

Ethnography inside the Walls: Studying the Contested Space of the Cemetery

ANNIKA PORSBORG NIELSEN

IS IT A BIRD, Copenhagen, Denmark

LINE GROES

IS IT A BIRD, Copenhagen, Denmark

This paper discusses the merits and challenges of user-centered urban development projects, and what it means to apply an ethnographic approach to the study of urban spaces and the way people use them. We draw primarily on an ethnographic project carried out in two cemeteries in Copenhagen. The project focused on the involvement of local citizens – both everyday users of the cemeteries, as well as locals who do not use these urban spaces. We discuss the challenges and opportunities of ethnography in a complex space such as a cemetery, and consider additional ways to incorporate citizens into projects that have a direct impact on their lives. We conclude with a discussion of the project learnings and their implications for future urban planning.

INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses the merits and challenges of user-centered urban development projects, and what it means to apply an ethnographic approach to the study of cemeteries and the ways people use them.

Based on the study discussed in this paper we developed a range of recommendations, which are currently being implemented in the City Council's development plan for Copenhagen's cemeteries for the next 50 years. The context of the study, and the reason why the City Council initiated the work on an overall development strategy, is that the city's cemeteries now have more available green spaces than ever. A general tendency in the population towards cremation, rather than burials in coffins, is freeing up a great deal of space on the cemetery grounds. Space which is not being used for gravesites, and which could therefore be developed for alternative recreational purposes. The City of Copenhagen was therefore interested in understanding which new ways of using this urban space would be seen as acceptable, relevant and meaningful by its citizens – especially those citizens who live their daily lives in the neighborhoods surrounding the cemetery grounds. As a result, we were brought in to carry out an ethnographic study, bringing out the citizens' perspectives on the future development of their local cemeteries.

1) FIELDWORK IN THE CEMETERY: APPLYING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE

The first section discusses the merits and challenges of doing ethnography in an urban space as inscribed with emotional significance, symbolic meaning, and conflicting interests as the cemetery. Our approach introduces the voice of the citizen, exploring his or her experience of the cemetery as a place of mourning, a backyard, or an oasis for escaping city life – or in the case of the non-users, a risky, inaccessible space they felt excluded from.

Methodology: mapping people's uses and perceptions of cemeteries

We draw primarily on an ethnographic project carried out in two cemeteries in Copenhagen: Bispebjerg and Vestre. We interviewed 12 respondents for the study – 8 everyday users of the cemeteries, as well as four youth who lived in the area, but who never used their local cemetery. We employed a combination of ethnographic methods, which allowed us to gain deep insights into the routines, thoughts and feelings of the cemetery's users. We carried out in-depth interviews with them in their homes, exploring their relationship with the cemetery space, what role it plays in their everyday life, and what their thoughts are on the future development of the space.

Also, we mapped their use of the cemetery by going for walks with them, asking them to show us their daily routines, their favorite spots, as well as the parts of the cemetery they tended to avoid. We brought maps along and used them actively as a way to compare our respondents' mental maps of the cemetery, with the actual layout and composition of the space. In our interviews with non-users we asked them to take us for walks in their neighborhood to get an understanding of what spaces they use, and why the cemetery was not a part of their mental map. Talking to the non-users was an important way of getting insights into why, for some people, the cemetery is an inaccessible and complicated place that does not invite exploration.

When planning our field work at the two cemeteries, we took several measures to prepare for the study of a physical space, that is both very important to its users and that demands a great deal of discretion and decorum. There are a lot of things you cannot do inside a cemetery. You have to be careful what you photograph, you must consider where you walk, and you have to think about which topics you raise and what questions you ask of your respondents while in that space.

Going in, we had some expectations that the ethical considerations about how to act in this space would be most important *vis-a-vis* respondents who were gravesite users, that is, people who had a loved one buried at the cemetery. The respondent group consisted of 50% gravesite users, and 50% recreational users (joggers, people who go for walks, picnics, visitors' tours etc.), and we expected the two groups to have rather different relationships with the cemetery space. We expected the gravesite users to have a somewhat stronger emotional attachment to the space, shaped by their experience of bereavement, grief and possibly comfort and closeness to the ones they lost. And thus we expected them to be sensitive to the ways in which other people behave in this space, in a way that perhaps recreational users would not be.

Insights: Understanding the Unpredictability of How People Use the Cemetery

What we found, though, was that these user categories made very little sense. Very often, people were both gravesite and recreational users at the same time, and the respondents who used the space purely for leisure would have just as strong concerns about behavior and conduct as the ones visiting their family's graves. The idea that visiting a grave corresponds poorly with using the space recreationally was not one that was recognized by our respondents. If anything, having a gravesite to visit would make it even more likely that they would afterwards go for a picnic nearby, or even lie down on a lawn to sunbathe. In fact, the more everyday activities a bereaved person could relegate to the cemetery, the better they often felt, because it gave them a sense of still including their lost loved ones in their everyday lives.

Furthermore, it turned out to be difficult to predict what was deemed inappropriate behavior within the cemetery walls. Often, the users who had someone buried at the cemetery would be eager to support new and unconventional ways of using the space. We went for a walk with a recently bereaved widow and her daughter, when somewhere on the route we spotted a grave with a few open bottles of beer and a pack of cigarettes. The widow noted how much she enjoyed the idea that the friends of the deceased person seemed to stop by often and leave their friend's favorite beer on his grave. She felt that although beer cans and cigarettes did not fit the traditional idea of what is appropriate on a gravesite, the most important thing was that the person's loved ones remembered him and made him a part of their everyday life.

In general, respondents who had recently lost someone seemed to greatly appreciate the diverse expressions of personality on other people's gravesites. In their eyes, it made the cemetery seem more lively and gave them an 'idea of who those people were, when they were alive'. It gave them a sense of the cemetery as a dynamic place, and a space shared by a community of people with whom they had something in common. In many ways, it made their own loss more bearable, because it made them feel they can be a part of defining the cemetery space, and that it is a place that can be incorporated into their daily lives in a meaningful way.

What Ethnography on the ground can teach us

What is particularly interesting about these findings is that they offer an insight into what is going on 'on the ground', in the concrete everyday use and non-use of an urban space. Many of our insights show us that the logics and patterns of how the space is used cannot be predicted and rarely follows the intentions inscribed in the planning of the space.

For instance, we interviewed a young girl who never uses the cemetery even though she lives right nearby, and although she felt that her neighborhood lacked green spaces for her and her friends to go for walks, play ball etc. When we asked her why they wouldn't use the local cemetery only steps away from their houses, she said they felt they would intrude, and they were unsure and nervous about how to act and behave, once inside the cemetery gates.

We took a walk on the cemetery later that day and she pointed out how the section closest to her house was the part of the cemetery, that seemed the most uninviting and scary to her. Since she would have to cross through that part to get to other areas that had green lawns and a lake, she had simply given up on the idea of going there. Interestingly, the space she saw as uninviting and scary was a fairly open space with very few graves, which the city council had envisioned would be just right for different types of recreational use. But because there were no graves, there were also very few people walking around and no caretakers in sight, which was one of the things that made the young woman and her friends feel that the space was scary and unwelcoming.

Thus, by directing an anthropological lens at the cemetery, and taking our cue from how users think and feel, we offer a perspective fundamentally different from that of the urban planner, the architect, or the landscaper. Our insights and recommendations point to a new understanding of the fact that the cemetery is more than its physical space, and lets us understand how this space is being appropriated and used in unintended and unpredictable ways.

The insights from the cemetery study in many ways echo results from another project we did about biking in the city. Here as well, ethnography on the ground challenged the more top-down approach of urban planners. In urban planning the focus is on making structures accessible – in this case bike lanes – rather than exploring the emotional barriers and motivations that affect people’s choice of biking vs. driving. What we found was that giving people access to the structures was not enough, rather, having positive experiences with biking created ownership to this type of transportation. It motivated our respondents to change their daily habits, because they experienced biking as an added value in their daily life.

2) INVOLVING THE CITIZEN IN NEW WAYS IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Secondly, we would like to discuss some questions that arise from carrying out a project, which has public participation as one of its core aims. A classic pitfall of many participatory projects is the tendency to ask the involved citizens directly, what changes they would like to see implemented in the future. An obvious weakness of this approach is that firstly, users are often not able to articulate what they want. Secondly, if you ask users, citizens, customers what they want and need, you end up with a 1:1 wish list that expresses subjective wishes, needs and preferences.

The fact that people are not able to articulate what they want, certainly applies to the question of how to develop cemeteries. Had we asked people what they thought the cemetery should be like in the future, chances are they would have painted a picture not far from the place they know today. It is surprisingly hard to imagine groundbreaking and truly innovative change. We tend to think and imagine within the frames and contexts we already know. On top of this, the cemetery is a space narrowly inscribed with shared moral, cultural and social rules and norms, which makes it even harder to go against habitual thinking and imagine what could be. After all, a cemetery is a green space used for burials, isn’t it?

Seeing Users and Citizens as Whole Human Beings

Instead of asking people how they would like cemeteries to develop, we took a broader more holistic approach. We focused on getting a deep and nuanced understanding of the cemetery space, and of the plurality of needs that must be balanced within this space. Instead of asking directly about wishes and preferences, we asked how people use the cemetery today. We explored the habits, routines and behavior that shaped their lives as a whole. Our approach is to see people not as users or citizens, but as whole human beings. We wanted to understand how their use of the cemetery fit the greater puzzle of their everyday life and their worldview.

When we did talk to them about how they felt the space should develop, we used cards, pictures, and maps, as a way to inspire and frame the discussions. Seeing as it is so difficult to imagine change that you haven't yet experienced, we gave our respondents a predefined context. A creative playground with concrete tools to make the discussions more tangible. For instance, we used a range of visual cues to discuss the boundaries of acceptable behavior and activities in the cemetery. The respondents would organize a range of cards with pictures and words, and categorize them according to how acceptable they were. Should picnics, football, or rock concerts be a part of the future of the cemetery? How did they feel about QR codes on gravestones that gave you information about famous deceased people? And what about weddings? Would that be acceptable within the cemetery space? This methodological approach yielded some very interesting insights. Instead of discussing who wanted more benches or better streetlights, we were able to move away from the subjective wish lists, and on to a far more important debate about what kind of space the cemetery is, and what we can and should do with this urban space.

From Abstract Intentions to Concrete Choices

What we also discovered is that if you ask people on an abstract level how their local cemetery ought to develop, they tend to be open to anything - "as long as there is room for everyone". That was a mantra we heard again and again. "This is everyone's space, everyone should be a part of it". But what does that mean? How exactly do we welcome all these new changes and innovative ideas, while also being respectful of everyone's different needs? Interestingly, as soon as we went from an abstract to a more concrete level, people were far more critical of certain ideas. Now they had to prioritize, to evaluate, and to choose. Suddenly, they had a very tangible and often provocative starting point to discuss from.

For instance, we included a picture of a parking lot. A flea market. Triggers that sparked heated debates, about why these things were so obviously unacceptable. This approach forced respondents to argue *why* it is unthinkable to have a flea market, but not a jazz concert? In this particular case, the flea market was a no-go, because it had a commercial aspect. Money – however little – was changing hands and that was not acceptable. A jazz concert would be okay, a pop concert too, but loud rock not so much. The challenge then becomes assessing exactly where the line should be drawn – when is a concert too loud? What genre or artist would fit the atmosphere of the cemetery? Who should be making these types of judgment calls and what should be the logic or criteria of assessment?

We discovered that there were certain criteria that people used for assessing new initiatives. For instance, cultural events like concerts and plays had to be sufficiently mainstream, not to alienate certain groups. An interesting illustration of this schism was people's reactions to a new dance institute that opened in the old chapel at Bispebjerg Cemetery. Our respondents seemed to agree that this initiative was in poor taste, and we initially thought it was the notion of people dancing in a chapel, that felt wrong to them. As we dug deeper we found that, rather, the problem was that the institute teaches hip-hop dance, which felt like a cultural expression that was too niche. Because our respondents felt that this activity was not aimed at the broader general public, many of them did not approve. They would, on the other hand, find it acceptable to have fitness sessions in the chapel, as they felt this was a kind of activity many different types of people in the neighborhood would be able to take part in. Thus, the idea of inviting physical activity into this space was not the issue – rather, people's concern was to make sure the cemetery remained a place for everyone.

Deep Human Insights as a Vehicle for Innovation

These discussions gave us great insights into the patterns and logics behind the seemingly subjective and idiosyncratic ideas of what is acceptable in a cemetery, and how this space can and should develop. Our approach allowed us to get behind what people say, when they express intentions and abstract opinions, and find out what happens when they are asked to choose between very concrete future scenarios, for a space they care about. We argue that this type of approach and methodology is needed, in order to truly achieve deep human insights that can give both content and direction to innovation processes.

If we really want public participation to be an integral part of these processes, we need to go beyond hearings that only produce lists of more or less random opinions and preferences, and that are often the result of a biased setting and an expression of unequal power relations. If public participation is to play a valuable and central role in urban development, we must use it to bring out deep, nuanced and robust insights into the dreams, frustrations, and hopes of real human beings.

3) THREE OPPORTUNITY SPACES FOR DEVELOPING COPENHAGEN'S CEMETERIES IN THE FUTURE

In this third and last section of the paper, we will outline the key recommendations that came out of the project. We identified five tensions in people's use of the cemetery today, and argued that the future development of this urban space needs to take into account and balance these tensions.

We argue that people's perception and use of the cemetery today is guided by the tension between the cemetery as:

1. A collective resource ↔ A personal space
2. Celebrating life ↔ Embracing sorrow

3. A space for everyone ↔ Not a space for all kinds of behavior
4. Feeling at home ↔ Feeling alienated
5. A timeless place ↔ A space that is changing

The key challenge for the city council, as we see it, is to develop the city's cemeteries while balancing these five tensions. We see the five tensions as guidelines that will ensure that the development of the cemeteries is addressing real human beings' concerns, needs, wishes, and frustrations.

In our recommendations to the council, we developed three opportunities, which each set a direction for the future of the cemeteries, and which each address a number of the tensions we identified.

The three opportunities in our recommendations are:

1. *Develop individual profiles* for each of the city's cemeteries
2. *Build partnerships with the local neighborhoods* surrounding the cemeteries
3. *Create behavioral zones within the cemetery space* to ensure that all citizens are welcomed inside while different types of behavior and usage co-exist harmoniously

We will now unfold each of the opportunities, discussing their potential for creating value and how they would help balancing the tensions outlined above.

Opportunity #1: Create a Clear Identity and a Distinct Profile for Each Cemetery

Cemeteries are different from most other urban spaces, in that we seem to have an abstract *a priori* idea of what we will find inside the walls, even before we enter the cemetery space. We often think we know what to expect in terms of the general look, function and atmosphere of a cemetery. Perhaps this is due to the fact that these spaces rarely focus on emphasizing their distinct individual features or characteristics. While almost every other corner of a modern city is defining its own flavor and style – and while different segments seek out the areas and neighborhoods that best match their identity – cemeteries are for everyone, and are therefore almost by default generic in the way they communicate about themselves. But in fact, these urban spaces each have characteristics that are very much their own. The difference lies in making a conscious choice to communicate this and put a label, so to speak, on the cemetery as a particular kind of place.

Based on the insights from our study we advised the city council to work towards more differentiated profiles for each cemetery. These profiles would be based on local citizens' perceptions of the cemetery, what role they think the place should play in the neighborhood, and how they would like to see it develop in the future. Furthermore, the profiles should build on both the physical layout and characteristics of the cemetery, and on the unique features they each have to offer to the area. For some of the larger cemeteries, that have patches of forests and a great botanical variety, a focus on a nature profile seems fruitful. While cemeteries that house old, historic buildings could emphasize their capacity as a space for learning about local history and architecture. Other more urbanized cemeteries might work towards communicating their role as a shared burial ground and meeting place for a

variety of cultures, ethnicities and social groups. Here, we envision a multicultural profile that emphasizes, for instance, the cemetery's role as a place to teach school children about different religions, rites and rituals.

There is a wide range of benefits in creating differentiated profiles for the city's cemeteries. Firstly, the cemeteries will become more visible and more present in the minds of people in the local community. This enables the cemeteries to tell the story of who they are and what they offer, in a way that makes them more relevant to both their current and potential users. A tension that we discovered in the way people used the cemeteries, was the tension between everyday users who felt at home there, and non-users who felt alienated. By being more visible in the neighborhood and communicating a clear profile, the cemeteries would invite the non-users in, and give them a reason to make this urban space a part of their everyday life.

Secondly, this heightened visibility will be supported by a clear visual identity that is communicated in the local library, in public buildings, and other key places in the local community. This will create a new situation where the users 'meet' the cemetery in the places where they live their everyday lives. As it is now, we are rarely reminded of the cemetery unless we are physically there. This is different from the way we think about other public spaces or institutions. For instance, you can have a clear vision of places like Tate Modern or Central Park, even though you've never visited. They have a distinct visual identity that can be communicated across borders. In the same way, the cemetery's profile should exist separately from its physical space.

Thirdly, if the cemetery is more present in people's minds, and if they have a clear idea of what it offers and what it stands for, they are also able to choose a cemetery that suits their identity, their needs and their preferences. It used to be that you 'belong to' a cemetery based on geography. But why should this very fundamental choice not be based on emotions, identity and temperament, rather than where you happen to live? It is only fitting that the (post-)modern individual, so used to customized, tailor-made products and services, should get to choose from a range of cemeteries that each represent different experiences and values.

And finally, by communicating that a cemetery is, for instance, a nature cemetery you attract a certain type of user. Creating distinct profiles will be a fruitful tool for the city council to target the type of user – and thus the type of user behavior – that the cemetery wishes to encourage and promote. By doing this they will solve the tension between on the one hand, being 'a space for everyone', while at the same time sanctioning certain types of behavior on the cemetery grounds.

Opportunity #2: Build Partnerships with the Local Neighborhoods Surrounding the Cemeteries

Many respondents from our study did not see their local cemetery as an integrated part of the area or community they lived in. They tended to think and speak of the cemeteries as rather isolated physical units – both literally and figuratively separated from the surrounding neighborhood by thick impenetrable walls.

Our advice to the city council is that they should work strategically toward the cemeteries becoming active and shared resources for the local community. In order to do this, partnerships between the cemetery and a wide range of local institutions, organizations, companies and private groups must be established. The goal is to anchor the cemetery more deeply within the local community, creating ties and relationships that will further a dynamic and robust integration between this urban space and its neighbors. This approach will also guide the cemetery in communicating in a meaningful way with groups that are not currently using its spaces and resources, in order to find new ways of inviting them in. Again, this would address the tension between feeling at home and feeling alienated from the cemetery.

But furthermore, working with this opportunity would also help address the tension of the cemetery being both a collective cultural resource and a deeply personal space. By integrating the cemetery more closely with the local neighborhood, we could imagine interactions with local museums, libraries, and schools, highlighting the cemetery as a source of learning. Each cemetery is tied to its surrounding neighborhood by the local history they share, and by anecdotes about famous local citizens, and it is these stories that should be brought to life. Rather than hiding behind thick walls the cemeteries must interact with its neighbors, reminding them of the shared cultural resource that they have in common. This might also strengthen the identity of the neighborhood as a whole.

Bringing the cemetery's collective cultural and historical resources into play should be done, however, with a respect for the fact that the cemetery is also a deeply personal space. Every small plot of land that houses a grave, is potentially someone's space for mourning, and for performing daily rituals of remembering. Integrating the cemetery more closely in the local area should therefore always be done hand in hand with teaching its users to respect the boundaries of these small private spaces.

Opportunity #3: Create Behavioral Zones within the Cemetery Space

This brings us to the third and last opportunity, which is a recommendation for the council to work with the cemetery in terms of zones that encourage different types of user behavior. Working with behavioral zones would help ensure that all citizens are welcomed inside, while different types of behavior and usage co-exist harmoniously.

Our study showed that while most can agree that they do not want more rules for how to behave, they would like to be taken by the hand a bit more while visiting the cemetery. Many – especially the people who rarely use the cemetery – feel insecure and unsure of what is deemed proper and appropriate behavior. They are constantly afraid of stepping on people's toes, of acting 'the wrong way', or walking into areas where they are not supposed to be. The cemetery space is guarded by strong cultural and social norms that are hard to decode for many, and this feeling of insecurity stops some people from using it as much as they would like to.

While making more rules does not seem to be a fruitful solution, behavioral zones represent a more subtle way of guiding users, of simply encouraging a certain behavior. This could be done by putting up posters or signs at the entrance, telling the user what is going on in certain parts of the cemetery, so they know what to expect. For instance, creating behavioral zones would address the tension of people wanting, on the one hand, the

cemetery to be a space where we celebrate life, while also keeping it as a place where public displays of grief is accepted and appropriate. We would make room for both these types of user needs by designating areas that were meant for quiet reflection, while other parts of the cemetery provided a space for art, music or other cultural expressions. Using the architecture and landscaping strategically is another way of guiding the visitor and suggesting a certain way of using the cemetery space.

By working with behavioral zones in the cemetery the council would allow for this space to be both a place that develops over time, while also keeping certain parts of it sacred and timeless. A clear insight from our study was the tension between wanting to invite new trends and developments into the cemetery, while also wanting it to be a space that never changes. Working with behavioral zones lets the users of the cemetery have both. Furthermore, it provides guidance and removes the fear of not knowing the 'secret rules' for appropriate behavior. Thus, this approach would open up the cemetery space and make it more accessible – especially to new users.

Annika Porsborg Nielsen is the chief anthropologist at IS IT A BIRD, a strategic innovation agency based in Copenhagen, Denmark. She has many years of experience working with user and consumer insights and giving advice on innovation and marketing strategies to international clients in a wide range of industries. Annika holds an MA and a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Copenhagen and Columbia University. annika@isitabird.dk

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