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Reconceptualising cemetery planning in South Africa: assessing the potentials for approaches informed by social-ecological resilience principles

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Abstract

Cemeteries consume vast amounts of land and contest with other land uses deemed more urgent; yet they are rarely addressed in international policy dialogues. They are generally not viewed as part of the open-space system and are mostly mono-functional. Resilience thinking has become an important discourse influencing the way in which urban policy and planning is conceptualised. There is potential to use these ideas to further develop the new approaches to cemetery provision, which are influenced by the application of sustainability concepts, and see them as part of green infrastructure. However, resilience thinking needs to go beyond technical solutions to consider local institutional and socio-cultural contexts that affect their application.

South African apartheid policies facilitated segregation that resulted in unsustainable approaches to cemetery planning and provision. New approaches that engage sustainability perspectives are being explored. This research explores the experience of implementing these approaches in the Johannesburg context, and what it might mean to reconceptualise cemetery planning further through a social-ecological resilience lens. This is achieved by establishing the relationship of cemeteries to social-ecological systems; investigating how the current design and provision of cemeteries can be reconceptualised in the context of resilience thinking; understanding whether newer cemetery planning approaches and designs adequately meet needs of users, and whether they would be willing to accept new ways of interment, and identifying barriers that would prevent the uptake of approaches that are consistent with resilience thinking.

The study employs a case-study methodology focusing on a primary case - Waterval Cemetery, to understand the applicability of resilience thinking in cemetery planning in South Africa. Through engagements with key respondents in the municipality, interviews and focus groups with cemetery users, it seeks diverse participants' perceptions of newer cemetery planning approaches, and alternatives to conventional burial. A secondary case examines Diepsloot Memorial Park, which integrates more innovative elements. Results show that the application of resilience in cemetery planning requires a strong understanding of local socio-cultural contexts. Although the idea of cemeteries contributing to the resilience of cities is

conceivable, it could take longer for transformation to happen and for innovative ideas to be fully accepted.