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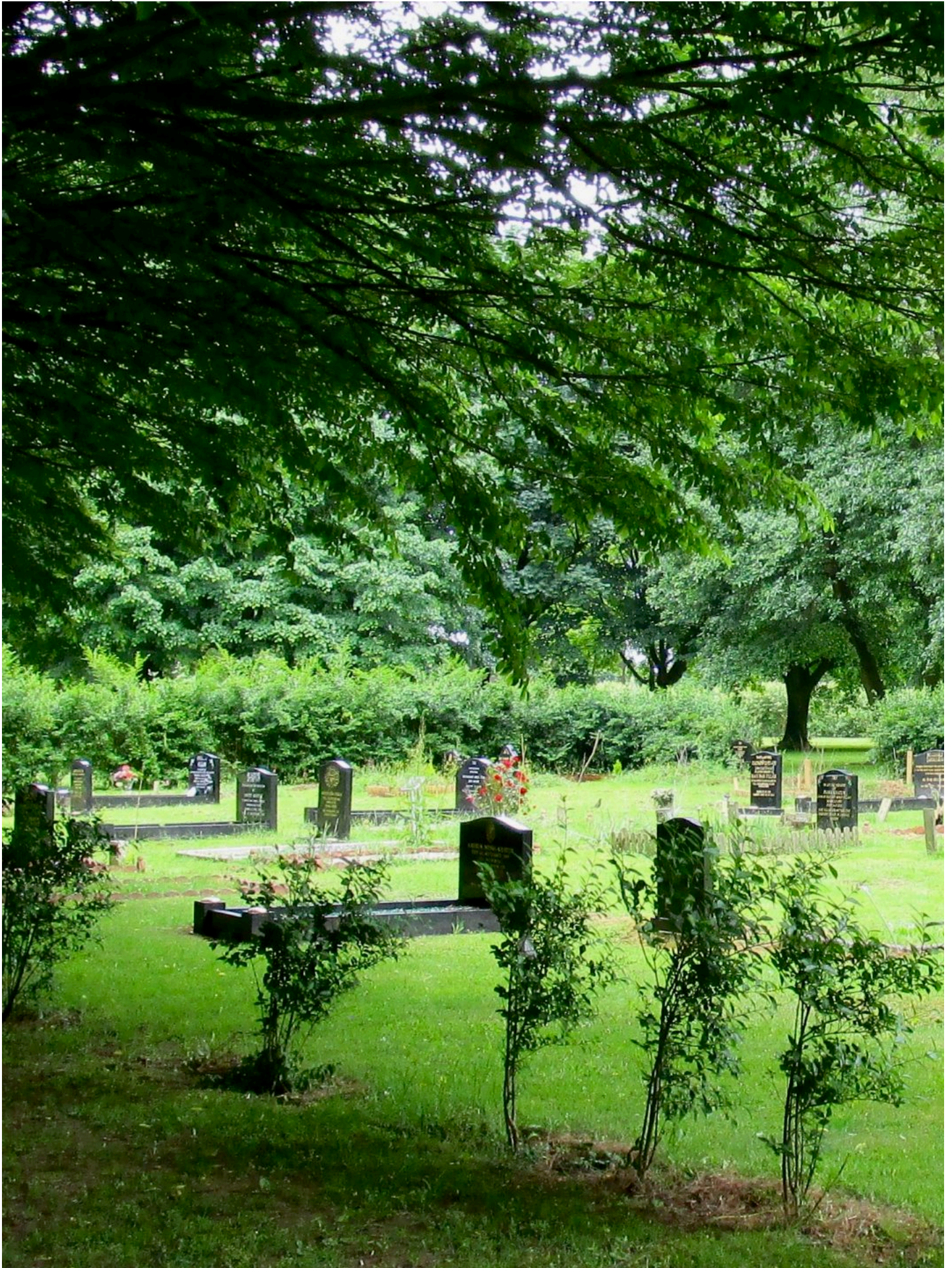
Deathscapes and Diversity: Planning for Death and Remembrance in Multicultural England and Wales

Category

[Remembrance Exhibition](#)

Date

Friday 14 September 2018



Cemetery in Northampton. Credit: Brenda Mathijssen

Guest post by [Katie McClymont](#), University of the West of England and Co-Investigator on the [Deathscapes and Diversity](#) project

Many of my colleagues were either rather taken aback, or quietly amused, when I told them I was researching cemeteries and planning. The reaction seems to stem from a sense that this is 'niche' or 'weird', or beyond the scope of what an urban planning academic should be interested in. Although not unexpected, I do still find this at best short-sighted as death (as Benjamin Franklin famously noted, along with taxation was one of the few certainties in life) is both central to human existence and a matter which has serious practical implications on the need for and use of land. This short-sightedness is not just a facet of my own colleagues: very few local authorities have pro-actively addressed the need to provide spaces and site for cemeteries and crematoria in their local development plans, leaving judgements on development proposal, when they do come in, to be judged without specific policy to guide decision makers.



Hindu Ohm Statue for use in Crematoria, Cardiff (credit Brenda Mathijssen)

This is particularly problematic in the multicultural, multifaith society which Britain is today. Without adequate policy guidance which considers what and where makes for a fitting contemporary 'deathscape' (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010), taking into account varied requirements over access, memorialisation and ceremony space, development may simply fall back on established patterns and traditional practices. Such patterns and practices do not readily accommodate dynamic changes, or group and individual preferences surrounding bodily disposal and memorial practices more widely. This is not a mere question of customer choice. Fewer children (and grandchildren) of migrant families wish for their bodies or ashes to be 'repatriated'; partially because of the cost and complication of this process, but also because the country of ancestral origin no longer holds the emotional position of 'home'. Places of bodily disposal and remembrance are for the living, and future generations, as much, if not more, than they are for the deceased. To therefore not provide burial and crematoria practices which fit a variety of cultural and religious practices is to deny the status of full citizenship to people of a wide range of faiths and traditions. These are people born, living their whole lives (and, as one participant commented, paying their taxes!) and dying within England and Wales.

These are the key issues which frame and underpin our project. It explores the needs and requirements of both established BME groups as well as newer migrant communities with regards to death and remembrance. It draws on extensive interviews and focus groups with a range of people from four towns: Newport, Huddersfield, Northampton and Swindon. A briefing note outlining the key policy implications can be found [here](#).

Conversely, we hope that by starting a conversations about policy making for future cemeteries and crematoria, that a wider range of views and needs can be taken into consideration, as well as establishing a greater sense of certainty in terms of provision, and the allocation of land. This, as well as being a valuable project in itself, holds greater resonance in terms of questions of integration and belonging. This is both highly practical and highly symbolic. On the one hand, cemeteries can represent civic memory, a physical record of those who have lived and died in a place, and hence mark who 'belongs' there. It is interesting to consider which groups are not marked in this way, and what this implication of this might be, such as Hindus and Sikhs who are cremated and do not chose to memorialise this via a

book of remembrance or plaque at the crematoria or garden of remembrance. On the other, access to something as mundane as car parking influences the size of a party readily accommodated at a funeral, but is underpinned by norms of white British practice, and attendant notions of 'genuine requirements'. This also related to the idea of cemeteries as greenspace, similar to parks and their role as places for recreation and nature conservation. Proposals for new developments can weigh up the relative importance of cemetery provision with protection of the greenbelt, or other open land. Moreover, the choice of location also impacts of how people can get there; by public transport or only by private car.

So, rather than being 'niche' or 'weird', considerations of planning for cemeteries and crematoria are central to key questions of planning practice. Attention to the diverse practical, religious, emotional and cultural requirements around death and dying are central to, and need to be recognised as a key part of sustainable development: 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (as cited in National Planning Policy Framework, 2018, p5)

References

Maddrell, A. & Sidaway, J.D. (2010) *Deathscapes: spaces for death, dying, mourning and remembrance*, Ashgate, Farnham

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2018) *National Planning Policy Framework*, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/733637/National_Planning_Policy_Framework_web_accessible_vers

This blog post is part of the AHRC/ESRC funded '[Deathscapes and Diversity: Making space for death and remembrance in multicultural England and Wales](#)' project designed and devised by [Avril Maddrell](#) (Principal Investigator, University of Reading) and [Yasminah Beebejaun](#) (Co-Investigator, UCL) and myself; conducted also with RAs [Brenda Mathijssen](#) (University of Groningen) and Danny McNally (Teeside University) and fieldwork consultant Sufyan Abid Dogra (Bradford Institute for Health Research).

Many thanks to the team for their comments and clarifications on this post; as ever, all the inaccuracies and typos are my own.

Katie gave a talk at Abbey House Museum on Tuesday 18th September 2018, as part of our series of events attached to the Remembrance exhibition. Listen now:

00:00

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