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# Why so serious?

**Barbequeing, jogging, bicycling, skiing, partying, sex and dogs peeing on gravestones are among the issues pushing the graveyards function into unknown territories. With great certainty one can not deny the graveyard typology evolving as it has transcended from mourning spaces to recreational spaces. It begs the question whether we are losing important parts of our culture and heritage or if we are gaining new public spaces?**

Graveyards have always been a conundrum from the very beginning. The number of deceased has increased exponentially resulting in never ending expansion of graveyard space. The focal discussion on graveyards has for many centuries revolved around the subject lack of space, but for the past decade it has taken another turn, as how we conduct ourselves in graveyards has changed drastically. Although a graveyard is an initially well-defined program, its defined usage for the living is

less clear.

## **Unclear function for the living**

The function of graveyards is undeniably this: Housing (c)remains of any paying citizen six feet under. There is no actual law that states how the living should conduct themselves in environments like this. These areas are almost self-sustainable public spaces, meaning there is little governmental interference. There is an ongoing discussion on the rules of conduct in graveyards and there has been cast light upon by several agencies, such as Gravferdsetaten, Kultur- og Kirke departementet and Kirkelig arbeidsgiver- og interesseorganisasjon (KA). The real problem does not lie in territorial issues, but what this behavior has led to. The cardinal rules, which we all learned at one point, were not to run, yell, litter or step on graves. These spaces are/were after all considered as holy. There has been issued many complaints, most recently in Ullern. An article was written on how a funeral service at Ullern church was delayed, as the event

of New Years Eve '14 had trashed the premises.<sup>1</sup> One could argue that the younger generation does not yet have the understanding of how it feels when someone close to them passes away. A contradictory statement to the ones criticizing, is that the elder generation parks their car in front of the tombstone they are visiting, which could be regarded as equally disrespectful. There is a clear and definite change in views on how to conduct oneself in graveyards. Øystein Dahle, chief of management affairs in KA has stated that it is being discussed, both in local and national church communities. To what degree should the graveyards be recreational and public spaces? Even though the church desperately wants to resolve this issue, they do not really know if the change in social practice is for good or bad.<sup>2</sup>

### Laws and regulation

So where does this behavior come from? Why are the graveyards used as parks? Is there a correlation between the dead and good recreational spaces? There may be a logical answer to this question, looking into the legislation on graveyard plots. The outlook of these plots is not circumstantial, but carefully planned and carried out. The laws and regulation issued by the Fornyings-, administrasjons- og kirke departementet (FAD) clearly states that each grave needs the dimension of 1,5x3 meters and urns of 2,25 square meters. Each field consists of 8 rows and each row has 25 single graves.<sup>3</sup> Natural pathways create accessibility so no graves are stepped on. About 50% of a regular burial plot is actually used for graves. The entire plot is placed on a slope hill, entirely covered with grass, so the rain water is naturally funneled to each single grave for the decomposing stage.<sup>4</sup> In addition graveyards have built into their design buffer zones to create distance to surrounding houses, road lanes and outside disturbances. In other words, the FAD dictates a typology very similar to recreational parks. It is also a fact that graveyards are public spaces where the premises are open to the public most of the day.

### Historical facts

Looking into the evolution of graveyards, historical

1 [www.dittoslo.no/ullern-avis-akersposten/nyheter-akersposten/kirkegarden-sa-ut-som-en-soppelfylling-under-begravelse-1.8230408](http://www.dittoslo.no/ullern-avis-akersposten/nyheter-akersposten/kirkegarden-sa-ut-som-en-soppelfylling-under-begravelse-1.8230408)

2 [www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/2008/07/27/541896.html](http://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/2008/07/27/541896.html)

3 Klingberg, Helge: *Kirkegårdsboka*, Forsythia Forlag 1997, p. 18-21 og 36.

4 *ibid.* p. 38-40

facts reveals a much grimmer past. Graveyards became a typology out of necessity, as the church floors did not have the capacity. The first graveyards were located outside city borders, as living among the dead often meant sickness and diseases. Oslo municipality would go on to have 6 greater expansions between 1794 and 1948.<sup>5</sup> Living among the dead became inevitable as the borders of the city engulfed the graveyards. The general opinion towards these sites at the time, were mostly hateful. We forget that these spaces once were regarded as unpopular parts of the city and associated with death and decay.<sup>6</sup> In light of this, the resistance towards change is actually surprising. These facts reveals the true nature of graveyards, they are in reality highly susceptible to changes in attitude.

### Multipurpose

Development in the modern city is often stifled by the fact that many buildings and areas are only built for one single purpose. The natural response is "multipurpose", a commonly known approach that tries to streamline given programs to fit an array of familiar programs, rather than one in particular. This is actually what is happening with graveyards. The reality of today's condition is this: Each grave hardly gets more than one-figure visits each month and graveyards are rarely "packed". Their easy accessibility and other advantages have led to the endangerment of graveyards former state and its status quo.

But what if we consider this situation as beneficial? In reality might this not save these sacred spaces? The relevance of graveyards would diminish if it had not been for the change it has gone through when becoming multipurpose spaces. Perhaps the change in how graveyards are used is not negative at all, considering people actually come here for their daily routines, enjoying the site in itself. With the case of Ullern, people choose these spaces to gaze at the city. The problem might be what the familiar programs consist of; on one side recreation and joy, and on the other side graveyard and grief. Since ancient times the mutual respect between the living has been shown to the ones who are

no longer among us. These sites have historically created some kind of friction, whether it is health

5 Evensberget, Snorre: *Bygd og by i Norge*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

6 Alsвик, Bård: *Døden i Christiania*, Tobias 4, Oslo Byarkivet, Norge 1998.

issues, spatial issues or terms of conduct, one can not deny its rising popularity among other people than mourners as an issue. We are left wondering if our old virtues are all that important. Do the dead rest any better as we quietly mourn for them? Or are the mourning only holding on to a dying culture, as their reluctance is standing in the way of change? Who should bow down the mourner visiting the graves of their loved ones, or the visitors using it solely as recreation spaces? Historical facts reveals that Hausmania, Sofienberg park, St. Hanshaugen park and Stensparken used to be graveyards, but has later been transformed into fully fledged public spaces of its own contemporary.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the thought of inflating graveyards with anything else can be hard to swallow, as one does not want to desecrate the memories of the deceased. Memories do not take any shape, yet we need a physical space for contemplation. The exact size needed for the deceased is hard to define, with almost no measurable parameters in the equation, and it is easy being cynical justifying this certain change with measurable data.

### Why so serious?

The dichotomy may be false and maybe what we really need is a new kind of public space that can handle both groups at the same time. Maybe the next stage is the in-between, the hybrid condition

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

where mourning and barbeque can exist side by side. One can examine Eisenmanns “*A Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*” as a reference. Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* criticizes it for being too blunt and with no direct references to its purpose and heavy theme; one can also regard the criticism as beauty by accident.<sup>8</sup> The bluntness in the execution of its symbolic values, has allowed not only a more open behavior in the memorial, but also an acceptance towards its accidental multipurpose. Both children and adults can be seen exploring the place as if it was a maze or playground as it is situated in a frequently visited urban setting. How would a more literal and direct representation of the murdered Jews play out? Would it not be considered a *faux pas* as when

deLillos performed their all too direct song in commemoration of the 22nd of July in Oslo?<sup>9</sup> A mourner does not need the constant reminder of death and sorrow; in the end is it not the happy memories that count? The mediation between reality and blurriness seems to be a necessity in a program that deals with death and the intangible. Maybe the social change in graveyards can be regarded as an extension of this mediation, a sort of political correctness towards a painful theme that takes itself too seriously.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2012/07/the-inadequacy-of-berlins-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe.html>  
<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nrk.no/kultur/kulturministeren-stotter-delillos-1.8256287>



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