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The landscape of urban cemeteries in Beirut: Perceptions and preferences

Nayla M. Al-Akl^{a,*}, Elias Nasser Karaan^a, Mohammad S. Al-Zein^b, Sarah Assaad^c^a Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut, 1107 2020, Lebanon^b Department of Biology, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut, 1107 2020, Lebanon^c Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut, 1107 2020, Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

Cemeteries constitute some of the oldest and largest green and open spaces in Beirut. With the rapid densification of the city, and the extensive loss of green space, understanding the potential of these sites, as multifunctional landscapes, is critical for the health and sustainability of the city. Few studies on cemeteries have investigated the social and recreational values of these specific spaces, focusing mainly on the observation of the existing users and their current activities on site. As far as we know, none have examined how potential users may perceive them and what they may see as attractive in them. This exploratory study aims to investigate different perceptions of urban cemeteries in Beirut and identify preferred characteristics and landscape features that render them attractive green spaces. Face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire and a photo-sorting exercise were conducted with 29 participants. Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that not all cemeteries are perceived in the same way and that the presence of greenery, stewardship through organization, maintenance and care, as well as restorative qualities linked to privacy and the sense of being away from the city, were main criteria for positive perception and preference. Crowdedness, unequal treatment of dead and intrusion from surrounding context, both physically and ideologically were perceived as negative constructs and were linked to the least preferred images of cemeteries. While religious affiliations did not seem to impact preference or perception, the presence of political influence through signs and symbols was highly condemned within urban cemeteries.

1. Introduction

1.1. Cemeteries as green spaces

Green spaces are central to the urban quality of life, and with densifying cities and the loss of available green open space, there is a growing interest in the potential of underutilized urban green areas as multifunctional landscapes that contribute to the social, cultural and environmental aspects of city life (Anderson and Minor, 2017). Literature on green infrastructure has identified cemeteries as one category of ‘urban green spaces with cultural identity’, whose incorporation in landscape planning is crucial for sustainable urban development (Sandström, 2002).

Cemetery values, as cultural and recreational green spaces, have a long history. The transformation of burial grounds from early churchyards and other forms of burial within the dense city fabric, to greener, more open and pleasant cemetery landscapes, was guided by two main principles. The first, relates to concerns over public health caused by the spread of diseases and natural resource contamination from the

large number of decomposing bodies. This led to the abolishment of burial within dense city neighborhoods in favor of large sites in more rural areas at the outskirts of the city, and away from dwellings. The selection of new sites favored elevated, open and airy lands, with proper soil and sun exposure for quick and proper dissolution (Curl, 1983). Their situation along main roads or railways was also considered preferred for ease of access and transportation. The second principle related to the concept of death and the expectation that appropriate burial sites should provide “beautiful” and comforting spaces that venerate the dead and provide soothing spaces for bereavement (Curl, 1983). Unlike the gloomy, depressing and often unclean spaces of overcrowded and noisy urban environments, new sites relied heavily on vegetated and natural landscapes that provided spiritual healing as well as park-like settings (Etlin, 1984). The rural cemetery movement thus placed nature at the forefront of the visitor’s experience, providing picturesque landscapes with an expectation of tranquil atmosphere and acceptance of death (Bender, 1974).

The readily accessible natural sanctuary at close proximity became a necessity to urban dwellers, and cemeteries were planned as burial grounds

* Corresponding author at: Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management, Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut, 1107 - 2020, Lebanon.

E-mail address: nayla.alakl@aub.edu.lb (N.M. Al-Akl).

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as well as leisure and breathing spaces for the community. Père Lachaise cemetery and a landmark in Paris, was created on a beautiful hill-top estate with views to the city and the countryside and became a main recreational space and a tourist attraction as early as the 1800s. Mount Auburn cemetery in Watertown served as an arboretum and a recreational space. It is today one of town's largest green open spaces and is recognized for its educational values amongst others. With the expansion and densification of cities, cemeteries primarily conceived as options for cheaper burial, soon became famous for their green qualities and recreational space provision, as is the case with Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen. Others serve today as attractive and active social spaces where "men discuss business and politics, while children find a safe place to play" as is the case of the cemetery of Ardakan, Iran (ShakerArdekani et al., 2015).

Research has recognized the famous cemeteries that served as instigators and leaders of cemetery design movements (Curl, 1983; French, 1974; Schuyler, 1984) and documented the work of cemetery designers such as Loudon and Lewerentz, emphasizing their impact on organization, health, aesthetics and place-making in the urban and rural contexts (Johnson, 2008; Wingren, 2013). Specific landscape and architectural features relating to burial techniques, maintenance and especially vegetation have been highlighted (Clayden and Dixon, 2007; Clayden et al., 2009) as main spatial features and aesthetic language contributing to accepted cemetery typologies (Constant, 1994; Rugg, 2006). Larger concepts of monumentality and notions of commemoration have also been discussed (Campo-Ruiz, 2015). Beyond the recent interest in the ecological values of cemeteries (Čanádý and Mořanský, 2017; Kowarik et al., 2016), limited yet central research has looked at other values of cemeteries as green spaces, focusing on recreational (Deering, 2010; Evensen et al., 2017) and restorative (Nordh et al., 2017) benefits.

Most of the above-mentioned literature has been based on the reading of experts and researchers who possess the skills of the trained observer (Steen Jacobsen, 2007) and whose perceptions of cemeteries relate to their own area of expertise and interest. Cemeteries however are complex spaces that bring notions of spirituality, religion, history, politics, design and landscape, all in one place (Rugg, 1998). They are sites that inspire strong emotions for both mourners (Bachelor, 2007) and non-mourners (Woodthorpe, 2009). While few studies have investigated the opinions of current cemetery users (Deering 2010, Francis et al., 2000; Woodthorpe, 2011), further research is required to better understand attitudes towards cemeteries by laypeople and potential users.

By taking Beirut cemeteries as case study, this exploratory study aims to (1) investigate different perceptions of cemeteries and (2) identify their positive and negative characteristics (features and qualities) which may affect their value as urban green spaces.

1.2. Cemeteries in Beirut, Lebanon

Beirut is a multi-religious and multicultural city that hosts a number of sect and non-sect related burial spaces. While several exist in the form of churchyards and mosque-related graveyards, the most visible and largest burial sites are cemeteries in centrally located urban sites. These sites were once considered outskirts of the ancient city and fell at the edges of the old city walls. Most of the cemeteries are primarily located along the two main historic roads which used to link Beirut to two other major cities in the area, Saida and Damascus. According to Stuart and Curvers (2014), many of the oldest cemeteries lie on ancient Roman predecessors. The more recent cemeteries of the 20th century generally fall further away from the historic core, along these same roads, or in the vicinity of the oldest and largest green space of the city, the pine forest, and often still preserve some of its historic trees. During the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), churchyards and other forms of graveyards of different religions became overcrowded while many of the established cemeteries, which fell along what had become the green-line, became inaccessible. New cemeteries were created, often in

an informal and unplanned manner, within the existing pine forest area or in other readily available urban sites. In this study, the definition of cemeteries will comprise different types of burial grounds including churchyards, graveyards as well as independent planned and unplanned burial sites.

In Lebanon, research on cemeteries is limited and has only looked at a small number of cemeteries as cultural entities as well as political spaces of commemoration. This has been done through the study of the historical development and layout of the cemetery of Saint Dimitri (Davie, 2007), the application of the international concept of the British War Cemetery in the Middle East (Fuchs, 2004) and recently the notions of martyrdom and martyr cemeteries and the relationship to funerary practices surrounding the culture of war (Chaib, 2011, 2014). The presence of these and other burial grounds in the urban setting of Beirut inner neighborhoods and their potential within the landscape vision of the city has not been previously investigated. Also little is known about the potential of cemeteries as green spaces in the Arab world in general, and in context of Beirut in particular.

The city is heavily dense with very limited green space (0.8 m² per capita), and a major lack of open spaces (Rahhal, 2014; Shayya, 2009). The need to protect existing green spaces is critical for the health of the city and its inhabitants, and cemeteries constitute some of the largest (and oldest) green areas in the city. While the type and amount of greenery and landscape setting vary between cemeteries, their location is currently in the heart of residential and mixed-use neighborhoods, and their sites are generally highly visible and along main roads. They remain, however, separated from the community by fences, walls and gates, and formal or informal access restrictions apply to all.

Despite being appreciated as functional and religious burial grounds, cemeteries, especially those reaching full capacity, have not been sheltered from the threats of real estate development, densification and infrastructural works, as has recently been the case in the controversial damage to Al Sintiyeh, one of the most famous Sunni cemeteries in the city. The future of other cemeteries is unknown and their preservation has so far been achieved through their status as active burial grounds, ownership control and community advocacy for their upkeep as cultural and historical sites with strong bonds to the community.

1.3. The role of perception and preference in cemetery landscape preservation

Participatory and communicative planning approaches have highlighted the importance of community input for successful and sustainable planning and proper valuation of urban spaces (Forester, 1999; Stähle, 2006). Studies have shown that experts and laypeople often perceive landscapes differently and that a good understanding of laypeople's perception within planning and design strategies can result in a better acceptance and satisfaction of green spaces by the community (Hofmann et al., 2012; Steen Jacobsen, 2007). In cities like Beirut, where the notion of the cemetery as green space has yet to be investigated, it is critical to understand how cemeteries are perceived in order to identify their positive and negative characteristics and their value as green spaces, with the aim to preserve and integrate them as multidimensional landscapes in a holistic landscape and urban planning strategy for a healthier city.

Numerous studies have looked at specific landscape features and qualities that are relevant to perception and affect preference. The presence of vegetation, water, wildlife, levels of maintenance, as well as landscape qualities such as naturalness, complexity, diversity, prospect and refuge are amongst many characteristics studied in the fields of landscape perception and preference. (Appleton, 1996; Hofmann et al., 2012; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Nassauer, 1995). Although these qualities have mostly been tested in parks, gardens or natural landscapes, different landscape types have particular perceptible characteristics that induce human perceptions and expectations (Gobster

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