

Research Paper

Disrespectful or socially acceptable? – A nordic case study of cemeteries as recreational landscapes

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HIGHLIGHTS

- It is common to observe recreational activities at Scandinavian cemeteries.
- Slow-paced and silent recreational uses are more acceptable than high-paced ones.
- The purpose of the activities determines if they are perceived as acceptable or not.
- Religious or cultural belongings partially explain variations in acceptable activities.
- Earmarking activity zones can help avoid conflicts between the different users.

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ABSTRACT

Across Scandinavia, we witness an increased interest in making provisions for urban cemeteries to evolve as recreational landscapes. However, this development comes with its own set of challenges when uniting its primary function as a place for disposal of human remains with active and passive urban recreation. In this paper, we explore varying perspectives on recreational use of cemeteries to give a nuanced picture of the possibilities and limitations for recreation at cemeteries in a multicultural society, most often positioned within a context of densifying urban areas. The empirical data consists of interviews with cemetery users (N = 24) from various faiths and belief systems in three towns in Norway and Sweden. Findings reveal that passive recreational activities like strolling, having a cup of coffee on a bench in the cemetery etc. are in general perceived as acceptable behaviour. However, opinions differ on 'active' undertakings like running, biking and walking a dog. How people perceive or use cemeteries is partly dependent on beliefs and cultural traditions, but other factors such as the purpose of using the cemetery for recreation and the type or character of the cemetery also impact the extent to which activities are perceived as appropriate or not. Respect and intensity are two key aspects that emerged in our analysis. The study concludes that the existing peaceful atmosphere at cemeteries should be preserved and nurtured. With correct design and zoning, some recreational activities can be integrated at cemeteries, benefiting both mourners and recreational visitors.

1. Introduction

Recreational activities are often conducted in parallel to mourning activities in the urban cemeteries of Scandinavia (Evensen, Nordh & Skaar, 2017; Grabalov, 2018; Grabalov & Nordh, 2020; Nordh et al., 2022). In this milieu, multifunctional uses, particularly recreational uses, are socially acceptable to some people while awkward and even disrespectful to others. Given this range of opinions, we are interested in

unpacking the existing tensions around recreational uses of urban cemeteries, particularly from a multicultural and religious perspective in this paper. The study aims to get a better understanding of how recreation at cemeteries is perceived by people of various belief and religious belongings and feed this knowledge to the ongoing discussions on multifunctional development of cemeteries in densifying, and diverse cultural contexts.

In several examples across Scandinavia, we find ways in which

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policies and practices coalesce to promote recreational development and usage of cemeteries (see for example Copenhagen Municipality, 2015; Oslo Municipality, 2017; Cerwén, Wingren, & Qviström, 2017). The topic has also raised interest in media (Laukøy & Sørensen, 2020). For example, to contextualise the shift towards viewing cemeteries as both places for disposal of human remains and spaces for recreation, we present two snapshots that show emerging tensions: the first from Järva in Stockholm, Sweden and the second one from a newly built cemetery in Trondheim, Norway. Note, none of these examples are explored further in the paper, but both examples are heavily discussed in media and shows possible tensions around cemeteries as recreational spaces.

Järva cemetery was the core subject for an international cemetery architecture competition in 2010, and the design of the winning project 'Islands' [Öar] paid attention to the need for multifunctional use of the area, incorporate several grave areas on and around a hill within an existing recreational nature park in Northern Stockholm. The proposal, according to Stockholm city, offered the possibility to 'walk, bike, barbeque and jog' that could be undertaken between and around the intermixed grave areas (<https://vaxer.stockholm/projekt/jarva-begravningsplats/>). But the planning process for this cemetery was delayed several times due to serious objections raised against Stockholm city and the plans for the cemetery by an actual user organisation from the area (disc golf), as the design conceptualisation necessitated a physical shift of the golf club, given the active nature of golfing, causing some serious conflicts (Cerwén et al., 2017; Wingren, 2018).

The other snapshot introduces a newly established cemetery in Trondheim. In the earlier phases of establishing this cemetery, the national broadcaster wrote an article proclaiming public acceptance of using the new cemetery as a public space, and a space which can be used for recreation (Laukøy & Sørensen, 2020). The location of the cemetery is on the urban fringe and has, in a short period of time, become a popular addition to Trondheim's green spaces according to the article. A vast majority of users, both those visiting the graves and those using it for recreation purposes, expressed positive sentiments towards the ensuing changes, and their view on what is appropriate use of a cemetery was situated within a framework of new ways of burial and use of memorial grounds. However, when the article was posted on Facebook, the comments were polarised and several negative comments regarding the use of cemeteries as green spaces were posted online. As a result, some of the earlier public announcements have continued to be further discussed on social media.

These two brief snapshots underscore findings from previous studies confirming that people are conscious of the different ways in which cemeteries are being used, and that the definition of 'what is appropriate' varies (Nordh, Evensen & Skår 2017a; Skår, Nordh, & Swensen, 2018). It is not questionable that the primary function of a cemetery is that of a burial ground and a place for mourning, but in the Scandinavian context, as well as in some other parts of the western world, its secondary function is rooted in being a public space for reflection, recreation, and cultural encounters (Davidsson-Bremborg & Dahlgren, 2011; Długoński, et al. 2022; Quinton & Duinker, 2019; Skår et al., 2018). It is a global commitment that cities and communities should be safe, resilient, sustainable and as well inclusive (Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities in UN Sustainable Goals <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). But ways in which 'inclusiveness' can be organised in cemeteries and what this implies for recreational use needs further exploration and discussion. Consequently, this article explores people's opinions about recreational use of urban cemeteries and identifies potential mechanisms that shape and determine opinions. The target group for this study comprises inhabitants in Scandinavian towns from different cultural or religious backgrounds (including non-religious orientations). As such, this study shifts the research gaze from an exclusive focus on bigger cities to medium sized towns.

1.1. Changing Scandinavian cemetery landscapes

Many Scandinavian cemeteries are from late 20th century and are designed in a tradition of modernistic landscape cemeteries, well-maintained and with the headstones placed in lawns (Nolin, 2008) (Figs. 1 and 2). The greenness found in Scandinavian cemeteries, and the use of headstones (rather than slabs) makes them different from many southern European cemeteries. Some of the sections in these lawn cemeteries have no or few headstones today, because grave spaces usually become vacant, and if conditions allow, possible for re-use when the contract for grave ownership is not renewed (Fig. 3). Thus, grave rights are not perpetual in Scandinavia as opposed to other parts of the world. Nordh et al. (2021) gives some concrete examples of re-use in the Northern European context including Norway and Sweden. However, to our understanding, the way re-use is practiced can vary between municipalities as well, and is a topic that needs further research attention.

There is an increased interest in collective grave spaces/memorials across Scandinavia, which together with the possibility of re-use has sometimes resulted in changing cemetery landscapes. In Sweden, there are several examples of traditional grave sections that are turned into different forms of collective memorials, sometimes with perennials, sculptures, water features and benches (Fig. 4). These garden like additions, based on new needs for collective or different burial forms instead of individual or family plots, tend to blur or dislocate the imagines of what a cemetery should look like and how it should be used (Wingren, 2013). As Hoeg and Pajari highlight 'The original design of the cemetery may be lost with the changes that have taken place; new cemetery designs have partly different aims than what was pursued in the past. Multiculturalism and varying religious and ethical views are especially a new challenge to Nordic cemetery design' (2013, p. 114). With restricted visibility of graves and headstones, the cemetery visually becomes more parklike rendering it easier to think about it as a park, especially in a time period when the green space ratio in the surrounding urban grid has been reduced owing to densification in urban areas.

According to the Danish researcher Kjølner (2012), cemeteries in the Scandinavian context are neither (pure) common green spaces due to their position within the overarching framework of dealing with the deceased and the concept of death, nor are they purely religious spaces since they fall partly under the domain of green space management. As shown in other Scandinavian studies (Nordh et al., 2017a), a combination of nature, culture, history, as well as respect for the deceased and families visiting graves, has rendered a 'different green character' to the urban cemeteries, setting them apart from other green spaces in the city. However, even if they are different from parks, cemeteries have components, facilities and similarities with parks that make them both

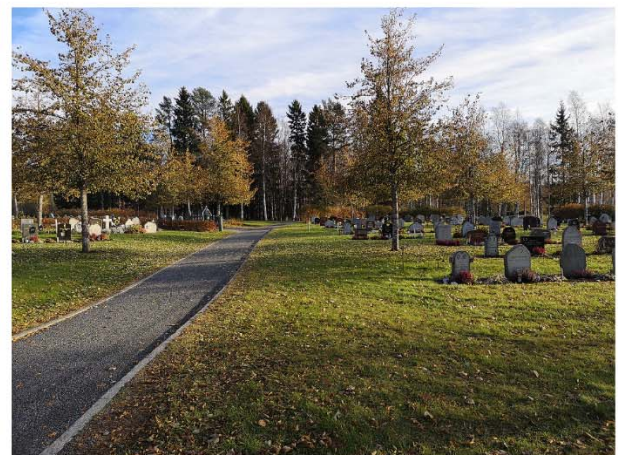


Fig. 1. A common organisation of a Scandinavian cemetery, headstones in lawn.

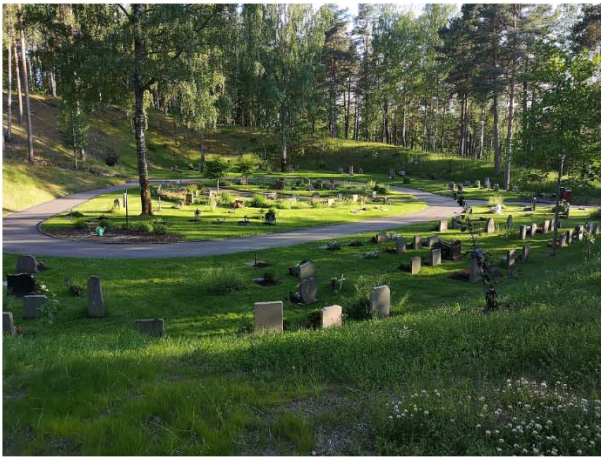


Fig. 2. A cemetery integrated in the existing landscape.



Fig. 3. A cemetery sections with few headstones left due to reuse of grave space.

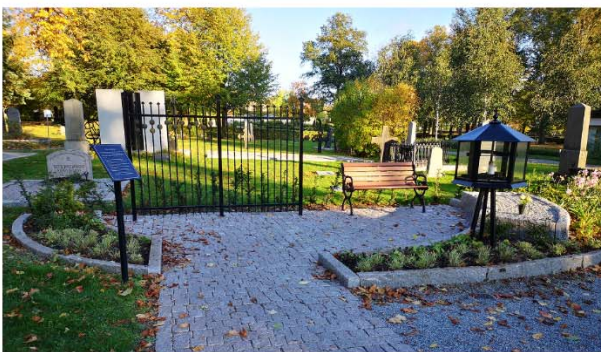


Fig. 4. A collective memorial where names of the deceased are posted on the fence.

interesting and inviting as recreational spaces.

In a secularized Scandinavia (Kjærsgaard, 2013; Pettersson 2011), recreational developments may not be surprising, but examples of recreational activities at cemeteries are also found in other parts of the world (see for example Huang, 2007; Goh & Ching 2020; Al-Akl, Karaan, Al-Zein & Assaad, 2018; Lai, Scott, & Sun, 2019; Quinton and Duinker, 2019; Rae, 2021) making the results from this study interesting outside the Scandinavian context as well. However, we stress the importance of contextual conditions that shape the results, not least since cemetery management has huge variations across countries (Nordh et al., 2021;

Walter, 2005; Rugg, 2020).

1.2. Cemeteries in diverse cultural contexts

In Norway and Sweden, cemeteries are predominantly owned and managed by the Swedish and Norwegian churches (Nordh et al., 2021; Pettersson, 2011). Even if the cemeteries are administrated by a religious (Christian) organisation, a grave space must be offered to everyone, independent of religious or non-religious affiliation (Ministry of Culture, 1990; Ministry of Children and Families, 1996) which means that the needs of a diverse population should be facilitated for and incorporated in the cemetery design (Pettersson, 2011). This sometimes results in specific and separate cemetery sections for various beliefs, such as separate sections for Jews, Muslims or other religious communities. As far as we understand, these sections are requested by the communities with a wish for having a space for their deceased community members and where burial can be made in accordance with religious needs. These needs can for example be the direction of the graves which is particularly important for some communities such as Muslims and Bahá'ís, or being allowed to decorate the full grave length. For the cemetery managers, having specific sections in which all graves have the same direction is also a convenient way of organising the cemetery. Even if a majority of the population in Norway (68 %) and slightly more than the half of the population in Sweden (55 %) are members of the Christian church (Swedish Church, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2021a,b), cemeteries today are not only meant for Christians, but need to cater to a variety of faiths and belief systems. Both countries have experienced an increase in immigration, resulting in diverse groups from varying cultural contexts (Statistics Norway, 2021a,b; Statistics Sweden, 2021). Furthermore, as stipulated by Statistics Sweden, in 2070 about one fourth of the deceased Swedish population in that year will have been born in another country (Statistics Sweden, 2022). So far, the Scandinavian cemetery literature has paid little attention to the topic of diversity and how diversity and multicultural societies have impacted or are in the process of impacting the design, maintenance and evolution of cemeteries (see for example Swensen & Skår, 2018; Wingren, 2013). The focus so far has primarily been on majority use and experiences of cemeteries (Evensen et al. 2017; Grabalov, 2018; Nordh et al., 2017a). Further, little attention is paid to how use and perception about appropriate behaviour may vary or varies across religions and belief systems (Swensen & Skår 2018). For example, how does belief in life after death, crucial for most religious communities, affect perception on use of cemeteries? Such attention deficits feed into the need to explore how people with diverse ethnicities or beliefs experience the potential transformation of cemeteries into multifunctional and recreational landscapes.

2. Method

Our primary method includes interviews conducted with residents in Drammen (Norway), Eskilstuna and Umeå (Sweden), Fig. 5. The towns were chosen for their relatively similar size (about 100,000 inhabitants), geographical distribution as well as a substantial proportion of resident immigrants – 28 % of the total population has an immigrant background in Drammen (Statistics Norway, 2021a,b), and the figure is 26 % and 13 % for Eskilstuna and Umeå respectively (Statistics Sweden, 2021). Even if the proportion of immigrants in Umeå in the far north is quite low in a national perspective, it can be considered high given its geographical position in the country. Each of these towns, functioning as municipalities, have 5–10 cemeteries which comprises both urban and rural ones. Except for Röbbäck cemetery in Umeå, which is a forest cemetery (also called woodland cemetery), all other cemeteries have traditional landscape or park like cemeteries with cut lawn. Some are historic and churchyard like and are typically located adjacent to a church building. Furthermore, all towns have one cemetery with dedicated cemetery sections for Islamic burials. In Eskilstuna there are sections for Bahá'í



Fig. 5. The case towns under study.

and Mandeé as well, whereas in Umeå, there are sections for Bahá'í and Catholics. Below we present the recruitment and interviewing processes followed by an analysis of the interviews.

2.1. Recruiting participants and running interviews during the pandemic

In March 2020, at the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, we visited a few organizations and religious communities asking for help to recruit informants among their members. Our ambition was to collect informants from various beliefs and ethnicities, and particularly people from religious communities having a specific cemetery section in the case towns. This face-to-face strategy was applied as a means to establish personal contact with key persons within the organization that could assist in building dialogues between the researcher and potential informants. A few interviews were scheduled in spring 2020, however, as the pandemic spread, we had to pause all interviews until September 2020 and change our recruitment strategy. Instead of visiting organizations, we contacted the prospective respondents over mail or phone, put up posts at cemeteries and in public spaces such as libraries, universities and on social media. Inclusion criteria for participation were as following – living in the case town and having visited a local cemetery. After running the first round of interviews, we adopted a snowball sampling technique and requested the informants to recommend potential informants from their network. The snowballing method recognized and suggested for working with vulnerable groups (Ghaljaie, Naderifar, & Goli, 2017), worked relatively well. We had success in finding informants among the majority population and pensioners, but it was challenging to recruit informants from minority groups, and we did not succeed in finding informants from all religious communities with dedicated cemetery sections in the case towns. However we managed to recruit respondents from some of the biggest ethnic groups in Norway and Sweden such as people from Finland, Poland, Syria and Iran. In total, we conducted 23 biographical interviews (5 from Eskilstuna, 10 from Umeå and 8 from Drammen) and one informal conversation with a taxi driver in Umeå. The informants were born in the following countries: China, Denmark, Finland, Iran, Kongo, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Syria, Turkey and can be placed on a scale ranging from non-believers to

strictly religious. Some were frequent cemetery visitors, while most visited the cemeteries a few times a year. There were informants from the majority population that didn't want to label themselves as Christian, but during the interview, it became apparent that they subscribed to Christian values and traditions. Table 1 presents an overview of the informants in the study, including belief/religion and those who categorically selected 'No belief'. When quoting the informants in the result section, we do not state the country of origin or town where they live, instead informants from Umeå and Eskilstuna are referred to as Swedish, and informants from Drammen as Norwegian. This ensures anonymity of the informants.

2.2. Conducting the interviews

One interview and an informal conversation was conducted between January-March 2020. Due to the pandemic, data collection was paused and resumed a few months later via Zoom (N = 11) and telephone (N = 11) between September-March 2021. The change to Zoom and phone could have impacted the results (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst 2017), but we experienced that the Zoom interviews worked well and even contributed to a relatively relaxed conversation compared to normal face-to-face interviews due to the physical distance between the researcher and the informant(s). Six informants were interviewed in a set of two as they were either siblings or married couples. In the analyses, they have been treated as individuals due to their differences in opinion and responses. The semi-structured interviews lasted for approximately 1 h each. An interview guide was developed covering the following three main topics – experiences of death and remembrance, use and experiences of cemeteries, and views on cemeteries as public spaces. Additionally, we gathered information on gender, age, ethnicity and belief/religion of the informants. All interviews, except for the informal conversations, were recorded.¹ The interviews were conducted in either Swedish or Norwegian and all respondents were able to converse easily in the local language.

2.3. Analysis of interviews

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and further analysed in line with qualitative content analysis (Barbour, 2014). An iterative analysis process was adopted, where the first author conducted and analysed the interviews. The analysis was focused on coding all parts of the transcripts that covered anything on recreation, use and behaviour at cemeteries. All quotations, including the codes, were marked in the software Atlas.ti and further grouped and analysed. We thereafter re-scanned each transcript in order to find potential explanations for the opinions expressed on the topic of recreation.

Table 1
Overview of informants.

Men/Women	9/15
Age range	23–82 years, 58 % were over the age of 60
Belief/Religion	
Protestant	7
Catholic	1
Muslim	5
Bahá'í	1
No belief	9
Unknown	1

¹ The study is approved by the Ethics authorities in Sweden and Norway and written or oral consent were approved by all informants.

3. Results – Exploring varying perspectives on recreational use

In the following sections, we discuss and problematize the cemetery as a recreational landscape and the perceived elements that constitute appropriate or inappropriate behaviour at cemeteries in the case towns. However, before we introduce the results of the study, we delve into the conceptual framing of *recreation*. We argue that recreation is a broad concept that is not only limited to activities related to nature in remote settings, but can include walks in the urban outdoor environment (Nordh, Vistad, Skår, Wold, & Bærum, 2017b) or other outdoor activities in urban green spaces, such as having a cup of coffee at a cemetery while exploring nature and/or culture, or reading a book sitting at one of the benches in the cemetery. Similar to Rae (2021) and Długoński et al. (2022), we categorize recreation at cemeteries into *active* and *passive* uses. Active use refers to activities that are speedy, intensive and attracts attention, such as jogging and biking, but also picnic if it refers to groups socializing at the cemetery. People walking their dogs is also a kind of active usage, because the activity could attract attention and potentially be disturbing. Passive recreation is slow-paced and more silent, such as taking a peaceful stroll at the cemetery, sitting on a bench alone or chatting with another cemetery visitor, or having a cup of coffee etc.

3.1. Activity and agent - passive and active recreation

We noticed that when the topic of recreational use of cemeteries was brought up in the interviews, most people thought of active recreation, and activities that would disturb the peaceful atmosphere or might result in littering or noise. Overall, only a few informants had witnessed jogging or biking in cemeteries, and even fewer had noticed inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour. Only some respondents commented on problems associated with littering. For some, runners and cyclists were warmly welcome if they showed respect for the mourners, but for others, active recreation did not belong to the cemetery at all. Some informants could consider doing active recreation themselves but were hesitant as they did not want to disturb others (mourners) at the cemetery. Below is a quote from a Swedish secular woman who elaborates on active use.

Informant: I do not know, a walk through is definitely ok. Jogging, I do not know, it can be that someone is disturbed by that, so maybe it should be avoided.

Researcher: would you be disturbed?

Informant: I would not be disturbed, but I can think that others could be. I would not mind, absolutely not.

Similar to previous research (Nordh et al., 2017a), the word respect or synonyms such as dignity and reverence appeared in several interviews. In the quotation below, the researcher asks another Swedish secular woman if she would consider bringing a thermos and sit down at one of the benches at the cemetery after visiting the grave of her husband who passed away several years ago.

Informant: Yes I think so. From my point of view, what should I say, [...], dignity is the wrong word, but I do not find a better word for it, as long as you do not litter or destroy. If I bring a thermos and sit on a bench, together with someone or alone. That I think is completely fine. I even think it is ok if you think of biking, take a shortcut [through the cemetery] or something like that as long as it does not shed gravel.

The quotation above not only shows the importance of dignity or respect, but illustrates that disturbance is related to avoiding littering and destruction. In addition, it shows that the intensity of the activity matters. We noticed that people had several opinions about what activities they thought others could undertake at the cemetery. And we noticed that several respondents were specific about not disturbing others. However, when we asked if they, themselves, would go for a run at the cemetery, or bring with them a thermos, only few had undertaken such activities even though some had considered undertaking them.

For some informants, it was common practice to visit the cemetery as a place to relax and have a lunchbreak for example, while for others, such uses were awkward. This discrepancy was found even in married

couples as illustrated in the following dialogue between a Norwegian husband and wife where both are members of the Norwegian Church:

Wife: ...I would simply have found another place, for example, I would have walked down to the river and used one of the benches there, and looked at the flowing river, because, to me that is a completely different type of recreation to put it that way, and eat my lunch there.

Husband: My response is that it [the cemetery] [...] is as good as any other place.

Wife: To me it would just not feel normal.

There was one activity which drew different reactions and feelings from the respondents, namely walking a dog at the cemetery. Below we have gathered some quotes that illustrate different perspectives, starting with the same Norwegian couple quoted above;

Researcher: I would like to ask if one should be able to walk the dog at the cemetery?

Wife: Yes, why not? If one follows the rules for dogs, it is completely fine with me. I don't have any hang-ups about it. I do not know if you [her husband] have?

Husband: No, I mean, I view the cemetery as a place like any other, where there should not be any particular restriction.

Another Norwegian woman, non-believer, who herself had been a dog owner, had observed that dogs are not allowed at the cemetery she visits, referring to a sign she had seen at the cemetery (Fig. 6). When we asked the cemetery administration why dogs were not allowed at this particular cemetery but allowed at other cemeteries in the municipality, they highlighted that dogs are allowed except if the purpose was defecating. However, such unclear messages could easily be misunderstood as shown in the following quote by the woman:

Researcher: Have you considered if it is ok to bring the dog with you?

Informant: Yes, I mean, I have respect for it, I would have picked up the excrement, and so forth. Actually, I think it is stupid that one can not pass through [a cemetery] with a dog. But on the other hand, I do not know anyone who does it since it is signposted that dogs are not allowed.

Researcher: But would you have reacted if anyone had their dog with them when you are maintaining the grave [of your husband]?

Informant: No, not if the dog was on a leash and the owner had respect and did not let the dog dig. I actually think they could change [the rule], yes I think so.

A Swedish secular woman we interviewed often brought her dog with her when visiting the cemetery, when the researcher asked if she had considered how it could be perceived by others, she answered:

Informant: Yes I have thought of how it is perceived. But I haven't thought of leaving him home so to say. But so far, no one has said anything, and it is, not every time, but relatively often, that one observes people with dogs there. And if they are walking to a grave or simply passing through, that I can't know, but I think the same, that the dogs do not have to pee on the headstones, or on the plantings in front of the graves [stones].



Fig. 6. The sign to the right explains that: cars are not allowed apart from goods delivery. In addition, biking and walking dogs are prohibited.

Most people accepted the presence of dogs provided they were on a leash. As in the example above and quoted in another study (Pettersson, Cerwén, Liljas & Wingren, 2018), dog owners thought of the dog as a companion animal, a family member that would also join in a visit to the cemetery. However, the opinion of Muslim informants stood out in this regard. Most of them did not have the same relationship to dogs or did not think of them as family members. A Swedish Muslim explained;

Informant: there are no rules in the religion about dogs in cemeteries, but they [Muslims] have this thought that dogs are not good, are no good, no good thing for us Muslims.

3.2. Relationship: Personal connection to cemetery

Informants had varied meanings and ideas regarding appropriate behaviour for mourners and 'other' users. If people come to the cemetery to visit a grave and spend some time there, then having a cup of coffee or eating a sandwich is nothing strange. But for some respondents, using the cemetery exclusively as a park, devoid of any relation to the cemetery (a grave to visit), was objectionable. The following quote from a Swedish man, a non-believer, is illustrative:

Informant: If one enters a cemetery, of any kind, and brings a cup of coffee, sits down, philosophizes and thinks, and one cleans afterwards, then there is no problem. But to go there, maybe, without any connection to the site, then it is not that nice maybe. [...].

Researcher: And would you, if you were there to visit the grave of your parents, for example, would you experience it as disturbing if people sat on a picnic blanket chatting?

Informant: No, if they sat by a grave, then it is completely fine, or by their relatives grave, I would not reflect over it in any way, if it wasn't so that they littered or so. Everyone must be allowed to do their thing.

If recreational activities are part of the grieving process, people would find it easier to accept and understand a different use of the cemetery which has been the case for our Muslim informants as well, as seen in the quote from a Norwegian Muslim woman who calls herself a secular Muslim being raised in a multicultural family:

Informant: I think that everything that helps you forward when it comes to loss and grief, either, as you say, to take a walk around the area [cemetery] or eat your lunch there. That's fine. People, they do things, I mean one does not know their relation to the deceased. Maybe this is something that they used to do together, maybe this is a walk they used to take, one never knows why. So I actually think that it is nice that the cemetery gets used to something else than just watch, or stand in front of the headstone.

3.3. The place: The type of cemetery

Some cemeteries are more suitable for recreational activities, and the following factors can potentially determine the level of adaptation for recreational purposes: the size of the cemetery (square meters), its character (if it is very formal or designed with a character similar to the surrounding natural environment), its location (if it is situated in an urban fabric or in a semi urban or even rural landscape). Some recreational activities, particularly the active ones, can only take place if the cemetery is big enough, if it is green and spacious, if it seems to be more nature-based than a formal layout etc. A Swedish woman and member of the Bahá'í community described that she had been doing orientation (sports activity) in the woods around Röbbäck cemetery in Umeå (Sweden) that is a quite large cemetery (Fig. 7), and she had observed other orienteers taking a shortcut through the cemetery. Her explanation to why this happens was that Röbbäck cemetery is designed with a character similar to the surrounding nature. She expressed:

Informant: it does not feel like anything strange, instead this cemetery is part of the surrounding nature and even a part of everyday life.

The cemeteries in Drammen are smaller, with less open spaces that would potentially allow for recreational activities. They have in general few design features such as water features, plantings and elements that would normally be more common in Swedish cemeteries. When we



Fig. 7. An image of the woodland cemetery Röbbäck in Umeå. The grave sections are integrated in nature, which explains why it may be perceived as a cemetery 'part of the surrounding nature and everyday live', as expressed by the an informant.

asked the Norwegian secular Muslim woman if she could consider bringing a cup of coffee with her and/or having picnic at one of the cemeteries, she answered:

Informant: No, I do not think so, it is not that kind of cemetery. I think people would have thought of me as strange. [...] I never think I would have, the thought has not even occurred to me. Because it is a cemetery, it is customised and small, it has a purpose - maintain the grave so to say.

However, if the cemeteries were more park-like or inviting or large enough as indicated by several informants, some would not hesitate in using them for recreational purposes. The quote above indicates that a bigger cemetery may allow for recreation more easily. However, most of the cemeteries in Drammen are located centrally. Some of the Norwegian informants mentioned that they could pass through the most central one, Bragenes, when in town doing errands. Most described it as a beautiful green space, however, few stopped at the cemetery for purposes other than visiting graves.

3.4. Cultural context: The impact of religious and cultural belonging

One may think that religious or cultural belonging is associated with traditions on how to behave at a cemetery, this is however only partly evident in our material. In fact, we noticed great variations across people with similar religious belongings. Bearing in mind that our material is limited in sample size and the fact that some communities are over-represented, it was clear that Muslims and non-believers stand out from the rest of the informants, therefore we focus on these groups in this section.

Most Muslims we interviewed did not understand the question of recreation at cemeteries. Why would one want to run or have picnic at a cemetery? The question seemed awkward, as explained by this Swedish Muslim man:

Informant: I would think of it as very odd, not only because it is the Muslim cemetery section, but rather that it is a cemetery in general [...], I mean, partly it is because there are humans buried there, and just the thought of eating when someone is buried there, eeh, I do not know. When I try to put these aspects together, it becomes a bit difficult. [...] So it is mainly that. It is probably this I am thinking of, there is someone buried and one should maybe show a little respect. For the dead. [...] To eat at the cemetery, I do not know, I have at least difficulties with it, but that's when the religious side turns up. You should pray this prayer, then go there and you should think of, yes, God and on death, life and so forth.

Another Norwegian Muslim man supported this sentiment and thought that the act of eating at the cemetery is disrespectful, but after some reflection he slightly modified his answer and acknowledged that

having a meal at the cemetery could also be a way to include the cemetery in everyday life. A Swedish Muslim man had observed people listening to music while walking in the cemetery and was surprised about it:

Informant: I also saw people listening to music there, but I feel this is disrespectful. One should simply walk there, staying calm and respect the dead and also to ask God for forgiveness for them, not just to do anything, if so, it becomes an ordinary, everyday place.

As seen in the quotes above, most Muslims we interviewed seemed to have a different purpose to visit the cemetery than recreation or taking care of the grave, to visit the cemetery. Most Christian or secular informants described that they went to the cemetery to plant, decorate, remove weeds as part of the grieving process or, for some, to perform their duty. But the Muslim informants described that they go there to pray for the dead and to reflect on life and death. There seems to be a distinct difference in the way the secular informants, as compared to the Muslim informants, reason around life after death. The Muslim informants explained that life does not end with death, and death simply marks the starting of a new 'after life', hence the grave and the cemetery holds a deeper meaning. The researcher asked a Swedish Muslim man if he could visit the cemetery without having a relative at the cemetery, and he responded:

Informant: Absolutely, because it becomes a good lesson for us in life, that this is our end, and we will all eventually die, so let's try to do as many good things as possible for other people so that when we die, we come to paradise instead of hell.

The Muslim informants in our sample were hesitant towards recreational activities, particularly active recreation. However, during fieldwork in the Muslim section of a Swedish cemetery, we observed a couple of families gathering and spending some time socialising while visiting the grave of a relative. This social gathering could easily be included in the conceptual framework of recreation but was deeply linked to visiting the grave in this case.

If Muslims are on one side of the scale regarding appropriate recreational activities and behaviour at the cemeteries, we find secular informants that describe themselves as non-believers on the other side of the scale. This group often, though not always, expressed non-restrictive views on the recreational use of cemeteries. This does not mean that they did not appreciate the peaceful and contemplative atmosphere at the cemeteries, but most of them looked at cemeteries more as parks and spaces that allow for both active and passive recreation as long as it did not disturb the mourners. A Swedish secular woman shared her experiences;

Informant: I can imagine that there are several people who maybe go there to stroll. I don't myself, but one can walk around for contemplation and to think of the ones who have passed away, it works as an important place. Well, now I do not go there very often, but it is beautiful.

Researcher: [...] What is it that contributes to the 'beautiful'?

Informant: Yes, it is the nature there, that it is so much, both trees and many flowers, yes, that's it.

When the researcher continued to ask about recreational activities, the woman replied:

Informant: There is some noise there with a lot of children and so, who run around and play, and that is allowed of course, it is life itself, it is ok and may be so.

H: And what if someone brings a picnic blanket and lays it out on the grass and sits down?

Informant: Yes absolutely, that one can do

The above quote illustrates that the woman appreciates the experience of being in a natural setting at the cemeteries even if she did not often use them as recreational spaces despite the fact that both her parents are buried at one of the town cemeteries. But as she explains, the cemetery is not where she memorializes, she does so mainly through old photographs. For her, the cemetery is more of a beautiful park where she experiences nature and landscape/garden design, an opinion she shares with several of the non-believers in our sample.

4. Discussion

This study on recreational use of cemeteries in three case towns in Norway and Sweden, shows that opinions about cemetery use varies not only between people from different cultural, religious or belief backgrounds but also among people from similar communities. The key themes that impact people's opinions about cemetery use are –the type of activities, people's relationship with the site, the type of cemetery and the cultural context (the impact of religious and cultural belonging). Being protected green spaces within a densified urban structure, the double or even triple roles of the cemetery as religious, cultural and recreational spaces (Dhugoński et al. 2022; Maddrell et al. 2022; Nordh et al., 2017a; Quinton and Duinker 2019) is important to highlight to draft forward looking landscape planning and design disciplines.

4.1. Varying perspectives on recreational use

Only a few informants in our study had consciously reflected on the recreational use of cemeteries, but when probed further, they had an opinion on the kind of uses that may or may not be appropriate at the cemetery. A number of informants in the case towns had not used the cemeteries as recreational spaces, and they principally found passive use more acceptable than active use. Passive use for the interviewees included, for example, sitting on benches or lawns, and walking, which coincides with earlier research on passive and active recreation (Dhugoński et al. 2022; Nordh et al. 2017b; Rae 2021). However, factors such as the size of the cemetery, its location and design affected the informants classification of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Belief in life after death also seems to affect people's views on what is acceptable behaviour at cemeteries. For many secular informants, the concept of life after death did not exist. Therefore, the purpose of visiting the grave and the cemetery differed between the secular and those who believed in resurrection.

People were, in general, highly concerned about not disturbing others. One activity that caused a lot of discussion was walking of dogs. Several interviewees relate to dog walking as problematic and envision that dog droppings or dogs digging at the cemetery can be upsetting. Similar issues around dogs at cemeteries have also been addressed by Deering (2010). There seems to be a discrepancy between those who think of the dog as a companion and those who categorise the accompanying dog as a disturbing, littering animal (Pettersson et al., 2018). For those who think of the dog as a companion (almost like a human), it is awkward to think about this companion as somebody who litters at the cemetery. Instead, this specific 'family member' has an obvious place at the cemetery when visiting other family members that have passed away. Therefore, dog walking can be seen as both passive and active, depending on the cemetery user.

4.2. Implications for practice

Subjects and specificities put forward by our informants can provide useful inputs for planning, design and management for inclusive cemeteries in future. Synergies or conflicting interests can inform design solutions, and stratified strategies can cater to inclusiveness, catering to both the majority and minority populations and people living nearby who might want to use the cemetery as a salient neighbourhood park. It sometimes seems easier for people to accept the cemetery as an urban park, but less easy to see all uses of parks as acceptable uses of cemeteries, especially for some informants from migrant communities.

The complexity of cemetery development, both in relation to multicultural and multifunctional needs, and the relatively limited knowledge on such complexities, requires a reflective approach in deciding and planning for cemetery practices (behaviour and use), especially for urban cemeteries. It is important for each case and situation to investigate needs and preferences of individuals and groups, along with organising a platform for discussing mutual acceptance on

various issues. As addressed in previous studies (Evensen et al., 2017), zoning and differentiating the cemetery, not exclusively in relation to cultural or religious differences, but also in relation to recreational use (passive or active), could be performed and concretized by differentiated designs of the cemetery through materiality as expressed by furnishing, pavement alignment for biking in some areas but not in others, adding more benches with tables in designated areas to allow for eating or drinking coffee together and socialising with others etc. Other design approaches can include lighting, putting up pedagogic signs telling about specific practices acceptable or even wanted in one zone or the other, and could also include extensive management for catering to biodiversity of plants and animals, something highly needed in existing urban structures.

The diversity within communities found in this study, as well as elsewhere (Maddrell et al. 2021), broadens the scope for creating inclusive cities through garnering knowledge on citizen's needs (including religious and cultural minorities) for tranquil, flexible and adapted cemetery spaces. But opinions expressed in our or similar case studies can and should be reinforced through local inputs on actual cemetery changes or designs. Modifications in current uses and a revised cemetery designs should ideally be developed in a collaborative process involving the cemetery administration, local inhabitants and users (Jedan et al., 2020). Extending this discussion on the need to understand local situations, we posit that such layered understandings are needed to meet the emerging needs from multicultural families and people with varying cultural and religious backgrounds. We subscribe to Rugg's (2020) emphasis on the need to juxtapose the conceptual framing of justice, while working with cemetery systems, to operationalise a well-managed cemetery system that provide emotional and spiritual consolation and the right to decent treatment at death. Rugg (ibid) also puts forward the variations in existing difficulties around the world in addressing such concerns. While more practical, technical or planning issues might be the most important in developing countries or in very densified global mega-cities, the European situation is more influenced by tensions around cultural and religious expressions and funeral practices related to the recent flows of migration to Europe followed by difficulties with integration.

4.3. Methodological considerations

From a methodological perspective, this study has focused on mid-sized towns in Norway and Sweden which have faced limitations in terms of available cemetery design strategies and an ever-increasing volume of diversity. If our cases were bigger cities in Sweden and Norway, a more complex and richer material in relation to diverse needs might have been collected. However, focusing on towns instead of cities does not only add to the existing cemetery literature, but allows for a deeper understanding of how diversity is currently being dealt or can be dealt with outside the city regions. Furthermore, densification in bigger cities impact the way cemeteries are used as recreational spaces. Densification means pressure on available green spaces and thereby more users. This can result in an increased diversity in both behaviour and ideas about different uses, as well as enhanced understandings for different interests and needs to be taken forward within planning, design and management of the cemeteries. Finally, during analysing the interviews, several aspects emerged that could have been interpreted as explanations for varying opinions about how to use the cemetery, such as personal experience with recent loss, relationship to the deceased, and individual as well as family traditions. However, none of these were explicitly mentioned as reasons in the interviews, and we have no specific quotes that are based on exclusive explanations, hence it would be speculative to discuss them further.

5. Conclusions

The study undertaken in the three case study towns has broadened

the picture on how people might think about and behave in a cemetery. One important finding is that diversity exists between people coming from similar culture or religious communities, and that other, more personal, factors influence ideas and thoughts about how a specific cemetery can be used. What is right today might be wrong tomorrow, as migration, secularisation and densification are important and ongoing processes influencing the situation and the ideas of citizens and cemetery users. This means that there is both a need for further studies in relation to this theme, and a need for continuously developing the cemeteries through planning, design and management processes which are grounded in the principle of inclusive designing.

Some clear findings emerge from this study which bear direct relevance for planning, landscape architecture and design practices. Our first argument rests on creating an understanding of the concept 'recreation'. We suggest that activities like walking, jogging, cycling etc. in the cemetery are forms of recreation which need to be considered in cemeteries as part of the larger urban green infrastructure but not in conflict with the cemetery as a place for burial and commemoration. Activities can be streamlined through participation and co-creation. The majority church and municipality have a special responsibility to commence such initiatives. With design and zoning, some passive and active recreational activities can be integrated at cemeteries, and benefit both mourners and recreational visitors. We stress the importance of implementing activity zones and maintaining distance between the graves and the activity zones.

The materiality of cemeteries needs to be revisited to position them as recreational landscapes – provision of benches, lighting, toilets, signage for directions but also tree species, plantings, etc. form the core elements of material provisions to create recreational landscapes. But it is essential that a peaceful atmosphere is maintained and nurtured at the cemeteries. Even if we are aiming for cemeteries to possess many of the same qualities as parks, they should not be substitutes to parks, but rather additions to the urban green fabric.

The examples at the beginning of the article from Trondheim and Järva, where new practices are made possible through planning of new cemeteries shows that a shift is occurring. Even though the results from the interviews show that many of the recreational activities are not consciously reflected on, the ability to reflect on current practice shows that, when asked, the informants address the use of cemeteries empathetically with others in mind. For the practice domain, this opens up possibilities and should therefore focus on learning from other contexts. As addressed in this paper, religious belongings cannot alone explain the existing variations and there exists diversity within communities which needs to be further researched and translated into flexible multifunctional cemetery spaces.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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