

'It's the greenness, the nature, it looks as if someone has taken care of the place very well'

Experiences from St Eskil cemetery in Sweden

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This article is about experiences of a cemetery landscape: a physical space that was chosen as a depository for human remains, and where different memorial and disposal practices have developed behavioural patterns that together form a cemetery culture. Through qualitative research at St Eskil's, Eskilstuna, Sweden, encompassing field observations and interviews (N=14) with stakeholders and people from the general public, we aim to describe and discuss the cemetery as a place and environment experienced from a perspective of people of diverse backgrounds. The study reveals important characteristics that facilitate designing, caretaking, developing and using cemeteries more generally. Findings show that most interviewees, independent for example of cultural or religious adherence, describe the cemetery as a beautiful natural or garden-like place. The well-maintained landscape is emphasized as a self-evident or impressive quality. The cemetery is experienced as 'typically Swedish' and described in terms of order and sense of care. Diversity in both design and multi-cultural and individual expressions are observed, acknowledged and welcomed. We conclude that *nature* (including a garden approach), *care* and *diversity* are key concepts that should be considered in design and development of future cemeteries.

Introduction

This article focuses on experiences of the cemetery landscape, not only as a place for private or individual grief, but also as a

common public green space used for contemplation and recreation. On the basis of earlier research in the Scandinavian countries (Petersson and Wingren 2011; Skår *et al.* 2018; Grabalov and Nordh 2021; Moberg and Kardemark 2021) and a more recent project on similarities and diversities for cemetery cultures in Northern Europe (Maddrell *et al.* 2022), the cemetery is discerned as a complex landscape intended for all occupants. The cemetery is a place where life and death exist in parallel, where the past and the present are connected and where the private grief and memorialization of deceased relatives is materialized through tombstones, plaques or symbolic artefacts in a space which is at the same time public and as such used for a variety of everyday activities.

Activities and rituals performed by people of different beliefs or none shape the cemetery as a place influenced, for example, by design ideals of the time, legal constraints, local rules and practices (Nordh *et al.* 2021). In this article we reflect on the complexity that the cemetery as place implies, and from a Swedish context and perspective reveal its characteristic complexity through the experiences of diverse cemetery users. The article reflects our own scholarly backgrounds as

landscape architects. This means that we explore the efforts made by landscape architects, designers and caretakers (i.e. gardeners) of the cemetery to form an ideal landscape for positive experiences, for memorialization, reflection and recreation. As such our analysis has been driven by key terms in landscape architecture and related disciplines. These are *caretaking*, *composition*, *elements* and *materiality*.

Caretaking refers to management and maintenance of the physical landscape but also to caretaking of a grave. The cemetery design not only has an instant moment of conception when designed and built; it also includes the time after the design drawings have been made, when managerial staff take over and develop the site. This co-design or co-creation also involves the communities or individual grave owners with diverse backgrounds and needs that influence the site from an individual meaning-making, as well as a community, perspective (Jedan *et al.* 2020; Maddrell *et al.* 2022). As Christoph Jedan and his colleagues (2020: 5) phrase it, the cemetery is ‘home to plural communities, whose diversity is reflected or enhanced, but also downplayed, mitigated or denied in the complex interactions that create the cemetery as a plural ritual space’.

Composition relates for example to scholars such as John Dixon Hunt (2000) and his description of inner design and organization and as well as to Catherine Dee’s (2003) way of emphasizing form.

Elements are those artefacts, components or objects of which a landscape is composed (Dee 2003; Hunt 2000).

Finally, the concept of *materiality* is not only important within the landscape architecture field but is also used in social sciences, humanities and literature on lived religion (Ammerman 2016), and as such is useful here in terms of the cemetery as a material space that includes the various

objects that people bring to it (Pettersson and Wingren 2011).

On this conceptual basis, we explore:

- Which landscape qualities are highlighted as significant among the diverse users of St Eskil’s cemetery?
- How does perception of the cemetery landscape vary between people of diverse background?

Before focusing on the experiences presented by those individuals who kindly shared their experiences with us, we would like to give a brief presentation of the Swedish context and describe some ‘typical’ characteristics of Swedish cemeteries, followed by an introduction to the Swedish cemetery system and the method applied in the study.

The Swedish context

In much of the Scandinavian literature on cemeteries published in recent years the multi-faceted role that cemeteries play in people’s lives is put forward: as places for mourning, remembrance and a way to connect the living and the dead (Pettersson and Wingren 2011; Moberg and Kardemark 2021), as places for reflection and contemplation (Nordh *et al.* 2017), as multicultural sites that reflect mobility and migration (Wingren 2013; Nordh *et al.* 2023), as designed places (Wingren 2013) and as places to experience nature, go for a walk or relax on a bench (Swensen *et al.* 2016; Evensen *et al.* 2017; Skår *et al.* 2018; Moberg and Kardemark 2021; Nordh *et al.* 2022) or even pass through when out jogging (Grabalov 2018). There are also studies of the significance of the choice of cemetery for the final rest (Marjavaara 2017) or the location of the grave within the cemetery (Vejrup Nielsen 2022). Cemeteries are not always described in positive terms; they can

also be places that some people avoid for burial and commemoration because of lack of local attachment (Høeg 2021). Most of the Scandinavian studies have focused on cemetery users or visitors, predominantly with mainstream Protestant or secular backgrounds. With some few exceptions (Swensen and Skår 2018; Hadders 2021; Nordh *et al.* 2023), there is little focus on how diverse backgrounds influence the experience of Scandinavian cemeteries.

In societal changes including secularization and migration there is an urgent need for knowledge about how to meet the needs of a diverse population, which means that not only traditional practices, but also new practices rooted in cultural or religious traditions historically not commonplace in Sweden have to be emphasized and reflected upon. Hence, this study has a particular focus on specific practices or needs related to diverse users of cemeteries, and how different needs are met in the Swedish cemetery system.

As stated in the Swedish burial act (Ministry of Culture 1990), burial and the handling of ashes are required to take place in a cemetery, other than when permission is sought to scatter the ashes in nature or at sea. This means that cemeteries serve important societal functions. In Sweden, cemeteries are mainly owned and operated by a Christian organization, the Church of Sweden (Pettersson 2011), which could be described as the 'majority church' (Furseth 2018). However, this does not mean that only Christian traditions and rituals are welcomed in cemeteries. Instead, cemeteries must by law fulfil the needs as burial spaces for all Swedish residents, thereby reflecting the various faith communities found in society. Some belief communities have succeeded in negotiating specific cemetery sections in public cemeteries in accordance with their

specific needs, such as orientation of graves (Nordh *et al.* 2023). According to the law, burial should be made with respect for the deceased's wishes and religion, so there is a need for a flexible and liberal system that allows for diversity (Nordh *et al.* 2021; Maddrell *et al.* 2021). To what extent the Swedish cemetery system fulfils such needs is discussed elsewhere (Pettersson 2011).

A Swedish 'style'

As Tony Walter (2021) observes, Scandinavian cemeteries are dominated by greenery. He hypothesizes that mourners in the Protestant and secular Northern European context turn to nature for mourning; 'in the absence of this spiritual language and required practice, nature provides an alternative discourse in communities that are predominantly Protestant or secular' (p. 230). David Thurffell (2020) even raises the question of whether nature has become the majority population's 'new' religion. This is an interesting thought that can be extended into questions such as: is there a typical Swedish cemetery 'style' and how are Swedish cemeteries experienced by people who do not come from a mainstream Swedish Protestant or secular background?

Over the years we have visited numerous Swedish cemeteries, and common to most of them is the presence of nature. However, even if all Swedish cemeteries have elements of nature, there exist varieties, of which the most common could be described as *lawn cemeteries* with an open/spacious character with headstones placed in lawns (Rugg 2006). Most of these lawn cemeteries in Sweden could just as well be described as *landscape cemeteries*, where the cemetery is integrated into the existing cultural or natural landscape and where preservation of specifically important landscape elements, forms, scales or structures are mimicked or even emphasized. Another

common kind of landscape cemetery in Sweden is the *forest or woodland cemetery*, which is originally introduced to a forested area, and where the cemetery areas are often, but not always, cut out from the forest as clearings or glades. This differs from a more common way of designing cemeteries in the open cultural landscape where new planting of trees and hedges forms the spaces of the cemetery. This means that not only the memorial inducements for the woodland cemetery, but also the process of designing it differ, for example, from the British natural burial ground, which is more of a memorial arboretum (Clayden and Dixon 2007). St Eskil's cemetery, the case under investigation in this article, could be described as a quite open landscape cemetery, partly inscribed in a forest area, combining the open character of the lawn cemetery with elements of a forest cemetery.

The greenery in cemeteries consists principally of trees, bushes, hedges, flowers and grass, where a cemetery designer has decided where planting should be done and clearings should be cut, and where gardeners or cemetery workers have planted and taken care of the growth and the green material. But the greenery also consists of individuals' planting and care of individual graves, care that is either performed by the grave owner and other relatives, or by the cemetery workers for a yearly fee. This need for caretaking illustrates how natural processes and human control interact at the cemetery, and where the green frame is often more tended than in any 'ordinary' park. It shows how society's as well as individuals' activities in cemeteries represent, handle and integrate the need for memorialization and contemplation with design and caretaking. This could be seen as an expression of control, not only over the environment and the natural processes,

with annual change from the growing and flowering period of spring and summer to the autumn and winter decomposition of the greenery, but also over the process of life and death that also needs to be taken care of at the cemetery. It is a way to deal with the decay, or as the landscape architect and scholar Anne Whiston Spirn (1998: 93) describes it: 'Leaves transpire and roots suck, animals breathe, drink, and excrete, all exchanging air and water between atmosphere, earth, and life. As plants and animals die and decay, organic tissue mingles with minerals and microorganisms to make soil, a living medium.'

Cemeteries in Sweden are mostly environments that resemble parks, gardens or natural settings, originally designed by famous landscape architects, mostly in the early or mid-twentieth century as burial grounds on the outskirts of cities (Andersson 1997; Nolin 2006; Wingren 2013); they have developed and expanded their use in relation to actual needs, motivated simultaneously by religious and secular practices as well as new trends within the cemetery field. One example of such change in Swedish cemetery culture is from the mid-twentieth century, when the collective memorial ('Minneslund') was introduced as an anonymous place for burial of ashes (Williams 2011). Another change in recent years, and in some ways opposed to this *anonymous collective memorial* form or practice, is the *named collective memorial* ('Askgravlund /Askgravplats') that offers an alternative where the name of the deceased and at some cemeteries the date of birth and death can be posted on a plaque. This new burial form is still growing and under development and is therefore also the subject of several landscape architecture competitions. New trends in death practices cause cemetery design to develop in close relation to how landscape design

develops in society as a whole (Andersson 1997; Nolin 2006). This means that it is not unusual, for example, for a cemetery designed with classical principles to be partly influenced by, or overlap or connect with new cemetery sections with either more romantic, functional or even post-modern features (Wingren 2013).

With the previous sections as a contextual background we turn our focus to St Eskil's cemetery and the empirical data. We begin by presenting our methodology, followed by a description of the cemetery landscape from the perspective of landscape architecture. Thereafter follow a couple of sections in which we present the interviewees' experiences of the cemetery, structured around the concepts *nature*, *care* and *diversity*. These were three terms that were frequently mentioned by the interviewees and relate to landscape architecture and our analysis of caretaking, composition, elements and materiality as addressed in the introduction. In the discussion and conclusion section we summarize the findings and reflect on the extent to which the findings from St Eskil's are unique or are to be seen as 'typically' Swedish.

Methodology

St Eskil's cemetery in Eskilstuna, Sweden, is the site used in order to analyse and describe the cemetery landscape through the interviewees' lenses, in order to understand what qualities in the cemetery are important to users. St Eskil's cemetery is one of several sites in the research project 'Cemeteries and Crematoria as Public Spaces of Belonging in Europe: A Study of Migrant and Minority Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and Integration', funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), which this study is part of. Eskilstuna is a medium-sized town about one

hour's drive west of the capital, Stockholm. About 26 per cent of the population were born outside Sweden; the biggest groups amongst these come from Iraq and Finland (Statistics Sweden 2020).

The study draws on qualitative research on St Eskil's cemetery, conducted in 2019–22. This includes seven site visits and observations at the cemetery during all four seasons, as well as in-depth interviews with members of the general public (N=5), cemetery workers (N=2), funeral-service providers (N=2), representatives of belief communities (N=3), a representative from the local authority and a landscape architect involved in developing the cemetery, in total fourteen interviewees, of whom four were women. Among the interviewees are people born in another country or second-generation Swedes (N=5). Six interviewees describe themselves as believers, while five are secular, and for three of the interviewees we do not have information on belief. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide. Owing to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic during data collection, interviews with members of the general public were either done on Zoom (N=3) or by phone (N=2). All stakeholder interviews were completed before the pandemic; hence these interviews were done in person. The study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

A description of St Eskil's cemetery

St Eskil's cemetery is located on the outskirts of Eskilstuna, in one of the county's largest burial areas, dating from the Late Iron Age. The cemetery originates from the end of the twentieth century and is with its 19 hectares the largest cemetery in Eskilstuna (Sandberg and Widmark 2020). It consists of fifty-eight sections separated by hedges, bushes or trees (see Figure 1).

Like many other cemeteries in Sweden, St Eskil's has a strong landform – a ridge – that was chosen for its location. As described on the website of the Church of Sweden (2022), which is responsible for its management and maintenance, a reason for the choice of location was the material nature of the soil of this ridge, created by the ice thousands of years ago and therefore composed of porous materials suitable for burial. At St Eskil's cemetery the topography, together with the greenery, is used to create separate spaces and characteristics in the cemetery landscape. An example is the anonymous collective memorial in the north-east part of the cemetery, which is designed as a sunken bowl-shaped formation, integrated into the landscape, where a curved path

and a stair lead down to the bottom of the memorial. An artificial stream also runs down to the very centre, where a mirror pond is located (Figure 2). Walking down into the memorial is like entering a separate space encircled by the topography and landscape, and the senses focus automatically on the pond in the middle, where the atmosphere created facilitates silence and contemplation. When visiting the cemetery during All Saints' Day, we found a large number of candles had been placed in the memorial. The heat that arose from all these candles was significant (Figure 3).

The burial and ash scattering provision available at the cemetery consists of burial of coffins or urns and collective memorials. In addition to the anonymous memorial described above, there are also named



Figure 1. An aerial photo of St Eskil's cemetery in Eskilstuna, Sweden. Photo © Lantmäteriet.



Figure 2 (above). The pond located in the bowl-shaped anonymous collective memorial at St Eskil's cemetery.

Figure 3 (below). The celebration of All Saints' Day at St Eskil's cemetery.

memorials (Figures 4–5). The cremation ratio in Eskilstuna is 77 per cent (Sveriges kyrkogårds och krematorieförbund 2021), which explains the high interest in collective memorials. We will now turn our focus to the interviewees' experiences of the cemetery. With a number of illustrative quotations we will describe the most prominent themes that evolved in the analysis.

A well-maintained natural resting place

When we asked the informants to describe their experiences of St Eskil's cemetery most began by talking about the well-maintained landscape and its peaceful atmosphere. Mohammed (fictive name), who called himself a second-generation Swedish Muslim, described the cemetery as very 'Swedish'; he explained 'it's very organized, it's very clean, at least when I've been there (here) in Eskilstuna. Very clean,

it's very peaceful, it almost feels like it's a good resting place. So, yes, it is, and it is beautiful too.' When the researcher asked him to describe what makes it beautiful he continues: 'Well, it is the greenness, the nature, it looks as if someone has taken care of the place very well.' Mohammed drew a parallel with cemeteries in northern Africa, where his family has its origins:

In that culture, you have to show great respect to the dead. However, you still find cemeteries that are sometimes not taken care of that much. But here in Sweden it's completely different, it's what you might have thought a Muslim cemetery should look like.

For Mohammed maintenance equals respect for those who have passed away. He is somehow surprised that in some countries

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Figure 4. Named collective memorial at St Eskil's cemetery. Here the location of the urn is known to the bereaved, which allows them to put a plaque and flowers by the grave.



Figure 5. Named collective memorial at St Eskil's cemetery. Here the location of the urn is unknown to the bereaved. Names of the deceased are posted on a joint plaque holder seen in the photo.

where he thinks that religion and death are more present in life, as compared to Sweden, cemeteries are less well maintained. His reflection, linking maintenance/care and religion, is interesting. Care of a grave could be seen as one way of processing grief, which may be explained as a way of practising religion in the Swedish context. The well-maintained cemetery landscape was confirmed by several informants. Lack of maintenance is something that is experienced as provocative and upsetting. Ali (fictive name), who is a member of the Baha'i community, reflected on why aesthetics and maintenance are important:

It's very beautiful there [St Eskil's]. Really nice. You feel the calmness, you kind of want to be there. You think you get peace, you think it's big, the graves are not next to each other, there is distance between them. ...

Nice garden, well-maintained garden. It gives room for reflection. Actually, these cemeteries have many purposes. One of the purposes is that humans are reminded of their limited time on earth. It is probably the biggest aspect, that this is how it will be, regardless of who you are, you will end up there. That's a reminder. In addition, it gives room for reflection. When you visit a cemetery you should also get this calmness and space for reflection. Perhaps it is the architect's kind of thought as well when planning the cemetery to create an atmosphere for reflection.

Ali's reflection pinpoints some of the qualities of St Eskil's cemetery: spaciousness, garden style and beauty. Beauty seems to Ali to be related to greenery and the sense of care. Interestingly, Ali talks about a garden style while Mohammed

describes it in terms of nature experience. From a landscape architect perspective St Eskil's cemetery has both. It is a large cemetery with many different sections with their unique characters. Some sections are traditional, with headstones in lawns, while some are more forest-like, with natural stones located between the trees. In addition, there are the collective memorials, as presented previously. In a cemetery like St Eskil's, with several sections with different characters, there is an opportunity to meet the need of different users. Others have found that the physical arrangements or experience of the site are of importance for the bereaved also when choosing the grave plot (Vejrup Nielsen 2022). Marie Vejrup Nielsen (2022) also describes how choosing a grave plot is part of the process of grief; here parallels could be made to maintenance and care for the grave as a part of the process of grieving.

Both Ali and Mohammed talked about the peaceful atmosphere, which is also a quality addressed in other cemetery research (Nordh *et al.* 2017; Lai *et al.* 2020; Nordh *et al.* 2022). In another publication (Nordh *et al.* 2017) we explain that 'the combination of nature, culture, and history, as well as respect for the deceased and others visiting graves, contributes to the description of the cemetery as a restorative environment' (p. 108). This statement also seems to apply to St Eskil's and the interviewees we spoke to. The cemetery's location on the outskirts of Eskilstuna with a residential area on one side and agricultural fields and forests on the other (see Figure 1) adds to the peaceful atmosphere. It is a quiet place, with little in the way of noise or traffic to disturb it. The peaceful experience is assisted by the different levels and spaces created by the topography within the cemetery. Also the rich vegetation is an important element that composes the spaces and

sections and provides visual shelter. One of the stakeholders we interviewed, a landscape architect who had been involved in developing parts of the cemetery, described how peacefulness and calmness were important when choosing plants and colours at the cemetery, but she had also experienced the importance of beds that are not boring or 'too' homogeneous. If they are, she argued, cemetery workers (not only at St Eskil's but also elsewhere) would start adding plants and colours to make the planting more interesting. This exemplifies how the cemetery workers care for the place and the visitors' experiences, but their actions can potentially be in conflict with the overall picture and the original thoughts and design of the landscape architect. Similar actions by cemetery workers taking matters into their own hands are found at other cemeteries in the Nordic context (Vejrup Nielsen 2022).

In all the interviews, the well-maintained landscape was emphasized as a key experience. Joan Iverson Nassauer (1988, 2011) argues that people prefer well-maintained landscapes and places that signal that someone cares for them. At the cemetery, maintenance has a deep meaning in that it points to care not only for the space but also for those who have passed away. The landscape architect we interviewed explained to us that 'So in some way, I always think that the cemetery manager or cemetery workers, they always take care of the place. That it should bloom, it should be nice, it should be beautiful, it should be well kept. ... I think they protect the greenery.' This statement was confirmed in the interviews with cemetery workers, and a walk through the cemetery clearly shows the neatly cut hedges and lawns, the perennial plantings and in the autumn the focus on removing fallen leaves from the paths. Following the reasoning of Vejrup

Nilsen (2022), cemetery workers set the standards of the cemetery and influence the local death culture.

In comparison to many other international cemeteries we have visited when travelling, our experience is that St Eskil's cemetery, as well as many other Swedish cemeteries, are very well maintained. An explanation for this can be found in the cemetery system. In Sweden, burial, cremation and maintenance of cemeteries (except the plantings on graves) are covered by a fee (2.5 per cent tax) that everyone with an income pays. Hence there is a budget for maintaining the cemeteries. One of the cemetery workers we spoke to compared the cemeteries with other public green spaces 'Cemeteries are perhaps the last "parks of first class". When municipal and castle gardens and such are struggling with financial problems, there are resources to maintain the cemeteries.'

Another explanation can be found in the law. Each grave has a juridical person (e.g. relative or friend) that is responsible for the grave for the first twenty-five years after burial; this implies a responsibility for maintaining the grave (headstone or slab) and the plantings on the grave. As stated in the burial law (Ministry of Culture 1990: ch. 7, § 3): 'The holder of the grave right must keep the grave in an orderly and dignified condition.' This means that if a grave owner does not maintain the grave in a proper manner he or she can lose the grave right, which is then returned to the cemetery manager. This also explains why one rarely sees overgrown headstones or graves at Swedish cemeteries, as can be found in other countries. There is no further specification in the law as to what orderly and dignified condition means, hence the way it is interpreted and practised varies across cemeteries. There are also national rules that each gravestone higher than 30

cm has to be stability tested every fifth year. In practice this means that the headstone has to pass a test of 35 kg push or pull. The responsibility for doing these tests lies on the cemetery managers, but the cost for potential measures has to be covered by the person with a grave right. This explains why one rarely sees any stones that tilt or look abandoned.

A welcoming place

St Eskil's cemetery offers sections for different denominations. Today there are sections for Muslims, Baha'is, Mandeers and Ahl-e haqh (Church of Sweden 2022). We also noted that many with Asian and Finnish names choose to be buried in close proximity to each other, but as one of the stakeholders pointed out, 'Well, the Asians have gathered over there, but they don't exactly have their own section. If you go there and check, I think you'll notice one Andersson [typical Swedish name] or Mäkinen [typical Finnish name] in between all Asian graves.'

Amir (fictive name), a Syrian man who came to Eskilstuna during the wave of migration to Europe in 2015, described how he was positively surprised by the fact that St Eskil's has specific sections for belief communities:

There are special places for Muslims, special places for Christians, special places for all religions. This was very nice actually, when I saw it, so I think it is very nice here. There is integration in the cemeteries themselves, so. As I told you, in Syria, it is not like that, there are not Christians together with Muslims, instead there are special and private cemeteries for families. ... But here there is, there is integration, a Christian with a Muslim with a Hindu and everything else. So it was actually



Figure 6. One of the visitors had put up a solar lamp in the trees in the Muslim section in St Eskil's cemetery. This can be seen as an example of 'home-making' or appropriation of space.

very nice and positive. It's a nice and quiet place. It is so well maintained, designed, everything is just there.

However, after some discussion around integration and segregation he slightly changed his mind and questioned why people have to be separated in death in different cemetery sections. He would prefer to be buried next to someone from another country or culture; this reasoning is addressed elsewhere (House *et al.* 2023). Returning to Mohammed, who was introduced earlier on, he was grateful and felt welcomed at the cemetery since Muslims have their own section in St Eskil's

cemetery. He talked about the Muslim cemetery section as 'our cemetery':

People [Muslims] are happy that there is a cemetery specifically for Muslims. It means a lot, especially for a lot of people who may come from other countries and then feel that there is a place for them when they leave this world ... Well, in a way, it's a very interesting feeling, a positive feeling, we [the Muslim community] have our cemetery. In any case, it is good that you feel you are part of society even when you leave this world.

Both the examples above touch on aspects of inclusion and integration, and the importance of belonging to a community, being allowed to have a cemetery section, and being buried in accordance with religious practices of that community, aspects that have been addressed by others as crucial in order to avoid harm to the bereaved (Maddrell *et al.* 2021); but also belonging to the society where one feels at home and welcomed (Hunter 2016).

During one of our visits to St Eskil's we noticed a very clear example of 'home-making' or appropriation of space. Someone had put up a solar lamp in one of the trees in the Muslim section (Figure 6). When we asked the cemetery manager about this, it was obvious that it was an initiative made without involving the cemetery management, and the cemetery manager was clear that this was something they would have to remove. To us this is an example of appropriation of place, someone feeling that this is his or her place. We question whether people would take a similar action in a public park. It is also potentially a signal to the manager that people want to be able to visit the cemetery also in the evening and that there is a need

for better lighting in some parts of the cemetery.

Arvid (fictive name), a pensioner and secular Swede, who likes to stroll at St Eskil's for its beauty and rich environment, usually passes by the Muslim section because he says it is interesting to look at the various ways of decorating graves. The Muslim sections stand out in their design compared with the rest of the cemetery. The main difference is the decorations made to full grave length with flowers or stones (see Figure 7). Materiality, in this example referred to as decorations, can be ways to display religious belonging, family unity or other forms of common values both religious and secular (Jedan *et al.* 2020). Through the materiality, diversity becomes visible and the cemetery can become an arena that may foster social recognition (*ibid.*).

Interestingly, some of the informants had noticed that Muslim graves in Sweden are 'Swedified', in that people adapt to the local style and get inspiration from other Swedes. Similarly, we observe how Swedes are inspired by other cultures, as in the use of photos on headstones, a tradition which does not have a long history in Sweden and could be inspired by eastern countries. Compared with many other cemeteries in Sweden, St Eskil's has flexible rules when it comes to choice of decoration, headstone and so on. This creates inclusive conditions appreciated by most of the informants we spoke to. However, stricter rules can be seen, for example, in cultural historic cemeteries or in woodland cemeteries, where the intention is to preserve a specific character. In these situations it is particularly important to inform the bereaved about the local rules prior to

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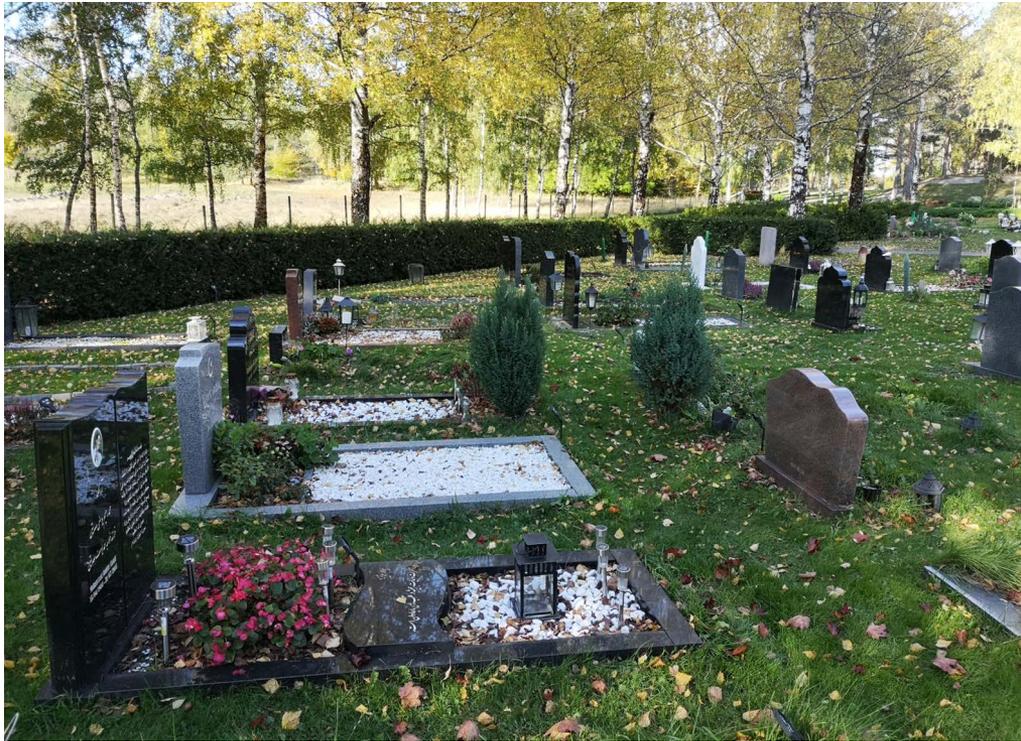


Figure 7. The Muslim section at St Eskil's cemetery. The graves are decorated to their full length.

the choice of grave plot, in order to avoid misunderstandings and negative surprises with regard to limitations.

Concluding discussion and reflections

In this study, we have used St Eskil's cemetery in Eskilstuna as an example to explore and discuss how diverse users experience a Swedish cemetery. Our aim was to describe and discuss cemetery qualities gained through design, management and use. Key qualities of the cemetery that evolved in the analysis of qualitative data were *nature*, *care* and *diversity*.

We find it interesting that the informants were so consistent in their description of the cemetery: the garden-like or natural character, the greenery, the well-structured organization, and the care afforded to keep the site clean. Other qualities necessary for positive experiences on site were more challenging for the interviewees to describe, but are aspects that we, as landscape architects, paid attention to, such as finding the right location with permeable materials to avoid bad drainage, inscribing the different spaces of the cemetery in the terrain in a natural way and making them part of the topography, choosing plants that are perceived as both calm and diversified, and putting in a pond as a focus of reflection in a central location in the collective memorial.

For several of the informants, maintenance seems to be linked to beauty. Mohammed, who we quote in the article, described the well-structured, orderly cemetery as typically Swedish, using words such as 'clean' and 'peaceful' to describe it. This may reflect Swedish society, which has for a long period kept to order and understandable structures to provide peace and safety. The well-maintained landscape is very much a result of economic resources and the fact that cemetery finance is derived from taxes

that cover, among other things, costs for maintenance of public spaces within the cemetery. This can be compared with other countries such as the UK and Luxembourg, where fees for grave plots finance the maintenance (Nordh *et al.* 2021). It may also be a response to legislation emphasizing the importance of care or individual acts that promote respect for the dead. Taking care of and thereby cherishing a grave or deceased relative is certainly a way for many Swedish grave-right owners to process grief, and to do it in a nature or garden context is common. But for those informants in this study whose cultural and religious backgrounds were neither Swedish nor Christian, the nature experience and the well-kept landscape seem also to be highly valued. Walter's (2021) hypothesis that in Protestant and secular Northern European contexts people turn to nature to mourn, and Thurffell's (2020) reasoning that nature is the Swedes' new religion, may be part of the explanation why cemeteries in Sweden are park or garden-like places with high levels of maintenance. However, even if it is typically Swedish to have well-maintained garden and nature-like cemeteries, across the full breadth of our interview study including other cemeteries we found an appreciation of these landscape qualities. Within landscape preference studies there is a lot of literature addressing people's preference for well-maintained landscape or parks (Tveit *et al.* 2006). However, there are few studies focusing on the qualities of cemeteries. For the future, we encourage research that explores people's perceptions about, or wishes for, future designs or types of cemeteries, particularly in accordance with the landscape-architect perspective addressed in the introduction. Such knowledge will help develop future cemeteries in accordance with people's needs and wishes.

We emphasize the importance of the Swedish cemetery as a 'place for everyone', in line with the national burial law. Through allowing specific cemetery sections, applying flexible rules, co-creation and understanding, the cemetery management seems to make people with diverse backgrounds feel included and welcomed. These are crucial aspects for inclusion and belonging (Maddrell *et al.* 2021; Nordh *et al.* 2021). In this article we have shown how some interviewees talk about the cemetery as 'their' place, which we interpret as a sign of belonging and home-making.

It is conceivable that St Eskil's cemetery is an especially favourable example, or that the small sample of informants we spoke to in this study gives a positively skewed picture of experiences of the place. More negative relations, or lack of relations, to Scandinavian cemeteries are found in the literature (Høeg 2021). Every cemetery is unique in its context, design and elements (Clayden and Dixon 2007). However, based on the observations and interviews, together with many years of experience within cemetery research, we claim to recognize that both nature/garden and maintenance are key characteristics of Swedish cemeteries. Finally, we stress the importance of professional cemetery design and management to conceptualize and form a good cemetery environment that contributes to the feeling of safety, meaning and beauty over time. ■

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