



The Cemetery as Leisure

An investigation for the use of
the landfill at Braambergen

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contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: The Japanese people' s
attitude towards cemeteries
- Chapter 2: Cemeteries as Leisure in
Western Culture
- Chapter 3: Cemeteries or alike in the
Netherlands
- Chapter 4: Conclusion

INSIDE

Studio Braambergen - Theory
25, May 2016

Introduction

A lot of Japanese go back to their hometown during the summer holiday to visit their ancestor's graves. This period is called "Obon" (1). It is a custom based on Buddhism where everyone comes together to pay their respects to dead, feast together, set off fireworks, and dance. The event is now more for personal leisure than paying one's respect to the deceased. There are many other opportunities to visit the cemetery throughout the year. Not only Japan's countryside has cemeteries but also its urban areas. Cemeteries are very intimate place for us Japanese. I have not heard about Westerners who share the same customs as here. I was especially surprised when I heard about how disconnected the Dutch are from cemeteries. They are a place passed on from generation to generation with respected as majestic and feared where people can converse with the souls of the deceased. I heard from some Japanese woman married a Dutch guy that in the Netherlands, if not desired, a grave will be removed after about 20-30 years to make room for someone else. The difference in way of thinking about cemeteries between the Japanese and Dutch is very interesting. What kind of existence should cemeteries be for people?

Braambergen in Almere, which is the site for this studio assignment, the area consists of reclaimed land which is built on three large hills and covered in beautiful green. It is surrounded in three directions with forest. You can find wild foxes, rabbits, and deer in this area rich in nature. If it was not for the pipes sticking out of the ground, you would not think that this artificial place full of nature was built upon garbage. During the research process, we took a look at some land art projects in the reclaimed area by bike in the surroundings of Almere. Experiencing the land art which brings out nature's dynamic and emotions was a real eye opener for me into the world of Dutch leisure. I thought that it would have been a good day to also include visiting cemeteries as a part of this trip. Regardless of religion, death is something that approaches everyone. At the end, we physically return to the soil. Ironically, we tread the same path as the garbage that our massive consumer societies produce. A cemetery is not a positive place for us Japanese either. The same applies to stinking reclaimed land. In my opinion it is necessary to add leisure and charm to the landfill for its inhabitants to feel comfort and pleasure aspects of the area.

For this research I have investigated Mt. Auburn as a pioneer in the park cemetery movement and a popular American place for recreation and relaxation (2). Besides that I studied the Woodland Cemetery in Sweden, a World Heritage Site, a beautiful site taking advantage of the majestic landscape (3), a World Heritage Site. Furthermore, I personally visited three Dutch cemeteries (or alike) to explore their circumstances and the connection between the Dutch and their cemeteries. I would like to use these as examples to inspect how the former landfill, Braambergen, can be used to create a suggestion for the design of a cemetery with trash for good memories.

What is the connection between the Braambergen Landfill and the Cemetery in regard with Leisure?



"Dance of Death" (1493) by Michael Wolgemut



Chapter 1: The Japanese people's attitude towards cemeteries

There is a festival that I have been interested in for some time. It is the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), which is held every year in Mexico from October 31st to November 2nd. This festival takes place on the Catholic holiday called "All Saints' Day," and is similar to Japan's "Obon" festival (4). Adults and children wear makeup that makes their faces look like skulls and they parade through the streets with lively singing and music. Compared to the modest, solemn memorial services for ancestors in Japan, the Mexican celebrations are loud and boisterous.

The cemetery decorations are a particular highlight. On this day, the family comes together to decorate the graves of the deceased to a surprising extent, with colorful flowers (mainly marigolds and cockscombs), candles, and colored sand. The graves are a colorful, fantastic sight that many foreign visitors, myself included, come to see. This is a scene that would be out of the question in a Japanese cemetery because for Japanese people, cemeteries are closely associated with the idea of death, so they are the symbol of a sinister place and considered to be dark and scary. On the other hand, they are special places that have come to be valued as places to enshrine the souls of our deceased ancestors. Cemeteries are an important place to remember the dead for Mexicans as well, but rather than fear death, they see it as something to ridicule, and face death cheerfully and jubilantly. This difference in views of death was a source of culture shock for me.

Japanese cemeteries are generally lined with orderly gravestones made of black and gray granite and are a solemn and serene place. They are familiar places that we visit several times a year, but they are by no means cheerful or fun.

Only 70 years have passed since cremation became widespread in Japan. In the Meiji era especially, the cremation rate was only about 10% (5). However, Japan's cremation rate is currently the highest in the world at 99.9% (Ibid:P.37-). This is an astounding number, considering how many countries have cremation rates below 50% (Ibid:P.37-). This was because as Japan continued to develop during the post-war era, cremation spread rapidly as an effective use of Japan's small amount of land that was also safe in terms of public health.

In Japan, cremated remains generally are buried in cemeteries with their family unit. Recently, as the availability of land has decreased, some people store the remains in charnel houses or ossuaries. Other new forms of funerals, such as the Jumokuso (where a tree is planted in place of a gravestone) or Sankotsu (where ashes are scattered) are attracting attention, and we are seeing changes in how Japanese people think about burials. In response to these needs and in order to dispel Japanese people's conventional image of cemeteries as dark and scary places, a growing number of cemeteries are planting trees and plants to transform the cemeteries into parks. These are called "Ko-en Bochi" , and there are many kind of park cemeteries all over Japan. "Kyoto Amagase Memorial Park" "Chiba Peace Park" "Nagoya City Midorigaok Park" etc... (6)



Chapter 2: Cemeteries as Leisure in Western Culture

There are a variety of cemeteries around the world that differ due to their religions, customs, and surroundings. Among them, I have found that there are many cemeteries that are not simply places to bury the dead, but also serve a purpose as leisure areas for people to relax.

Mt. Auburn is a cemetery park that was built in Boston in the United States in 1820 (7). Its main designer was Jacob Bigelow, who was both a physician and a botanist. It was conceived of based on a new view of life and death. Nature is thought of as an entity that transcends death. While gravestones had been pushed into the daily environment of the city as monuments to death, here, they were dispersed throughout nature in an environment with hints of classicism.

A cemetery for people to be at peace with death and return to nature - It was designed so that people could walk through nature, allowing their sad and anguished mental states to be set loose, so they could encounter a peaceful image of death. Even today, 200,000 people visit that graveyard annually (8). On the grounds, there are people walking freely and those looking at animals and plants, as well as creative people, such as painters, photographers, and poets. It has become a new place for creative activities that stimulates these people's creative impulses. There are also many events held there every month (tours to explore or observe the plants and animals) to actively bring people to the cemetery. Of course, as a cemetery, it still remains a place that offers eternal rest to people.

Skogskyrkogården - Woodland Cemetery is a cemetery that was constructed in the suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden, between 1917 and 1940 (9). It was designed by two young architects, Erik Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, who had significant impact on northern European modern architecture (10). The cemetery utilizes its hilly terrain where conifers grow, allowing the chapel and crematorium built there to blend into the forest. This consideration for nature led to Skogskyrkogården being registered as a World Heritage Site.

People return to the forest when they die - This is how the people of Sweden, blessed by abundant forests, view death. There are trees and plants planted in most cemeteries. However, here the trees and plants do not exist to surround the tombstones. Instead, nature has the upper hand and the natural environment is the deciding factor on where the gravestones are placed, so their arrangement does not seem out of place. Here as well, many people come on weekends to enjoy bicycling and jogging. In winter, people cross-country ski through the park, making it a place that anyone can enter freely. Cemeteries are generally thought of as places for the dead, but this one appears to be a space for the living.



"Mt Auburn" in Boston, America



"Skogskyrkogården" in Stockholm, Sweden





"Ereveld Loenen"



"De Nieuwe Ooster"



"Secret Path"

Chapter 3: Cemeteries or alike in the Netherlands

And what kind of cemeteries are there in the Netherlands? When I visited a few I was surprised to find that in the Netherlands, there is a much more diverse cemetery culture than I had imagined.

The first one that I visited was Ereveld Loenen, which is located to the south of Apeldoorn. This cemetery was designed in 1949 by the Dutch landscape architect B. Haspels as a memorial to the war dead and is a special place for the Dutch. As you leave the city through the idyllic scenery unique to the Netherlands, a dense coniferous forest appears. The cemetery is nestled inside that forest. There were few visitors, even though it was midday on a holiday, and the shadows cast by the huge pine trees gave off an extremely quiet and lonely impression. There were a few intricate and maze-like paths on the grounds, but I strangely did not get lost on them. I believe that was because of the radial plaza and the monument that stood at the center of the grounds acted as landmarks, and the rich greenery, including the various trees and mosses, made the paths easy to follow. The gravestones were arranged along these trails and they blended in with the natural, organic space. In recent years, new cemeteries were built to accommodate the dead, who will continue to increase in number in the future. A new cemetery designed by Karres and Brands is an oval plot of land with white birch surrounding its periphery. Fruit bushes such as blueberry and juneberry distributed throughout the red clay and its contrast with the gray walking paths make it a beautiful place. Compared to the organic space designed by Haspels, this cemetery gives off a very sophisticated and artificial impression. Because I have been wondering like this since I saw a place constructed just recently with a paved path and leveled ground with concrete.

The next cemetery I visited was De Nieuwe Ooster, which is located in the city of Amsterdam. This cemetery, designed in 1889 by Leonard Springer, has a variety of styles of graves. There are places where gravestones are lined up in the uniquely European burial style. There are places where the dead are buried in sarcophagi. There are graves where young children have been laid to rest. You can also see Chinese and Japanese gravestones among others a grave that contains the first

Many of these cemeteries are quite a fantastical sight, with green lawns and seasonal flowers such as cherry blossoms and magnolias blooming. Surprisingly, there is also a place lined with nothing but urns containing bones. An ossuary houses urns of bones. It is extremely rare to be able to see urns and freely touch them if you want in this fashion. This Urn Garden, lined with bone urns, was also designed by Karres and Brands. They separate each corner of the graveyard out with precise lines and plant a variety of plants and trees in each location to provide cemetery spaces with entirely different appearances in each area. The Urn Garden likely has a different appearance in different seasons, bringing comfort to those who visit it. There are chairs set up in front of the graves and urns in this cemetery, and I saw a few people thinking about the deceased over a cup of tea. Although there were not any people engaging in active leisure such as bicycling and jogging, I was glad to see some people bringing a small snack or sandwich to enjoy teatime alongside the graves.

I also visited another location which, while not a cemetery, is a place that uses gravestones in the Netherlands that I was quite interested in. On the grounds of the Kunstfort Vijfhuizen, there is a small path called the "Secret Path," which was a 2011 project by the Dutch artist Hans van Houwelingen. The narrow, roughly 250 meter-long trail stretches up a gentle hill alongside a canal. At first glance, it gives a poetic, sentimental impression, but it is entirely paved with gravestones. Moreover, the gravestones include not only old gravestones, but new ones from less than 10 years ago. Indeed, I was a little shocked by this and was hesitant to walk there. This is because as a Japanese person, I see gravestones as something to be respected and did not consider them to be something that it was alright to step on like a garden stone. However, by the story that I heard from an acquaintance, in general, in the Netherlands, if there is no family to tend to a grave site after 20 or 30 years, the grave is exhumed and provided to another deceased person, and the gravestone is discarded. Death is not something to be saved forever. However, the gravestones that were reused for the Secret Path can continue to act as a new kind of reminder of the dead forever. This idea gave me mixed feelings, personally.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The landfill in Braambergen, which is the brief of this studio, is a place that consists of three low hills. These hills were made by depositing industrial and household wastes, and covered with the original soil of the land. So to speak, this landfill is a grave of the wastes that humans made in our consumptive society. However, the site has a beautiful green land surrounded by rich nature. This time, I daringly propose to use the land as a grave site.

You may think "A grave site on a landfill? It's indiscreet! That may put a negative image on Braambergen", but I don't think so. Just think of the places like Mt Auburn or Skogskyrkogården where we can stay with the spirits of the dead in rich nature. Don't you think becoming that kind of place is the right way for this landfill?

I think so because it is such a precious experience only humans can have to talk with family or stroll in nature thinking about people who passed away. This may not be a spectacular and exciting leisure, because for most people, the cemetery is not a place to dancing and singing merrily except Mexican. But it gives us calm and peaceful time for sure.

Also, there are some attractive places near Braambergen and you can go around them by bicycle. Among those, various land art projects such as Het Museumbos and the Green Cathedral by Marinus Boezem. Don't you think it is such an attractive leisure to have emotional experiences in the landfill with those dynamic and poetic land arts?

The thing connected with the cemetery as Braambergen landfill and leisure, it will be nothing else but the commonness as "Memory of Ash." In Japan, the deceased is burned to lay in a coffin with the things they had cherished and loved when cremating their bodies. It is from the feeling that the deceased can live without inconvenience in the same way as they had lived here even in the afterlife. Braambergen landfill also contains things that many people had acquired, broken houses, and burnt ashes. There should be also a thing that various memories and wishes have been put in there. Braambergen is an ashes garden which has been piled up with ashes as the memories of people. We must not forget in this ashes garden to set up a monument not only which accommodates urns but also which devotes thanks to a lot of waste. It will be a wonderful experience to talk about memories of important people and to dedicate thanks to things while enjoying nature in the beautiful green on the earth.

I do hope that this landfill in Braambergen will become a place that fits the Netherlands which fosters the culture of various grave styles.



"Green Cathedral"

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