



Cemeteries and Crematoria

Creating inclusive public spaces in Luxembourg



Cemeteries and Crematoria as public spaces of belonging in multicultural Europe (CeMi)

Cemeteries and crematoria are important public spaces and services serving all citizens – as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The CeMi project studied cemeteries and crematoria in 8 medium-sized municipalities in 6 countries: Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. Each municipality included long-standing ethnic or religious minority communities and more recent migrants. Researchers talked with municipal cemeteries and crematoria providers, planners, 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 locally and internationally.

ABOVE: Merl Cemetery,
1 November 2019. Photograph by
Mariske Westendorp.

“At cemeteries, you have your urn burials, you have classic coffin burials, you have the dispersal of ashes. Otherwise, nothing. And we have no other demands, because of the regulations.”

Cemetery manager, Luxembourg City

Issues and challenges

Municipal authorities and the funeral sector are acutely aware of the growing diversity of the population, and open to minority provisions. Still, practicing diversity is limited by strict regulations in terms of:

- Legal time constraints (36 to 72 hours to bury or cremate). Additional time, e.g. for in-bound travel, requires special authorisation.
- Limited time (30 min. slots) for services at the crematorium. This does not meet the needs of diverse faith groups, which require more time to perform their rituals.
- Choice of cemetery (obligation to bury in the district where people were registered during life). Merl Cemetery has Muslim and Jewish sections; families from other districts (and towns) need a special authorization to be buried there.
- Conformity regarding grave orientation, inscriptions and other aesthetic prescriptions, which do not allow for individual expressions and ‘diversity within diversity’.

Despite official religious neutrality, cemetery design, such as funeral chapels, often retains Roman Catholic iconography. Alternative farewell areas may be outdoors and/or unable to accommodate large funeral parties. There are also less benches in the Muslim section and a lack of sign postage makes the section difficult to find.

Informal rules, such as the custom of burying coffins in the absence of mourners, may be incompatible with funeral rituals that place much emphasis on that moment of parting. If this is handled with undue expediency, it is experienced as disrespectful.

Location

Luxembourg City is host to many EU institutions as well as international financial organizations, attracting people from all over the world. About 70% of the 122,000 residents are non-nationals and for the most part EU-citizen. There are 13 cemeteries run by the municipality and one crematorium, managed by a consortium of municipalities.

Population of Luxembourg City, 2020

29.6%	Luxembourgish
17.0%	French
9.7%	Portuguese
7.1%	Italian
3.7%	Belgian
3.3%	Spanish
1.7%	Romanian
1.9%	British
3.1%	German
1.6%	Greek
1.4%	Polish
0.8%	Dutch
9.7%	European (other)
4.8%	Asian
2.4%	African
2.3%	American
0.1%	Oceania



Best practice

- For all Luxembourg citizens, social security cover includes a so-called funeral allowance (EUR 1085, for adults in 2020).
- Cemeteries are recognized as essential community service and generally appreciated for their effective organization and well-cared-for environment.
- Minority provisions are available at Merl Cemetery: Muslim and Jewish distinct sections with adequate grave orientation and ritual washing facilities. Eternal grave rights for religious reasons are included in the Funerary Law (1972, art. 10).

“It’s an opportunity, because at the beginning the Muslim section at Merl Cemetery was reserved for people who live in Luxembourg City. The other families, who live in other municipalities, protested. They intervened with the municipalities and today it’s open to everyone, based on an authorization of the mayor of Luxembourg City. And that’s a great chance, it has opened up, people are glad.”

Woman of Algerian background

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

In Luxembourg graves are traditionally cleaned and decorated with flowers for All-Saints Day. This Chinese grave follows the local custom, grave design and choice of flowers (chrysanthems) combining it with typical Chinese offerings (paper hellbank notes, fruits, candles, incense), 1 November 2019.

The chairs in the Muslim section in Merl have been brought by mourners, as the benches are far, 1 October 2019.

Jewish section at the Merl Cemetery, container with pebbles, 12 July 2019.

Luxembourgish cemeteries are municipal services but shaped by Catholic heritage. Strict rules in terms of design, material and orientation are imposed. Neudorf Cemetery, 4 October 2019.

All photographs by Mariske Westendorp.

Translations of the quotes from Luxembourgish and French by Sonja Kmec.



Selwerderhof Cemetery, Groningen
2 July 2019. Photograph by
Sonja Kmec.

“Because there are so many foreigners here. So Luxembourg has to be openminded. If things gotta work. Of course [it takes time] and you have your habits and ways of doing things (...).

And this is where, you know, you meet each other. Because we both come with our ‘that’s just normal’ (laughing). I can’t see anything special about that. And then you have to be prepared. There are different ways of putting down a coffin, and you have to know that.”

Woman of Danish background

International examples of best practice

International examples of best practice In some Dutch cemeteries, such as Selwerderhof in Groningen, there is a ‘free field’ next to traditional sections for those who feel confined by the aesthetic conformity of other sections.

In the Swedish cemetery of Eskilstuna extensive sign postage make diversity visible and provide visitor-friendly information.

Proposed solutions

- Rules and informal regulations should be more flexible to accommodate culturally diverse practices, in particular to allow more time and space to say farewell and to allow for more time and solemnity when lowering the coffin in the presence of mourners.
- The opening of a ‘free field’ that does not impose restrictions to grave orientations and aesthetics would allow to respect diversity-within-diversity.
- (Re)design of already established, extended or new cemeteries as well as questions of what constitutes ‘cultural heritage’ would benefit from consultation with all cultural and religious groups. Regular exchanges and a ‘suggestion box’ would help to understand what funeral dignity means to all, as customs are fluid and communities change.

Authors

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Find out more

www.cemi-hera.org