligations concerning the day to day running of cemeteries; and
- community engagement around strategic and statutory planning for this type of land use is often fraught with opposition.

The interaction of these factors make land use planning for cemeteries an ideal case study to observe the intersection of strategic planning and how proposals are considered by planning authorities given they typically represent a new land use into an otherwise homogeneous urban or peri-urban typology.

This paper examines cemetery planning in Sydney. It analyses the development assessment process and outcome of four proposals for new cemetery proposals at the urban fringe (Fig. 2). The discussion canvasses various planning processes and issues including the capacity of local and regional planning authorities to deal with this infrequently considered and often contentious land use. The paper postulates that there is a significant division between the interests or *wants* of the local community in terms of their immediate amenity and land use and the longer-term *needs* of society.

For many land use decisions there will be an inevitable tension that places local planning against regional or metropolitan strategic planning (e.g. the vertical communities as described by Tropman et al., 2001). Such tensions are not unique to cemetery planning and generally surround the siting of locally unwanted projects (Lesbirel, 2011). For example there are many instances of local opposition to changes in land use within or near existing residential areas. This may be as 'simple' as increasing housing density (e.g. Ruming, 2014) and more controversially sex businesses (e.g. Prior and Crofts, 2012) and intensive agriculture (e.g. Metze and Van Zuydam, 2013). What makes cemetery planning of particular interest is that society expects to have a place to bury our dead. The question is where?

Historical and current demands for cemetery planning and provision

The issue of cemeteries exhausting their space is not a new situation either for Sydney or other cities around the world (Coutts et al., 2011; Hussein and Rugg, 2003; Longoria, 2014; Santarsiero et al., 2000; Teather, 1998). In Sydney the first cemeteries were created within a reasonable walking distance from the town centre (Griffin and Tobin, 1997). In 1845 the General Cemetery Bill proposed the establishment of the first public cemetery to replace the George Street burial ground in order to build Sydney Town Hall (Murray, 2003). A series of burial grounds for various denominations were subsequently established at Devonshire Street, now the site of Central Railway Station. It was not long before the crowded and unsanitary conditions at the new cemetery, along with problems at other cemeteries around the city, sparked a series of NSW Parliamentary debates and inquiries (Murray, 2003). Frequent complaints about odours 'unmistakeably suggestive of coffins' emanating from Sydney's cemeteries were linked to inadequate drainage and poor siting of cemetery grounds (Murray, 2003).

By 1866 overcrowded and neglected cemeteries closed for burials posed significant public health and safety fears for the government and communities (Jalland, 2006). In an effort to solve Sydney's cemetery problem a 200 ha Crown cemetery was opened in 1876 on the western outskirts, 17 km from the city centre (NSW Government, 2013c). This new public cemetery, Rookwood Necropolis, led to the closure of the Devonshire Street cemetery to new burials and the introduction of new laws to control or close other city cemeteries (Murray, 2003). Many of these cemeteries either no longer exist, having been relocated for further urban
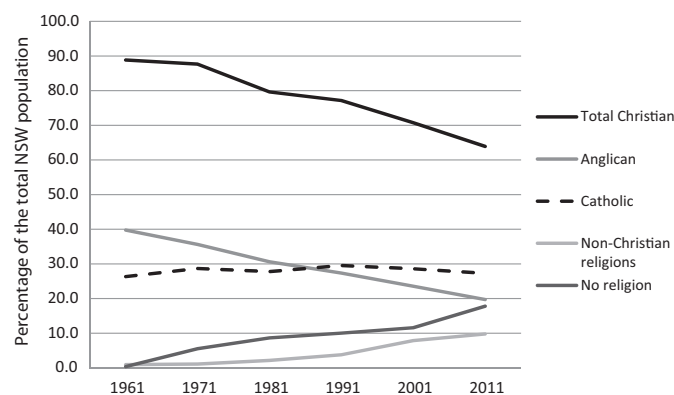

Fig. 1. Proportion of the NSW population affiliated with selected religions, 1961–2011. ABS (1961–1991, 2011d).

expansion, or are controlled by various heritage planning instruments (for example, Camperdown cemetery in inner Sydney was closed in 1868 and the remaining portions are listed under the NSW *Heritage Act 1977*, Marrickville Local Environment Plan 2011 and Register of the National Estate for cultural significance (NSW Government, 2013e)). Over the years Rookwood Necropolis has expanded to 286 ha and is now the largest cemetery in the southern hemisphere with over one million burials (NSW Government, 2013c). Rookwood continues to accept almost a quarter of Sydney's interments with estimated capacity to provide sufficient burial space to 2016. If more flexible arrangements for burials are introduced and the on-going trend for cremations continue, burial space should last until 2026 (NSW Government, 2013c).

Most cemeteries in Sydney were originally designed and divided into denominational sections based on the most recent census at the time of establishment. As the demographics of Sydney have changed these original land allocations, in which the Christian faiths predominated, have not evolved to meet the needs of more recent migrant communities of different religions (Fig. 1). The proportion of the population professing non-Christian religions has increased, particularly since the early 1970s, however this has not been reflected proportionately in the area of land available for burials. In Sydney the space shortage has been felt most acutely by the Islamic and Jewish communities with a critical shortage of burial lands. The remaining space in 2012 was estimated to be 12–17 months for the Islamic community and 6–8 years for the Jewish community leading to the state government to support the last remaining portion of land available in Rookwood Necropolis being allocated to these two faiths in 2012 (Keene, 2013; NSW Government, 2012b; Narunsky, 2012).

Land use planning for cemeteries has not been undertaken in many decades nor has it been considered within strategic metropolitan land use planning. The most recent strategic land use planning document was a discussion paper issued in 2008 by the former NSW Department of Lands (manager of the Crown cemeteries). The discussion paper sought community feedback on various options to extend the longevity of existing cemeteries and to increase provision of new burial spaces in Sydney (NSW Department of Lands, 2008b). The discussion paper stated '[I]f no action is taken, metropolitan public cemeteries will eventually run out of burial space.' Further the capacity was expected to be reached by 2035 with an estimated 680,000 burial sites remaining in Sydney across Crown, local government and private cemeteries, the majority of available space in private cemeteries (NSW Department of Lands, 2008b, p. 4). Of more than 200 cemeteries in the Sydney greater metropolitan area only 70 were actively selling plots (NSW Department of Lands, 2008a,b). These estimates carried a caveat as to the accuracy and completeness of cemetery records,