

# Sustainability of existing areas of historic cemeteries in the city organism: A Czech case study

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**Abstract.** Old public cemeteries are integrated in urbanism as its obvious part what is given by its social function. The witness of these spaces express the relationship and respect to values created by generations ahead of us. There were a lot of forms of graves and cemeteries in a history. A big part of cemeteries preserved until today that we still have in our cities, were founded in 18th and 19th Century. Those burial sites that could be expanded fulfill its function till today. But some of them were closed in an urban organism and remained without use. The others were lost with an aggressive construction and were replaced by the settlements, factories or new parks in some cases, without etic rules. The story of many cemeteries is forgotten. There is a question: What is the fate of old cemeteries, which stopped fulfill their original function? What the investors, the monument care, the heads of cities would to do with it? The aim of the article is to compare the mutual influence of the urban structure of chosen cemeteries in Czech Republic and abroad. The results are obtained by analyzing and comparing the findings of the individual revitalized cemeteries that are still part of urban organism. It is necessary to specify the appropriate transformation of nonfunctional necropolis to become a full part of the city with respect to the dead, to the traditions, to the sacred space.

## 1. Introduction

Until 1918, the Czech Lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The empire's laws influenced the burial and funeral tradition in the Czech Republic to such extent that the consequences can be seen in the local settlements to this day. The Josephine reforms in the late 18th century shifted necropolis sites to a distance of 15 minutes walk beyond settlements. Gradually, however, most of such graveyards turned to be part of the urban organism once again through becoming absorbed by the fast development of towns brought by the industrial revolution, albeit treating them as strictly separate "gardens of silence" is the general tendency. Due to the centuries-old, considerable impact of the Catholic Church, cemeteries form strictly circumscribed, sacred areas, separated from the rest of the public space of the city. The limited opening hours, which allows visiting the site by anyone, but within a defined time, exempts cemeteries from the common definition of *public space*. Formerly, the site sanctity, along with intercessory prayers right at the grave, was making cemeteries places of frequent visits, which today, in the secular and atheistic Czechia (Špatenková, Kovář & Peřinková, 2014) ceases to be current and is limited to less-frequent visits of loved ones or relaxing in greenery; sometimes, funeral tourism is also involved. The low frequency of visits - observed in other countries as well, including those with different historical backgrounds [1] - as seen particularly at sites found on the periphery of major cities of the Czech Republic, leads to vandalism and other unethical practices.



Cemeteries are often outside the attention of public life of the society and on the edge of interest of city's officials.

For graveyards found in villages and rather small towns, the situation is quite different. They are still managed and cared for by the local residents. They are mostly located near the church or in the countryside beyond the village. The reasons include the higher religiosity of the population as well as concerns as 'what people would say' if one does not take care of their family grave; there is also a better level of surveillance and checks and, last but not least, a higher degree of cultivation of traditions. Specific situations occur in the territory of the former Sudetenland, where there are family graves of residents dislocated after World War II as part of the German minority; this brings out specific questions and issues in terms of attitudes to caring for such sites.

On the contrary, larger cities have seen higher rates of secularisation, the settings appear to be more anonymous and indistinct, the walking distance logically increases, and it is often necessary to use personal means of transportation or public transport in order to reach the destination.

The high number of cremations, which in 2014 was 79.86% [2] of all burials in the Czech Republic and even 98% [3] [4] in the capital city, Prague, is also an indisputable aspect. Such a sharp increase occurred over the past hundred years - 2018 will mark 100 years from the first-ever cremation in this country. Many of the cemetery complexes are still not ready for new forms of burying that are envisaged through the phenomenon described above. The reason perhaps lies in the interest of clients in specific necropolises or the low attention of city/village officials toward cemeteries and transformation of the sites; the rather long-term process of the capacity to adapt the necropolises to the new demand may also be the factor. The existing cemeteries were mostly being set up in the 18th/19th century; in some, the process largely occurred in the first half of the 20th century. After WW II, rather urn groves were being established near new crematoria and funeral halls; this was generally underway in the 1970s and 1980s. The period following the 1989 "Velvet Revolution" has seen a minimum of new cemeteries being founded; rather, the smaller cemeteries tend to be enlarged, where the situation permits and backup areas are available - this mainly concerns rather small graveyards found in small settlements where they prefer burying into graves.

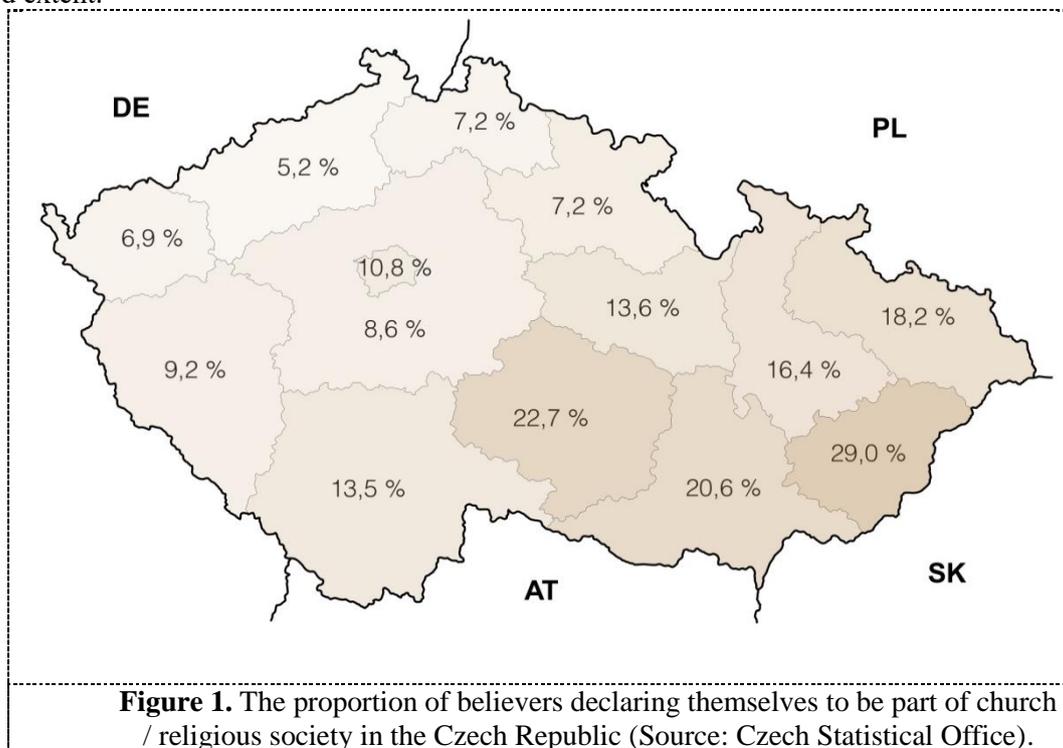
The aim of this paper is to (1) specify the problems of historical graveyards in towns and cities in comparison with burial grounds found in smaller settlements; and (2) indicate the potential of transformation according to current funeral habits and needs making use of case studies.

## **2. The transformation of perceiving final resting places by the society**

In villages and small towns, cemeteries enjoy the favour and attention of the population. Located around churches in centres or on the outskirts, or, in some cases, outside the municipality in the open country, the bulk of the sites involves graves and tombs designed for skeleton burials; for interment of ashes, this is done using either the primary skeleton grave or the ash is stored on the surface, by a marker/monument of the skeleton grave the rental of which goes from generation to generation within the family. The fee for a burial place is usually paid for 10 years as an upfront payment; afterwards, the hire needs to be renewed or the grave needs to be passed to other interested parties. In small towns, urn groves are developed, mostly in connection with the construction of a mourning hall (predominantly in the second half of the 20th century) in close proximity to the existing cemetery.

For reasons of residents of small communities to take care of their cemeteries, there are certainly a few. Above all, they include (1) easier control and visibility of the complex, due to its size; (2) the concern of the local people in sense of their responsibility toward the tradition of their community; and (3) the amount of believer population in the municipality. The latest mentioned appears to be the most significant aspect, particularly in regions where they record rather large numbers of believers, i.e., the Vysočina, South Moravia and Zlín regions where believers from 20% to 30% of the population, closely followed by Olomouc and Moravia-Silesia regions with 15% to 19% believers. [5]. Here, Christian rituals support the practice of attending and looking after the cemetery. In rather large cities, in Central Bohemian Region and in the territory of the former Sudetenland, there we see lesser levels of religious populations. Besides other factors, this is related with the development of the particular region and the way of livelihood. In industrial areas of Bohemia, the departure from the traditional way of co-existence with laws of nature started the process of secularisation which in the agricultural areas - - those of South

Moravia and, economically underdeveloped, Vysočina Region - found its application at a later stage and to a much lesser extent. Secularisation was also boosted by the political regimes that were represented in Czechoslovakia in the course of the 20th century. First of all, the Communist regime had certainly its impact in providing for the “separation of church and state ... which ... in democratic capitalism could lead to free and extremely intense development of the church, while communism sought to make it a means of achieving an irreversible ‘death’ of religion”, p. 16 [6]. The consequences are something that the current society is facing in that it understands the relationship to the deceased and, particularly, to their place of final rest, with difficulties - particularly in the areas mentioned above, with the high degree of secularisation - or, sometimes, even controversially. Where socialism and communism offered “...well-being and comfort for everybody”, which was “considered unlimited happiness for all. The ‘trinity’ of unleashed production, absolute freedom and unlimited happiness created a core for a new religion...”, fulfilling its supporters with “energy, stamina, and hope.” p. 14 [7]. In such a society, there is no room for contemplations about death and attending graves. Only agricultural municipalities, far from the centrally managed state, were making it possible to retain one’s faith and traditions, albeit to a limited extent.



If viewing the tabooisation of death, which is being pursued in the current society, from the perspective of Fromm, then the thought can be explained in two ways, depending on whether the modus of *TO BE* or *TO HAVE* is involved. From the perspective of the latter, even a modern human seeks to be immortal, wishing to leave something that commemorates them after their death. This is explained by Fromm as “biologically determined desire to live”; p. 101 [7]. In the current consumer society, however, it is just no longer a tombstone with a name; instead, the idea of immortality has modified into the form of glory or assets that can be bequeathed, i.e., something that is left after the individual who can be subsequently seen as immortal. On the other hand, the *TO BE* perspective involves a status when free ourselves from the crutch of property and exist independently of it. Without property, it would be possible to understand that very substance of life - thus death as well - in its naturalness; however, the idea of losing all the security which property provides is the same as “if someone is thrown into the sea and cannot swim”; p. 108 [7].

This approach is particularly manifest in the historical cemeteries set up in the 18th and 19th centuries where the cult of the death is shown in the achievements of high-quality sepulchral arts and construction of burial vaults. The legacy of the 19th century is now something that is very hard to handle for the strict

secular society of the 20th century; it has brought it forward into the current century when new solutions are necessary to find.

### **3. Historic cemeteries in the city organism**

In the big cities of what is now the Czech Republic, particularly in Ostrava (289,158 residents on 1 October 2017) - chiefly in the larger districts of the city with rather high proportion of socially excluded sites, and in the peripheral areas of Prague (1,282,496 residents as per 31 March 2017) one can observe a low level of attention toward cemeteries, associated with low visitor numbers and reduced level of management or even vandalism in relation to „changing intervent practices such as ‘no service’ cremations, ..., and informal burials“ [8]. Factors for this status certainly include greater anonymity of the settings, increasing walking distance, larger rates of cremations and high levels of secularisation of the population, i.e. the low proportion of believers, as well as little interest on the part of city officials “despite the fact that it has a direct impact on land use planning and social integration.” [8]. Cemeteries have thus become closed “gardens of silence”, forming impermeable complexes in the middle of the city organism or isolated districts on the periphery. The above-mentioned secularisation - along with the high degree of cremation - significantly modifies funeral rituals. In the Czech Republic, as well as in the world, “there is a movement away from traditional burials toward cremations as the dominant interment choice”, with the reasons being as follows: „lower costs to the consumer”, as well as “the emergence of cremation factories; and the popularity of informal burials in location other than traditional cemeteries“ - something that still has not been introduced in the CR [8]; an option of interment of ashes outside the sacred place of burial grounds, however, enjoys some degree of favour in this country. The level of so-called *social funerals* is also high - cases where the state secures the funeral instead of the bereaved and where burial is always performed by cremation and interment of ashes is done using a collective site of placement or a scattering lawn, where the ash is dispersed in an anonymous way. There is no need for the bereaved to visit or manage the burial site.

### **4. Sustainability of historical cemeteries in organisms of modern cities**

The current status encourages reflection on the further direction of cemeteries should new features be added. Reasons such as reducing quantity of urban green areas, changed views of death and burials, and cultural factors supported by the upcoming multicultural population can potentially lead to changes in the use of public urban green areas, as well as cemeteries. When planning changes to existing historical cemeteries, one must first take a cemetery as a place of final rest and, further, consider other reasons for visiting the gardens of green in the organisms of cities. [1]. Grounds as well as frequency of visits differ when comparing weekdays against weekends or the cemetery locations. In addition to visits to graves, this may include walking, socialisation (meeting places), relaxation - plain sitting on a bench (Olšany Cemetery - the south-western portion is used for lunch break resting by employees of nearby offices), visiting cultural heritage (sepulchral arts, graves of significant personalities), etc. [1]. In the historical setting of a strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church it is difficult to consider other reasons for visiting the sacred area of strictly defined cemeteries in Central Europe. In the Nordic countries of Europe - given the influence of the Lutheran church - cemeteries are more open-access, fenced using only a low wall or a hedge row, with gravestones of less formal make, set in a meadow-like arrangement. Pačlová reports that in the west, north and south, one encounters greater austerity of the cemetery area than what we know in this country. It is mostly covered in a uniform surface of green, from which only markers or crosses protrude. P. 128-129 [9]. The list below shows more potential activities that in Central Europe are prohibited. They include cycling, walking dogs, skateboarding, etc., as well as activities that in the settings of cemeteries in the Czech Republic are unusual - such as jogging and picnicking [1]. Recently, a tendency has been evident in the management of cemeteries, funeral halls and crematoria to focus on the live who decide, as clients, whether or not to use the facilities and grounds [10].

From the perspective of city organisms, historical graveyards are strictly enclosed, fence- or wall-defined, grounds of isolated *gardens of silence*. They never or just minimally respond to adjacent public space. With their often limited, monitored access and controlled visitor hours, they become complexes with low or zero (evening hours) throughput. Given the low numbers of visitors, there is just a weak

interaction with the nearby surroundings. The cemeteries alone do not exhibit sufficient amenities for visitors or participants in the funeral rites. Insufficient space for the live in Prague cemeteries is something recorded as early as in the writing by Jan Almer of 1928: For all of our cemeteries, ... the lack of an adequate free space for coaches and audience to gather in rather large quantities is the significant flaw and conspicuous negative. Similarly, there is no catering for any form of shelter for the audience to hide from bad weather if any occurs suddenly, especially rain. pp. 5,6 [11]. The lack of amenities (as regards shelters for bad weather, as well as refreshment facilities) shows to be problematic particularly in cemeteries on the outskirts of major cities where one needs more time to arrive to the desired place and, given the vastness of certain grounds, even to walk across the cemetery. Cemeteries or their boundaries lack any defined space for the funeral ritual to fade out - e.g. condolences and mourning reception. Expressing condolences thus often takes place outdoors in unsheltered areas or even in the mourning hall. Clients also increasingly do not use mourning halls or churches as places of mourning rites, planning them outside the necropolis, or cancelling them completely. This not very good trend in terms of respect for the deceased and possible celebration of their life - as well as in terms of the possibility to believe the situation and go through the phases of grieving - is supported by the lack of preparedness of cemeteries [12].

### **5. Student proposals for amending facilities of burial sites and integrate the places into city organisms**

Following the existing research of the Department of Architecture, VSB - Technical University Ostrava, students of Architecture and Civil Engineering devoted time, under the leadership of Klára Frolíková, Martina Peřínková and Petr Hruša, to a study and their own proposals how to amend facilities of burial grounds as part of efforts to integrate them into the city organism.

Olšany Cemetery in Prague were selected for the case study along with cemeteries in Ostrava-Vítkovice, Ostrava-Mariánské Hory and Hulváky.

Olšany Cemetery in Prague was founded in the second half of the 17th century as a black-death graveyard to be subsequently declared a public cemetery after Josephine reforms of the late 18th century. In compliance with applicable laws [13], the grounds were then located beyond the town to become part of the city organism of Prague 3 - Žižkov later on as the city of Prague developed. At present, it is the largest Prague cemetery with a total area of 50 hectares; there are about 25,000 tombs; 200 burial vaults; 65,000 graves; 20,000 urn graves, 6 columbarium walls and two scattering fields [14].

The complex is firmly squeezed into the current city organism, in close proximity to a new shopping centre, and is lined by busy city roads from its three sides. Yet it is searched for its high-quality sepulchral art and visits to graves of major personalities and forms, with the mature trees which make the cemetery a rich urban green area, space favourable for relaxation. Currently, the grounds lack amenities for visitors, which involves, in addition to the bereaved, young people with pushchairs or working people who spend their lunch break in the area. The complex is split into two parts by a busy road. The bigger section is accessible via five entrances; the lesser part is a specific area with the military cemeteries, burial grounds for Eastern Orthodox church members, and scattering lawns; a strictly enclosed Jewish graveyard is also set in. This cemetery too just slowly responds to the new trend of burying, that is, cremation, which represents almost absolute majority of all burials in Prague [12].

Students defined key issues, responding to them by specifying functions to be applied to the current situation of the complex. It involved the creation of possibilities for the interment of ash, i.e. columbaria and new scattering lawns; lapidaria for storing unused artistically valuable gravestones; area for meditation and last farewell at sites of interment/scattering of ashes; scattering surfaces in front of the mourning hall, community meeting areas protected from bad weather; dining areas, sanitary facilities, flower souvenir shops.

The proposed new columbaria for storing urns with ash were located in the central part of the cemetery around the existing cross along the axis of the main entrance, i.e. at a very significant location in terms of composition; columbarium towers were also designed and situated in the oldest part of the cemetery in an area with many "defunct graves", where they complemented the existing irregular structure of the remaining graves. [15] [16]. In addition, students paid attention to some of the entrances to ensure there is an appropriate switch-over from the daily rite of the public space to the silence of the

cemetery garden of green. Entrances that involved only a small gate in a stone wall were replaced with an access platform to allow for the distance to be overcome when entering the cemetery and which, with its character, tunes up the visitor to the forthcoming experience. The access platform was completed with / defined by visitor facilities to be used as a visitor centre, gift-shop, café or lapidarium [16] [17] [18]. Areas to serve the updated forms of burial and meditation as well as sites for the last farewell when placing ash were mainly situated at the site of the oldest part of the cemetery, where there is a minimum of attended graves, which gradually transforms the place into a park. Subsequently, students proposed to remove any unused gravestones from the site and place some of them in the newly created lapidarium, which consisted of a covered arcade defining the area being designed; now the area so vacated was to be used for placing new scattering lawns. Using it as a sheltered area for ash interment rites as part of a meditation site was another option. [15][19][19]. The sheltered meditation area / arcade of the lapidarium responds to the need for a meeting place of the bereaved before/after the ceremony to provide a place for the live following the recommendation shared as early as 1928 in the publication by J Almer [11]. Following the crematorium in Heimolen, Belgium [21], as an example, one of the variants involved a restaurant for funeral guests designed by the cemetery wall near one of the entrances making sure that this item of the funeral rite agenda is not displaced from the place of burials.

The cemetery based in the city district of Ostrava-Vítkovice was founded in 1913 and consecrated a year later. The initial ambitious plans to build proper amenities and a surface area as needed had to give way to the events of World War I [22]. Today, therefore, there is only one wall out of those planned initially, along with the main entrance and already a sub-standard mourning hall. The cemetery alone is locked by busy roads as well as production and school complexes. Displaced from major pedestrian routes, the grounds no longer provide the necessary peace for the rites or for rest with the vicinity of the busy arteries. Burial places are gradually abandoned and the whole area decays. Students, therefore, seek to set up a new access platform for visitors in a way that it is not crossed by supplies to the mourning hall [23]. A new hall is being proposed at the site of the original building in the vicinity of the main entrance; the solution is not very good, but there was no other alternative with the absence of another free space. As a result, the hall is separated from the road by cemetery facilities behind the scenes and a meditational garden; everything is defined and shielded by walls. The mourning hall alone opens toward the cemetery within which there is a shelter for receiving condolences [24]. The draft by student Ondrej Vavro designs potential options for interment of ash which is currently limited within the cemetery. Reflecting the mourning hall mass along the axis of the main entrance, it offers three sheltered areas of columbaria. It also follows up the previous studies at the department of architecture (FAST, VSB-TUO) [25] [26]; as a result, it proposes a basement area beneath the ceremonial hall, dedicated to the “path of the deceased” to the place of last farewell on the ground floor. This provides architectonisation not only in the area for the bereaved, but also in that for the deceased so that the conclusion of celebration of their life is not underway in a purely technological background area, but to ensure the ethics of treatment of the deceased including the possibility to be accompanied by the family and commemorated as part of last-goodbye ceremonies. This path is designed as a spacious hall, where in the ceiling there are masses of the ceremonial hall, the site of display and a small ceremonial hall for alternative ways of funerals. From here, the coffin is taken directly to the place of the funeral rite.

The Cemetery on the hill of Hulvácký kopec, Ostrava, was established 115 years ago and has seen no burial into the ground for almost 70 years. Almost half of the remaining graves is now “abandoned” with no one to take care of them. The paths and roads became overgrown and part of the cemetery was abolished earlier and used to construct a busy road and to enable development of Vítkovice Ironworks. Only a triangle was left from what was formerly a strictly composed rectangular shape with a central axis on which a cross was standing. The cemetery is fenced only by wire mesh; there is no structure; even no chapel and the original mortuary is also missing. The proximity of a socially excluded group of residents and the exclusion of the complex from the everyday life of the population, as well as the cut off of the part by the factory, which “turns its back” on the grounds, all of this triggered a wave of vandalism and indifference. In their designs, students define the cemetery using a solid wall into which names of the buried are inscribed so that they would never disappear from the thoughts of us, living. The students propose that the grounds are gradually transformed into a city park; the process should follow the ends of rental periods for the individual graves. There are already more such places in

Ostrava; however, there is a lack of any reference to the original purpose of the grounds, which, in this case, students replace by designs of meditation chapels or leaving the cross on the axis of the main entrance. Even this place calls for placing a lapidarium, e.g. in a form of a sheltered arcade placed by the newly built wall; the great artistic value of some monuments is the reason when nobody is interested in them. In this case, however, the complex cannot be assumed to welcome many visitors in the future; rather, it is to remain - with its location in an industrial area - a silent reminder of its time and a bounded area of urban greenery amidst a hostile setting of an industrial site.

## 6. Conclusion

The Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Civil Engineering (VSB - Technical University of Ostrava) has been engaged in studying cemeteries in the Czech Republic for 7 years. It seeks to apply the existing knowledge in the teaching activities so that future designers or city officials become interested in this issue which now stands on the brink of attention of the society, and have an idea of how to handle the legacy of the past centuries.

Primarily, historical cemeteries in large cities are the aim of the research; found at the edge of attention of the society as well as town officials, they remain isolated *gardens of silence* in the organisms of the cities.

With the centuries-old strong influence of the Catholic Church in Central Europe, necropolises are to continue to be enclosed complexes; however, new features were specified for them to be capable to become full-fledged parts of the cities, linked to the existing public areas, and, last but not least, enter awareness of ordinary people and political decision-makers.

This particularly includes ensuring the passability of the sites, adding services for visitors, improving their aesthetic aspects, treating their artistically valuable sepulchral heritage, providing a decent entrance area which connects the site with the remainder of the city organism, and enabling new forms of funerals following the current needs of the society.

Increased visitor numbers is something that cannot be provided at every location. If the grounds had been absorbed by an industrial site and eliminated from what is a residential zone, they will remain an enclosed site forever; nonetheless, they should be treated with dignity and the symbols which indicate the initial function of the place should not be omitted.

To conclude, focusing not only on the dead, but also on the living ones makes it possible to finally take historical graveyards into the current century and leave them to future generations, because cemeteries existed before us and they will continue even after us.

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