

Green is the New Black

Sustainable deathstyle consumption and the contemporary cemetery space



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Abstract

Cemeteries have the reputation of being feared and highly avoided spaces in Western societies. They are walled in, separated from everyday life and exist on the outskirts of towns where they have developed into necropolises – cities of the dead. This however is changing due to new burial dispositions and increasing customer demand for a more pleasant mourning environment in harmony with nature. This poster highlights the current changes in the German burial culture and demonstrates how the contemporary cemetery space develops into an appreciated landscape, valued for its green spaces and sanctuary purposes.

NB: This work is an extract of my PhD project which examines the overall changes in consumer culture regarding demise, burial, and the space for it all.



The traditional burial plot – A bit of history

Foucault (1984:4) acknowledges the cemetery space as a place “outside of all places”, discussing its development over time and its reputation in society. The first cemeteries – strongly connected to the clergy – were established in churchyards to keep the deceased close to the living as a reminder of mortality. But at the turn of the 19th century, with the advance of atheism and the increasing perception of death as an illness, society no longer tolerated burials in their midst and hence moved their space outside of their settlements. These necropolises – the cities of the dead – developed into feared, avoided places, which they still are today.

The traditional grave plots feature a headstone naming the deceased, a frame outlining the buried body as well as a flowerbed reflecting the paradox of a degenerating body below and generating plants above the ground (see example photo on the left, anonymised).

In 2013, 26% of the German population would want an alternative, green burial for themselves, compared to 19% in 2004 (Aeternitas, 2013).

Think green – New burial concepts in line with nature

For various reasons – some still to be uncovered in the process of this research project – bereaved and pre-arrangement customers have evoked a high demand for natural, green burial spaces. Here, the shrine-like appearance of individual plots is abandoned for the benefit of nature, flora and the creation of a special atmosphere. Three examples:

Natural woodland burial

Urns are bio-degradable and buried underneath trees in designated, public forest areas. Neither headstones nor grave decorations are allowed while nature takes over the maintenance.



[1]



[2]

Burial garden

A recently introduced urn burial concept where part of the municipal cemetery is re-designed to resemble a park or a garden rather than a burial ground. Names and dates of the deceased are displayed collectively on steles.



Forest cemetery

A burial ground located in a fenced-in woodland area. Inhumation and urn plots are aligned according to the growth of the trees. Headstones mark individual graves but plot frames are prohibited to allow a more natural design.



“It is close-by and does not remind of a cemetery but rather a park-like resting-place which I believe invites more people to seek calmness and retreat from the busy city parks where often drinking and noise occurs. I think that not everyone here is visiting someone but just goes for a walk like me”.
– Greg, informant

A changing space – the green burial ground as a new space in society

While informants from the business side expressed declining figures in traditional plot sales, my observations on various burial sites confirmed that the traditional, shrine-like grave plot is ‘dying out’ due to the increasing popularity of natural burials. It seems that *green is the new black* in the burial industry. With an increasing price-sensitivity and a more environmental consciousness, bereaved and pre-arranging customers demand more and more *green* burial options. Hence, Foucault’s idea of a changing burial environment proves to be true yet again in the 21st century. This new, green thinking influences the overall design and atmosphere of burial grounds making them less death-reminding and more pleasant environments. It was found that their extraordinary atmosphere attracts also non-bereaved, opening up this space for the wider public (see quote on the left). By abandoning death-reminding elements such as headstones and individual plot designs, green cemeteries are perceived as more welcoming.

Conclusion

With the increasing popularity of ethical and green consumption (Williams, 2007), consumers seek to expand their eco-conscious lifestyle and apply it to their *deathstyle*. The traditional cemetery space is degenerating for the benefit of nature and sustainable burial options. At the same time, this decision making contributes to building a new mourning space, away from the hectic city and into woodland areas creating sanctuaries, escape-spaces and places for retreat. This indicates a (visual) change in German mourning culture away from shrine-like burial grounds towards green burial spaces in line with nature.



References

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