Transcript: James Reid – Death Care, Cemeteries & Public Space

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: James Reid – Death Care, Cemeteries & Public Space

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Guest: James Reed, Chief Built Environment Officer with the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to James Reed. James is an urban planner by profession, and he currently works in the field of death care. James has had a lifelong fascination with people and how they interact and influence places. And this was shaped by his childhood experiences growing up in migrant areas and seeing how migrants shaped their new environment through things like language, food, design, and landscape. James has become interested in the idea of belonging to places and how people feel a sense of belonging to a particular environment. James is the Chief Built Environment Officer with the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust in Victoria, Australia. James, thanks for joining us today and welcome to the Placemakers.

James Reed: Thank you Stephen, it's great to be here.

Stephen Burton: So I might start with the obvious question is you work in the field of death care, can you tell us a little bit about what death care actually is?

James Reed: Well, it's an adjunct to the health care sector if you like, and death care is a range of activities around the final times of our lives and indeed the laying to rest and celebration of people after death. So, people who would include themselves in the death care category might be well-known sectors like funeral directors, even the clergy in terms of dealing with people at death or after death, through to cemetery workers, burial workers, our horticultural teams, and there's a growing range of people that help people navigate through the last moments of life with titles like death doula who will work with families or individuals around that progression from the end of life to passing away. So it's all of those types of professions and activities.

Stephen Burton: Right. And so you're with the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust here in Victoria, Australia. Can you tell us a little bit about what that role entails and what it is that you might be finding yourself doing on a regular basis in that role?

James Reed: Yes, so my role is the Chief Built Environment Officer and I lead a team that's responsible for really everything to do with land, buildings, and infrastructure. So we plan for future cemetery sites, we do design work, we consult with communities around those designs, we develop infrastructure just as you would a residential development—new graves, mausoleums, facilities—and look after them through maintenance and asset management. So it's a whole range of activities. It's pretty busy, we do have 19 active sites and two greenfield sites and about 620 hectares of public land that we look after. It's quite a

big estate we're looking after, stretching from Melton, way out in the western suburbs of Melbourne, through to Emerald out in the east, which is about 100ks.

Stephen Burton: Wow, that's... that is large. So the idea of cemeteries as public spaces is not necessarily one that I've thought about much personally. Is it something that people seem to be surprised about when you talk about cemeteries in the context of being a public place? Like how do people... how do people come to terms with a cemetery as a public place in your understanding?

James Reed: It's interesting because I think that perception has changed a lot over time. I think that it's an emerging discussion that we're having now in the early 21st century, but when you go back to the early 20th century or the late 19th century, the idea of cemeteries as public spaces wasn't a surprising one. You go to the original Melbourne General Cemetery and it was designed as a place where people would go and picnic and spend some time with the deceased. Same here as at our site at Fawkner in Melbourne, it was developed in the early 20th century with a railway station so that people could come and celebrate life or picnic and head back on the train back to the city afterwards. So I think it was probably in the middle of the 20th century after a couple of world wars and the the big flu epidemic of the early 1920s that cemeteries became places that people didn't want to visit. There was I think too much exposure to death and disease in that early part of the 20th century that people really shunned cemeteries as places, didn't want to go to them, only attended them at times of funeral. And I think we're emerging from that now where people are starting to explore cemeteries once again as part of the public open space network and a space that of course we are going to spend some time reflecting on life and death and those that have come before us, but also to apply other uses to these sites like walking the dog or you know perhaps spending some passive recreational time.

Stephen Burton: Yeah. You mentioned this idea of other uses and I'm interested to know what are some of the changes that you've seen in your career in terms of the way communities and people are using cemeteries as public places? What are some of the shifts that you've noticed across that period of time?

James Reed: I think that the shifts have been subtle, I don't think that they've been substantial, but I think it's a greater acceptance of the casual use of cemeteries as a place to ride the bike or walk the dog or just be in the environment, enjoy some of the biodiverse areas that we have in some of our cemeteries. So I don't think it's been a wholesale change but more of a preparedness to enter the cemetery not as something to be hidden away from the life of the city but to actually come along, enjoy the space and be reflective or just enjoy the environment. We've got incredible biodiversity across our sites. Our horticulture team has a long list of the different bird species that they've discovered here in Fawkner, only 10 kilometers from the CBD of Melbourne, and we even get kangaroos in our Northern Memorial Park site which is just a little bit up the road. So it's an emerging gradual trend, one that really does need to sit alongside the more reflective and respectful elements of what happens in the cemeteries, but I think a welcome change.

Stephen Burton: It sounds like that matrix of recreational use and also use for reflection and coming there for purposes of grieving and laying loved ones to rest presents an interesting challenge from an urban design point of view. How do we create a place that caters to all

these different uses? What are some of the ways that you guys have approached urban design of the cemeteries in light of the different uses?

James Reed: Well, it's something that we do pretty carefully because we do get feedback from our communities that they they want to ensure that whatever happens on our sites is respectful. And I guess we do that in a range of ways, some of them are physical around the design, so we will have precincts where there might be a little bit more activity than others. For example, we have a cafe here at Fawkner that's quite close to the railway station, and other areas where there are active burials occurring we wouldn't really encourage a lot of recreational activity for example. So what you'll find over time is that cemeteries will have gradual development across the landscape and over time areas become less visited, the vegetation matures and they become the areas that are quite open for recreational activities. The the heart of our site here at Fawkner is a place you'll see people walking their dogs and riding their bikes every single day of the week. Other areas where there's more active funerals going on I think people tend to just respect the privacy and the sanctity of those areas. So it's around spatial separation, sometimes using screening vegetation to to soften the views between areas, but also sometimes just around programming things. We had a small event at our cemetery in at Northern Memorial Park just this Wednesday and we were just careful to schedule it so that it wasn't interfering with any funeral activities that might have been happening on that day.

Stephen Burton: Given the pressures around land development and land use, you mentioned a couple of greenfield sites that you have and are working on. Is it hard to have land set aside these days, big tracts of land for use as cemeteries? Is that a challenge that you're facing? Is it a challenge that you think we're going to continue to face if so?

James Reed: It is a real challenge. We've we're very lucky here in Victoria that through decisions made decades ago we actually have a couple of major greenfield sites set aside for the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust, so we we are fortunate in that regard. In places like Sydney the scarcity of land for cemeteries is a real issue. So it is it is something that we're very conscious of. Part of my team, our responsibility is to to be on the lookout for new investments in land over time. It's challenging because we're in a housing crisis, within the inner parts of the city very hard to argue for a cemetery when there's a need for housing. So we're looking a bit further afield, we're fortunate that we can look for land that may not be suitable for other purposes, so we we've got the the potential to rehabilitate land and to beautify it and to make it work for us over a long period of time.

Stephen Burton: What does... what do cemeteries look like in other jurisdictions where they have different land pressures? So you where you have places that it's almost impossible to get greenfield sites, like how are we dealing with cemeteries in different urban environments where that land scarcity is a real issue?

James Reed: Well, like anything density steps up. So what you'll find in some places is a greater emphasis on cremation and the memorialization through much smaller memorial statues and things like that that will be centered around cremated remains rather than a burial of a deceased person, through to mausoleums, so you're constructing a building to to accommodate the deceased, through to high-rise developments as as there are examples in Brazil for example where they've essentially built an I think an 18-story high-rise mausoleum

in the middle of Rio de Janeiro. So there's a range of things happening, very responsive to the cultures of the place and the I guess the scarcity of land in those those locations.

Stephen Burton: Do you think the idea of cemeteries as public places is something that's a relatively new phenomenon or is it something that people have always had an understanding of?

James Reed: I think it's relatively new, at least in in the Western sense which is where we're sitting. Certainly up until probably the late 19th century most burial grounds were located associated with churches, so they were regarded as ecclesiastical spaces rather than public open spaces. And it was a sort of late 19th, early 20th century movement to create public non-denominational cemeteries that we know today.

Stephen Burton: Is there pressure on the death care industry to somehow cater for the range of different denominations in our multicultural society? How is that issue managed?

James Reed: Well, we don't see it as a pressure, we see it as part of our responsibility. So our remit if you like is to treat the deceased with with dignity and respect, and that means serving whoever you are from wherever you come from and whatever your beliefs are. So what that means is we are constantly talking to different communities and identities and cultures about how they deal with the the process of death, how they deal with remembrance and and funeral rites. We've got a lot to learn, but it means that we're constantly talking and constantly adjusting both our services and the way we design our sites and deal with the deceased to respond to those needs.

Stephen Burton: And would it be the case that that's specific to some particular communities where you might have cemeteries located around an area which have a high representation of people from a certain culture? So you'd be catering the way the cemetery is designed and run more to people from that culture, or is it... is it a broader set of considerations that you use?

James Reed: As I say we've got 19 cemeteries across Melbourne and they're all very different and they all very much reflect the cultural and aesthetic needs of the communities that they sit within. So they're not necessarily denominational or specific to a religion in the way they are designed, but the grave types might be. So you'll find for example here in in Fawkner we have a large Islamic community, a large mosque near here, so we have a lot of directional graves in part of the cemetery. Go through other parts of the cemetery and you'll see waves of different cultures that have moved through from Anglican areas and Catholic areas and Methodist through to more recent cultures, Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian and Greek, you see this pattern of different types of memorialization as you move through the space. So we are strictly non-denominational in the way we design the park generally, but in terms of the the choices made by individual groups they will select a different type of grave or memorialization depending on their religious or cultural needs.

Stephen Burton: What are some of the challenges facing the death care industry going forward in terms of the way that public space is used, the way it's designed, the way it's created, the fact that it might be some sort of pressures around obtaining the space itself? What do some of those pressures look like?

James Reed: I think obtaining the space is probably the most pressing issue for us right now. It it's such a competitive environment out there, particularly with population growth and the need to deal with housing and schools and hospitals and all of all of those other social infrastructure items that we need to provide for. So that that is probably the most pressing issue that we have. We we seek to provide about 30 years supply of demand on an ongoing basis and we're you know constantly on the lookout for where we'll continue to supply that land beyond that period. I think then it it is really understanding and adapting to the the different needs of a consistently diversifying community. So we've got new cultures and and new religious groups and fragments of those that we are trying to understand and deal with and and serve the needs of. But then we've got also the process of secularization of different groups as they establish themselves within our communities too, so you can't make any assumptions about a particular group or what their needs will be in the long term. So it's a challenge, but it's an endlessly fascinating and important discussion to have.

Stephen Burton: You talk a little bit there about the needs of different communities. Is there a role to play with community engagement in the work that you do? And if so what role has that community engagement taken up until now?

James Reed: Absolutely. It I've been involved in a lot of community engagement throughout my career as an urban planner and urban designer and I'm pretty proud of the work we do actually in terms of community engagement here at GMCT. To give you an example in relation to our site out at Harkness, which is way out on the western edge of Melbourne, we went out to community there before we'd even really put pen to paper with respect to the design of that site to understand what the community was seeking in terms of a 21st century cemetery and how that might integrate with the existing community. Now the site was already selected so we weren't going to the community saying "here we are we're about to impose a cemetery on you", they knew that we were going to develop a cemetery at some stage, but we had a really mature conversation with those communities around how could we do this differently? How might this really serve you as a grown community into the future? How would you get a sense of belonging and involvement in this place as we move forward? And that's involved discussions of course about death and dying and that's a conversation that often isn't had in the public realm very often, but also around biodiversity, working with First Nations people, linking in with shared paths and public open space networks, and even trying to identify the types of facilities that we might provide that might serve the community beyond just a funeral type of arrangement.

Stephen Burton: And is that where it sort of strays into this idea that the use of a cemetery might be more than simply for grief and for burying loved ones? Is that where some of that more kind of encompassing public space ideas come from in that engagement process?

James Reed: Well, absolutely because we we see ourselves as being here for forever. We actually have an obligation under our legislation to look after our sites in perpetuity. So of course our primary purpose is to serve the needs of people at the time of death and memorializing that their their loved ones, but we've then got to look after that land forever as part of that community. So how do we ensure that the way we design and activate our spaces actually has meaning to that community and and is something that they can enjoy and be part of forever? So again referring to our site at Harkness, at the moment it's a field that's been farmed for who knows over over a century. It's got an ephemeral creek that runs

through it that's been plowed out and and flattened over time. Now we're going to restore that creek and plant thousands of trees along it, eventually build a shared path that will connect into the Arnolds Creek corridor which runs all the way down to the Werribee River. So we see a really important role in knitting together and improving the biodiversity and active recreation of that area.

Stephen Burton: It sounds like a great approach to looking at cemeteries in their broader kind of urban context and how it can feed into some of those other needs like whether that be recreation or biodiversity and so on. Little bit of a pivot, James, what's some of the things that have surprised you working in the death care industry?

James Reed: I think the thing that surprised me the most, I've been in the field now for just over four years, is just how dynamic and diverse it is. A perception of cemeteries from the outside is perhaps something of a limited view that they're quite somber places, that perhaps they aren't particularly active or or dynamic. It's actually quite the opposite. We're dealing with essentially a third of Victoria's deaths every year, so we're dealing with tens of thousands of families on a regular basis and an ongoing basis as people continue to visit our sites you know beyond that moment of funeral. So I think that that level of activity I just never anticipated. I guess I came from a culture where we would attend a funeral and probably never return to the cemetery, but there's plenty of cultures that don't do that, there's plenty of cultures that will come back for a birthday or Mother's Day or Christmas, which means that it's an ongoing process of making our sites beautiful and presentable to those families and keeping the promise that we're looking after their loved ones.

Stephen Burton: Yeah, it's interesting because when I reflect on my own experience of cemeteries, particularly being a kid, it was a place that we were locked out of, you know you couldn't go into a cemetery unless you had a reason to be there. So this notion of cemeteries as public spaces I think is is an amazing one and I've really... I've really enjoyed learning more about it and it's almost inspiring me to go down and check out my own cemetery, which I know hasn't changed at all in the last probably 30 years, but certainly some of them have. What do you think some of the lessons might be for those of us working in public space design that we might take from the design of cemeteries? What are some of the really great things that you've come across that you think might have wider applicability in other urban environments?

James Reed: I think there's some really great learnings about the power of engagement and the power of just listening and understanding your user, so that you can really anticipate how they'll experience a space and what impact it will have on them. So for example we not only consider how different cultures might use our sites, but we also recognize that many of the people coming to our sites are actually experiencing grief or trauma, which impacts the way that they can interpret signs and wayfinding and navigate around spaces. So they're things I hadn't really thought about before joining this particular industry. I think also the ongoing challenge of the concept of inclusion in a really diverse community, so that you know our as I said before our objective is to afford dignity and respect to anyone no matter who they are, but there's you know sometimes friction points between different cultures and activities that we need to be aware of. So you know we try in our design and in the way we manage our sites to be conscious of those and respectful of all the needs of our communities, but also aware that sometimes there's friction points that we also need to be aware of. So there's

some you know real insights that I've gained from being part of this industry that I hadn't really experienced before, notwithstanding I'd worked on a diverse range of projects throughout the metropolitan area.

Stephen Burton: Yeah the idea of the friction points is particularly interesting to me. I wonder like how that plays out in the design of a of a more broad public space, but can I ask you to explain a little bit more about that in terms of the context of cemeteries and how you've managed this idea of friction points through through design?

James Reed: Well a good example for would be we can have some communities that are quite devout and really view the cemetery as a as a somber place and a place where they really don't want to see people enjoying themselves or particularly active or or take a different approach perhaps to mourning than their particular culture would expect. We totally respect that, but we also know there's other cultures or other groups that will take a different approach to dealing with death and perhaps have a more of a celebratory approach and may want to make some noise or have a band. So the the types of things we do is a, listen and understand what the needs of different groups are, and then we might put in place some design interventions that might help us perhaps separate areas that we know might be more devout than others so that they are very perhaps not so much isolated but but protected through vegetation, perhaps some mounding to give them a sense of serenity and security. We might program things at different times of day if we know something is going to be a bit more active or perhaps a a funeral with a large number of people coming. But even in terms of our the design of our future ceremonial building, we've looked at ways that we might even through technology have the space adaptable for different cultures. So you know a good example is I went to a Jewish cemetery here in Melbourne where they deal with very orthodox and very contemporary congregations from time to time. Some of those like to separate the genders, others don't. So they've installed technology that allows a curtain to come down and meet the needs of the orthodox groups, but that can be taken away when they have perhaps a different type of congregation in place. So we've looked at doing similar things with our ceremonial spaces, looked at how we might use more dynamic lighting to change the feel of the space from perhaps a more religious type setting, a more somber type setting, to one that might be more celebratory through engagement with our customers to understand what they're looking for. So they're the kind of adaptations we we try to put into place to to meet such diverse and interesting needs.

Stephen Burton: Yeah. It's fascinating and it sounds like from what I can tell it probably would have been quite effective. Last question for today, James, the one I ask all of my guests on the Placemakers, which is: what do you think the most important ingredient might be for creating a successful public place?

James Reed: I think the most important ingredient is to really understand who the users will be, and to if they're part of the existing community work with them, so that the place meets the needs of course of the person who's going to undertake the activation or development, knits in with that community, understands it and meets it where it comes from.

Stephen Burton: Couldn't agree more. James, thank you so much for joining us today, talking about the death care industry here on the Placemakers. Thank you.

James Reed: Thank you, Stephen. It's been a pleasure.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.