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Cemeteries and Crematoria

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Cemeteries and Crematoria

Creating inclusive public spaces in Maastricht



Cemeteries and crematoriums are important public spaces and services serving all citizens – as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The CeMi project studied cemeteries and crematoriums in 8 medium-sized municipalities in 6 countries: Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. Each municipality included both long-established minority ethnic or religious communities and more recent migrants. Researchers talked with municipal cemetery and crematorium providers and planners, and faith and community groups. It is hoped that summary feedback will enhance understanding of cultural practices, prompt dialogue between local government providers and communities, and inform future planning both locally and internationally.

ABOVE: Armenian grave, Tongerseweg Cemetery, June 2020 (detail). Photograph by Mariske Westendorp.

“People prefer to pay once and for all for perpetual grave rights. But the municipality of Maastricht, they don’t offer those possibilities. And if they offer them, it is quite expensive. Approximately 10.000 Euros altogether. And that’s too expensive for us. (...) When I heard about their prices for the first time, I thought: ‘How dare you profit from a dead human being?’”

— Moroccan migrant

Issues and challenges

Municipal policymakers are aware of the pressures on funerary provisions and have formulated responses to them. As in many other Dutch municipalities, finances are limited in the wake of the Social Support Act 2015. There are plans to enhance the cost-effectiveness of the Tongerseweg cemetery. However, it is difficult for a municipality of Maastricht’s size and population profile to make dedicated provision for smaller migrant and long-established minority groups.

Specifically:

- At 66.91%, the proportion of indigenous inhabitants is comparatively high; moreover, high cremation rates among this group place additional financial pressure on municipal funerary services.
- The two largest migrant and minority groups (from Germany and Belgium) are not ritually distinct to a degree that might warrant dedicated funerary provision. The third-largest minority group, from Indonesia, already has dedicated provision in the ‘Moluccan section’ at Bovens Cemetery in Heer.
- With its goal of cost-effectiveness, the municipality risks setting elevated prices that are unaffordable for members of religions seeking perpetual grave rights (e.g. Muslims) and drive them away.
- There are perceptions on the part of different communities using the Maastricht municipal funerary service that it operates within an unacknowledged Roman Catholic framework, so greater openness is desirable.

A member of the Pentecostal Church told us: “I think they simply don’t know about rituals in other denominations or religions. Most people here are Roman Catholics, and one sees that quite clearly with the carriers and also with the undertakers. You have to tell them every time anew that they have to turn the coffin. And then I think: ‘they should really try to get some knowledge about other religions.’”

Location

Maastricht is the capital and largest town of Limburg, the southernmost province in the Netherlands. Famous through the eponymous Maastricht Treaty, the town has an international attraction for tourists and students. Because Maastricht incorporated a number of formerly-independent villages, there is a correspondingly large number of non-municipal (religious and commercial) cemeteries spread across the municipality, in addition to its historic cemetery at Tongerseweg. As a ‘metropolitan provincial municipality’, Maastricht has a diverse population, but the different migrant and minority groups are quite small. More than two-thirds of the inhabitants have indigenous origins.

Population of Maastricht, top-15 countries of origin (1 January 2021)

66.91%	Netherlands
5.32%	Germany
3.67%	Belgium
2.30%	Indonesia (Moluccas)
1.41%	Morocco
1.35%	Italy
1.34%	Turkey
1.08%	(former) Soviet Union
0.92%	UK
0.90%	China
0.87%	Spain
0.83%	USA
0.79%	Syria
0.74%	Poland
0.66%	France

(Source: opendata.cbs.nl)



Best practice

- The municipality understands the need to reach post-religious and less traditionalist groups from the indigenous population with additional funerary services.
- Clear information on the website of the Tongerseweg cemetery: Visitors are informed well in advance of impending works, and their rationale is communicated well.
- A dedicated area for Jewish and Muslim graves is available at Tongerseweg.
- The municipality has offered dedicated funerary facilities to a new migrant group, the Armenian-Christian minority, which is expected to increase.

“We had a good relationship with the alderman — former alderman, really. I forget his name; he is dead now, alas. He said: ‘Don’t you need a cemetery of your own?’”

— Armenian community leader

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

The municipal cemetery at Tongerseweg is rooted firmly in the majority Roman Catholic culture and aesthetic (July 2019, Mariske Westendorp).

This makes it a challenge to provide equally attractive space for other cultures. Sometimes, the compromises are not entirely convincing: for example, the Muslim graves turned against the direction of the path system to face Mecca (July 2019, Christoph Jedan).

The integration of migrant and minority groups might be easier in cemeteries without a listed heritage status. For example, the ‘Moluccan section’, an important funerary space for the Indonesian minority in Maastricht, at the Bovens Cemetery in Heer (June 2020, Mariske Westendorp).

Travellers’ graves at the Oostermaas Cemetery (July 2019, Mariske Westendorp).

Proposed solutions

- As the examples of Zwolle (Chinese cemetery) and Zuidlaren (Muslim cemetery) show, dedicated funerary provision can be cost-effective, if there is a regional function. In order to acquire or maintain that function, Tongerseweg needs to reconsider the price point for its services and the provision of perpetual grave rights.
- Inexpensive additions can help to produce a greatly improved experience for minority groups, e.g. a compass indicating the direction of Mecca, or a fire bowl for Chinese and Hindu ceremonies.
- For many of the ritually distinct but small minority groups, dedicated provision will hardly be feasible. Consider the addition of a new 'free field', a lawn section without rectilinear paths, with free orientation and adornment of graves, as in Selwerderhof, Groningen. With its own 'heterodox' field, Tongerseweg has some experience with this, but the current field is located far from the entrance and would benefit from a visual and functional upgrade. Such a field offers good possibilities for accommodating the dead of very different ethnic and religious communities, and might also appeal to a sizeable post-Christian or post-traditional group of the indigenous population.
- Cemetery planners and municipal policy-makers and politicians should extend their contacts with leaders of minority communities, to better understand the funerary needs of communities outside the (post-)Roman Catholic mainstream.

"In my view it would be great if a Dutch person and an Armenian, or a Turk and an Arab lie next to each other. And, if that happens in the Netherlands, I would want a Dutch text on the tomb stone and an Arabic text underneath. And for the neighbour a Turkish text with a Dutch text. Yes, that would be integration at its best, I think. It seems to me quite beautiful to combine things in this way."

— Armenian-Syrian refugee

(Inter)national examples of best practice

- Although facing similar financial pressures to Maastricht, Leeuwarden has opted for lower cost-effectiveness in the municipal funerary services (74%), and can thus maintain a competitive price point. This benefits financially vulnerable migrant and minority families.
- With low-cost additions such as a compass indicating the direction of Mecca or a canopy for Islamic funerals, Noorderbegraafplaats (Leeuwarden) provides added value for Muslim cemetery-users.
- In Luxembourg the public health insurance scheme pays a 'funeral allowance' that is sufficient for a basic funeral.
- In cemeteries such as Kranenburg (Zwolle), Selwerderhof (Groningen) and St Eskil (Eskilstuna, Sweden), extensive sign-posting showcases diversity and provides visitor-friendly information.

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