



## Cemeteries as Cultural Heritage: Implementing the Model of Cemeteries-Cultural Heritage as Education Environment

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**Abstract:** Nowadays we can notice significant changes and variations in dealing with death around Europe which requires adaptation of services that cemeteries provide in their vast space. Providing new services is a challenging management issue that first requires a change in the perception of cemetery away from burial space. Purpose of this paper is to analyse how cemeteries can be used as education environment.

Analysis of cases in 3 cities around Europe provides insights into how a cemetery can become perceived and used as rich cultural heritage learning environment for schools in combination of use of modern IT solutions. In discussion we are exploring the positive effects of this development on cemetery management.

**Keywords:** cemeteries; school; cultural heritage; learning environment; perception

**JEL classification:** D70, D83

## Pokopališča kot kulturna dediščina: implementacija modela kulturne dediščine pokopališča kot izobraževalnega okolja

**Povzetek:** Odnos družbe do smrti se je v zadnjih desetletjih bistveno spremenil, kar zahteva prilagoditev ponudbe, ki jo pokopališča ponujajo v svojem velikem prostoru. Ponudba novih storitev je zahteven izziv za management in v prvi vrsti zahteva spremembo percepcije pokopališč izven ozkega razumevanja kot mesta za pokop. Namen prispevka je analizirati možne implementacije pokopališča kot izobraževalnega okolja.

Analiza primerov iz 3 različnih mest omogoča vpogled v procese in metode, s katerimi lahko pokopališče postane razumljeno kot izobraževalno okolje z bogato kulturno dediščino in sodobnimi informacijskimi rešitvami. V razpravi se osredotočamo na pozitivne učinke te transformacije na upravljanje pokopališč.

**Ključne besede:** pokopališča; šola; kulturna dediščina; izobraževalno okolje; percepcija

**JEL klasifikacija:** D70, D83

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How to cite this paper = Kako citirati ta članek:  
Pliberšek, L., Vrban, D. (2019). Cemeteries as Cultural Heritage: Implementing the Model of Cemeteries-Cultural Heritage as Education Environment. *Mednarodno inovativno poslovanje = Journal of Innovative Business and Management*, 11(2), 22-31. DOI: 10.32015/JIBM/2019-11-2-3

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*Mednarodno inovativno poslovanje = Journal of Innovative Business and Management*  
ISSN: 1855-6175

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Cemeteries: image and hidden aspects

Death is the most common mental connection to a cemetery in general public. This association is accompanied with negative emotions, like sorrow and frustration. Yet the perception of death was changing throughout history and this is the reason for different connections of death to cemeteries.

In the beginning, cemeteries were placed far away from settlements, whereas in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and since, cemeteries are a part of cities and villages (Schmitz, 1995). In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century wealthy were buried next to churches and cemeteries began to function also as meeting places. Cemeteries became an area of conducting important public decisions (Schmitz, 2001).

A closer look and especially experience with cemeteries in foreign cities provide a new associations and *emotions*. Attending a concert or guided walk through a cemetery in another city provides the visitor with new associations about the cemetery - a place for cultural events associated with *relaxation* and *intellectual discoveries*.

This emerges due to an obvious (once exposed) fact that cemetery is as a place with *rich architectural and artistic value*. It presents exceptional collection of structural masterpieces and great achievements of statuary that we are blind to as we walk the cemetery with personal motives. As we are visiting the grave of our relatives or friends, we are normally blind for the valuable cultural assets of cemeteries.

The context in which we can consider spaces of, and for, the dead as 'alternative' is undergoing marked sociocultural, economic, political and environmental changes (Young and Light, 2016).

### 1.2 Death professionalisation and impact for the cemeteries

Due to the pain and suffering during the loss of a close relative, especially in liberal markets of recent decades, funeral services have developed and *professionalized death*. As noted by Maddrell (2016): "More intimately, ashes can be metamorphosed into 'precious' jewels, ground into paints or made into ornaments, whereby the remains of the dead body – dull ashes – are rendered beautiful, but also kept close, worn in sensual proximity to the body or retained within the domesticated space of the home, as an expression of continuing relation and remembrance".

This resembles in changes of how cemeteries are used. Classical casket burials are being replaced by ashes scattering or even (if allowed by the law), taking the urns home. Cemeteries which were urbanistic planned as vast outdoor spaces taking much of the city space, are therefore becoming hard to manage as the income from grave space rental is in decline. Relatives are paying less for the rent as well as the maintenance. Burial methods and especially *cremations* are impacting the landscape of cemeteries.

Gaeta (2018) noticed that "mainly in the large cities of the North (Milan, Genoa, Turin, Bologna, etc., but also Rome), it has significantly changed the structure and use of cemeteries, which, as we know, are places made up of a network of symbols and historical points of reference that represent the memory of the entire nation."

### 1.3 Strategic challenge for cemeteries managers

Cemeteries managers therefore face a troublesome challenge as cemeteries present a big space for the city and could be serving public in other aspects. Income could be generated by transforming parts of the cemetery into various services. Yet that transformation could be facing piety prejudice and severe urbanistic challenges. At the same time, it could be risky if habits change again or natural disasters that take many casualties.

The solution arises in *cultural heritage*, a fact that cemetery is a representation of the city history, expressed through names and dedications on tombstones, tomb architecture and landscape architecture of cemeteries.

Zerrudo (2008) states that any development that is not consolidated and intertwined with the awareness, tradition and values of local inhabitants is bound to fail. Through this perspective, cemeteries can be seen as an important place to learn about local cultural heritage and their people thought time.

Very often, cemetery is referred as an open-air museum. Identification and understanding of cultural dimension of cemeteries leads to significant changes in the role of the cemetery itself. From being recognized as merely a burial ground, cemetery image can be suddenly changed in the *perception of local community* by the importance of their cultural heritage that it holds.

Managing this transformation is a very complex strategic challenge because it is related to the cognitive, emotional and affective *component of the attitudes* of people towards cemeteries.

#### 1.4 Model of changing the cemetery into education environment

One of the key steps towards this change is to address and invite youngsters to get to know the cemetery through the prism of cultural heritage. "Educating the public on matters related to cultural heritage has become a global endeavour. In recent decades, efforts have been made to develop cultural heritage programmes that target children and young people, particularly at the international level. These efforts range from the development of education and information programmes in a global context (1) (UNESCO, 1972, article 27) to national curriculums, with the intention of encouraging initiatives that create a better understanding of the conservation and restoration of cultural property (2), raising awareness of cultural heritage among young people (3), and so on. A broad variety of disciplines and discourses, such as preservation, education and history, has devoted substantial effort to the education of children and young people on heritage" (Şimşek et al., 2013).

Cemetery can be use as outdoor classroom which can provide students with powerful, memorable learning experiences.

Although outdoor education is often seen as a positive phenomenon, relatively few teachers and schools are using this type of didactics (Carrier, Tugurian and Thomson, 2013). According to the history of the evolved child, the children in earlier generations always learned in a concrete setting (Bjorklund & Bering, 2000). Learning in natural settings and green environments may also have the benefit of increased concentration (Berman, Jonides and Kaplan, 2008). This is where cemeteries are especially interesting as an option since they offer natural and calm environment.

As it was noticed in several interviews we have conducted during our work, early experience of the cemetery as a place of cultural heritage leads to different associations in later life, as well as mediates the same effect on parents and other family.

Achieving this however requires a lot of activities depending on following factors:

- cemetery specifics (age, preservation, architecture...)
- cultural environment (religion, ethnic diversity...)
- legal and economic environment
- cemetery managing organization (employee's skills, financial resources, legal framework, marketing assets...)
- presence of organized cultural societies related to the cemetery (Friends of cemetery)
- cultural heritage organizations and their relationship or work in the cemetery field
- integration of cemetery into international projects (European Cemeteries Route...)
- other specifics.

Activities that must be performed by management are several:

- Finding relevant and *interesting stories* at the cemetery  
A task that often seems trivial is quite contrary challenging. Managers normally hire historians or cultural preservation professionals. Sometimes they get approached by cemetery fans which are formed in various

societies. While these professionals do perform outstanding work in terms of facts and relevant historical data, the findings are rarely interesting for *youngsters* or others.

Therefore, to actually acquire interesting content, those findings should be interpreted by writers or another research should be considered, focused on less famous monuments, triggered by other data.

- Prepare programs for specific target groups

Content of presentations and work challenges makes a huge difference even when addressing the youngsters between 12 or 14 years old. Therefore, it is important to prepare *various programs* for *various target groups* and not considering the same program for all.

At the same time stories from local cemetery may not be as interesting as *stories from another cemeteries* and cultures. Presenting youngsters facts and concepts that are strange helps them understand their own uniqueness.

- Preparing *integrated programs* covering several study subjects

Cemeteries are normally quite large public space that requires lots of *geographic skills* and as such presents a great opportunity to include learning of geography.

Historical facts in the cemetery can be related to various topics like war, industrial revolution, migrations or other events that occurred in the past. Program can therefore help youngsters understand and *connect topics* that often come separate in their curriculum.

Cemeteries are places connected to data. Besides location, data about names, symbols, dates or even general tags can be researched. Throughout applications or statistical tools such data can be collected, researched and interpreted. This requires *IT knowledge* and *analytic skills*.

Most of all, cemeteries are *inspirational spaces* offering artistic ideas and opportunities.

All these study subjects can be integrated into a program which allows children to learn many skills at the same place and time, connecting and interpreting the content.

- Change *cemetery image* in general public via media

No matter the good content and programs, schools, parents and teachers could be reluctant to consider bringing kids to the cemetery due to their own perception. It is therefore important to raise attention in general public and media through events or other communication tools.

Especially during important holidays when many people visit the cemetery it is important to *highlight the cultural heritage* of the cemeteries through *posters, exhibitions, art installations or other projects* that attract attention.

Once cemeteries are presented as cultural heritage and venue spaces, it becomes easier to approach the next step, communicating the program.

- Communicate the programs

Schools are often looking for new ways to organize cultural days or other projects related to specific theme. Sending the programs to schools is therefore a good approach but may not be the only one. Inviting cultural or other institutions to events related to the programs can lead to same interests since many teachers are active participants.

- Execute the programs

Most of all it is important to plan the process afterwards since many questions and organizational efforts are required. To make the experience really unique and special, the process must be properly planned from first contacts to the activities after the program is executed.

Many issues can be overcome and overall experience being overwhelming by proper planning of the activities.

Each activity can be performed by various organizations, employees or other interested parties. In our model (Figure 1) we are trying to conclude the best practice and approaches depending on the cemetery situation specifics and activities that must take place.

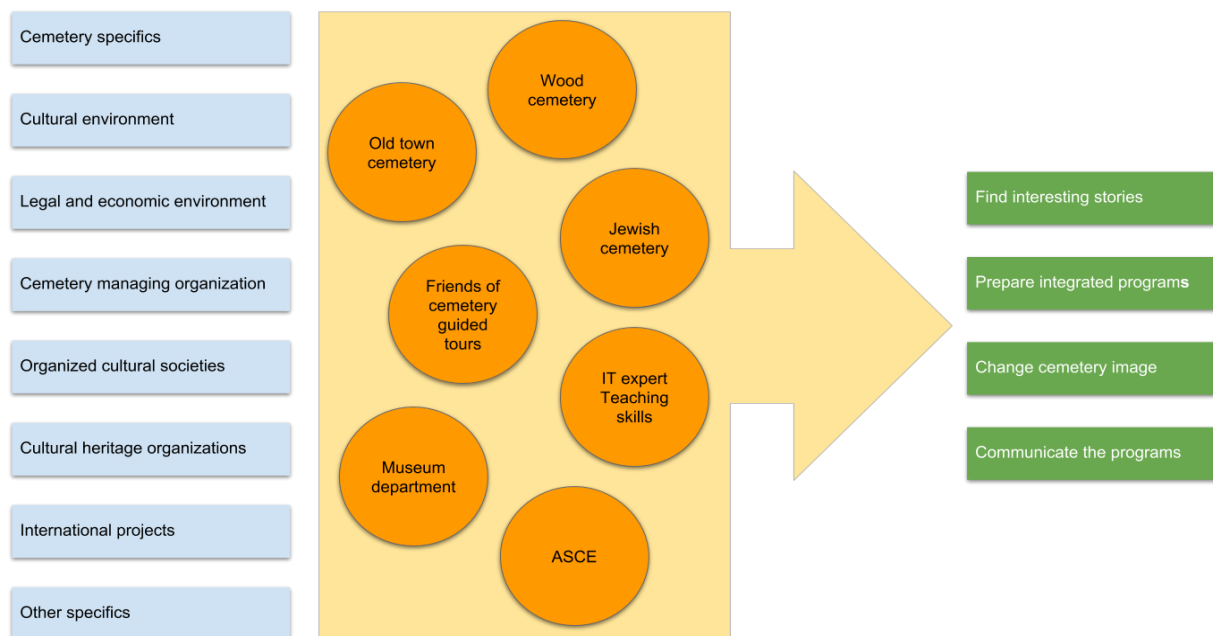


Figure 1: Model of changing the cemetery into education environment

To explore the model and relate important specifics with activities, we have performed case studies in 3 cities across Europe. As presented in results.

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Scholars: researchers, stories authors and guides

Pobrežje cemetery in Maribor is an old city cemetery with monumental character, presenting more than 150 years of town history. Rich cultural heritage positioned the cemetery into the map of significant cemeteries of Europe.

For over 15 years the managing company has actively promoted the cemetery heritage in local environment. Photo and other art exhibitions, guided tours, musical and other events, research and international projects were carried out to attract local and national media, academic, diplomatic and general public.

Overall a very well-established image of cemetery as cultural and tourist point was developed. Local schools became interested as principals and teachers were following stories about cultural heritage and random cultural days for schools that took place at the cemetery.

Cultural days for schools were carried out randomly over years as a free offer for the schools of Pogrebno podjetje Maribor, the managing company of Maribor cemeteries and presidential member of Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe. Such activities were initially prepared and executed by the company in format of presentations and guiding through the cemetery.

Through several occurrences the offer developed into a complex but attractive project. Most interesting project was carried out in 2018 with following activities taking place:

- scholars visited the cemetery

- cemetery was presented as a *real social media platform* where tombstones are *deceased walls* and flowers, or candles are *likes* about the *stories of their lives*;
- a mobile app was presented that contained *missing data* about 3-5 graves at the cemetery relevant to subject (1918 in Maribor); *locations* were known, but the deceased name was not - they should find it on the grave;
- scholars found the graves in the cemetery and returned in 30 minutes with more data about those graves - learning orientation skills and historical data along the way;
- scholars were offered to participate in a research project on person
  - person was chosen together with the *mentoring teacher*;
  - scholars gathered data and prepared story about the person with other materials available (old photos, historically connected data, ...);
- scholars presented the story and guided through the cemetery
  - during the Week of Discovering European Cemeteries a *presentation of the life story* of the person was prepared in the cemetery and general public was invited;
  - *scholars guided* the visitors on a tour throughout the cemetery related to the story and facts of the person.

The project resolved in several interesting results as interpreted by project team:

- school and teacher preparing and executing several stages of the project on themselves, thus *decreasing the required resources* of the cemetery managing company;
- cemetery image among scholars and their relatives was altered as they were directly involved into the project and the content;
- much more attention of general public was acquired as the story was full of interesting details, prepared in a very different style and with many additional materials that appealed the senses;
- overall the image of cemetery in general public was again changing, making it a place of study and venues besides its primary role;

Most interesting findings from the case study:

- a well-established image of cemetery as cultural heritage makes it easier to attract schools and even get teachers who become the primary force of executing the cultural days project;
- integrated programs at the cemetery can be prepared involving developments of geography, research, IT and presentation skills together with historical knowledge and social values developments;
- cemetery image can be altered by involving schools and developing cultural days programmes;
- changed image helps future management challenges as cemetery is not perceived only as a burial ground anymore.

## 2.2 Cemetery as art inspiration and learning environment

Municipal cemetery of Cariona in Aviles is as well an old town cemetery with overwhelming monuments and history. As a typical Spanish catholic environment, Aviles municipality and society is very traditional about cemetery. Artistic aspect is considered valuable and important with strong emphasis on tradition and culture.

Municipality has a cemetery management department dealing with general management issues while cultural heritage aspect is left for the designated organization named Factoria Cultural (cultural factory).



Figure 1: Website of students at Factoria Cultural  
Source: Reto TMT Syambols, 2019

Therefore, dealing with culture aspect of cemetery is more subject to specific projects co-financed by public funds, rather than continued work. One of such projects was researching and artistic interpretation of symbols at cemeteries (Symbols project, 2018).

Students in Aviles participated in the project with their own extensive research project. Everything from historical research to symbols descriptions and artistic interpretations was done and very rich results achieved. It was a complete semester project during which students performed historical research, worked with various IT solutions, prepared artistic work.

Overall a blog with dozens of posts about historical facts and stories together with symbols descriptions and their artistic interpretations in graphical or video format was created.

The project resulted in many positive outcomes:

- the cemetery was presented in another image to various public as students were active in social media and within their societies,
- students and their friends noticed that cemetery can be an inspiring space for creative work,
- long-term change of cemetery image can be expected as the blog remained available and students will communicate their work in future as their artistic background.

The case again provides insight into using cemetery as school environment *for integrated programs* in several subjects and areas of interests, from history to art or information technology.

It was as well observed in this case that a dedicated cultural organization that deals with the cemetery can initiate such projects even without the specific engagement of cemetery management company. Little resources were used on the either side as most of the work was done by students and their mentors.

Especially the communication results are very interesting as the target group was highly interactive within their societies. We can notice reach of broad public that could lead to strong impacts on the cemetery image, but the open question remains, *which is the direction of this strong impact*. Much of the creative work behind the project, especially the artistic part, is linked to death and accompanied emotions of grief, loss and sadness.

This is something that should be avoided in terms of changing the cemeteries into education environments since it does not encourage new generations and teachers to deal with this subject. In order to improve such results, we



suggest that cemetery management organization should lead parts of the process, especially in the early stages of cooperation with schools, to direct the perception of scholars.

### 2.3 Cemetery as a summer free-time activity



Figure 2: Email newsletter from Glasnevin cemetery  
Source: archives of ASCE

Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin is an extraordinary case in many ways. Glasnevin Trust is a non-profit cemetery management organization that took a completely innovative approach in dealing with cultural heritage at cemetery, making it a number 2 most visited tourist spot in the city.

Due to many innovative projects, building of a new cemetery museum and restoration of huge complex of tombstones, Glasnevin cemetery is perceived in the local society as a significant part of cultural heritage and identity of the city.

Glasnevin Trust is an organization completely dedicated to cemetery preservation and development with many well-established *dedicated resources*:

- guides that perform theatre roles,
- museum shop with dozens of interesting items,
- IT and communication experts
- staff for international projects and cooperation's
- communication channels across the city (museums, tourist offices, hotels...).

Glasnevin Trust already has a very well-established system of programs for primary or secondary schools, offering group guiding or even certificated *become a guide program*. The programs are adapted to the needs of schools and teachers and integrate the historical knowledge, development of research and presentation skills.



Glasnevin Trust decided to initiate a new activity, promoting the Children's Summer Tours which targets the young scholars and their parents or grandparents during the free vacation period. While the cemetery already has a well-established image of being more than a burial space, this step was well accepted. Overall during the last 5 years approximate 20.000 children were attracted to Glasnevin tour outside the regular school programs (individual visits with parents and grandparents).

Besides the already established integrated programs for schools this case provides insight into possibility to further diverse the cemetery image with free-time education activities. Such approach is important as it opens the possibility for cemeteries to establish the image of a learning environment beyond school programmes.

### 3 Discussion

Cases present varied environments with more or less already established image of cemetery as cultural heritage space. Management organizations are performing various cultural activities for years and thus the cooperation with schools and teachers is already established.

In all the cases we can as well notice that school programs are integrated and include several subjects from history to art, information technology, research and presentation skills. This is perhaps one of the key factors for future developments as such integrations are increasingly popular in school curriculums.

Somehow unclear is the role and resources required of the managing organization and its relationship to the economic performance of such programmes. In certain environments, the organizational resources of the managing company can be intensively used but make economic sense in the general company image and reputation achieved. If considered as an investment into future income at the cemetery the required resources can be justified.

On the other hand, in big cities like Dublin an organization with many resources already dedicated to performing school programmes may require less investment but the results are quite more important for sales rather than image and reputation.

Nevertheless, in all cases we can notice 2 important results:

- cemeteries can be an innovative education environment with integrated programmes
- performing such programmes affects the image of the cemetery and may contribute to easier management in the future as cemetery is not perceived just as burial ground anymore.

Presented cases open several research questions for developing model of transforming the cemetery into the education environment:

- Is the model of Glasnevin Trust as a dedicated organization dealing with cultural heritage at cemeteries viable in smaller cities and towns given the option of developing school programmes?
- What are the unused educational practice and subjects that could be better developed in the cemetery rather than in classroom?
- Which are the undiscovered educational target groups (private programs for art) that could use cemetery as their environment?
- What could be the proper management schemes and developments (renting fees)?

However, as we can see professionalisation of death services and strategic challenges for cemeteries management in terms of managing a big open space, such transformation is required and important. Various target groups small children to adults or elderly people could find and use cemetery as the learning space. Such usage increases possibilities of income (either direct or indirect) for management and thus lowers the chances of degradation.

Implementing such changes is however very much dependent on environment and cemetery properties. Areas with large migration as Dublin can be quite easy to adapt as it attracts visitors and schools by its already established

recognition and image. On the other hand, cemeteries as in Maribor have to use other management solutions to develop perception and image of the cemetery as learning environment.

## 4 Conclusions

Educational programmes at cemeteries are present in various cities around Europe with scattered and undermined results. Most of the times they are limited to guided walks and presentations that are not perfectly suited for the age and skills of scholars. In the presented cases we have noticed a variety of integrated programmes that can be performed by schools and teachers alone, in cooperation with cemeteries management company or even completely by the cemetery heritage organization.

Regardless of environment these programmes do have an impact on broader society as children are excellent mediators in their own micro societies. Depending on the engagement of cemetery management organization this impact can change or intensify the image of cemetery as burial ground related to death and sorrow.

Future of cemeteries as education environment clearly presents an important task for cemeteries managers and municipalities. Proper planning and understanding of factors that influence this development can help cemetery becoming an integrated space where burials are just one of its dimensions.

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