

Cities – a matter of life and death

By Neil McCarthy, CEO World Urban Parks

Having just spent and reconnected with the cultural in Japan after completing the famous [The Kumano Kodo](#), it has given me time to reflect on the importance of a certain type of open space in Cities.

Japan, like numerous cultures that have a long history compared to the more recent USA, Australian and Canadian societies, where the tourism sector is dominated by three key components – Nature, Cultural sites and Events and Festivals. In Japan, all three components are intertwined.

The majority of visitors to Japan, spend most of their trip visiting Shrines and Temples, generally associated with nature. An example of this would be visiting Koyasan or Nikko. Visitors also tend to participate in festivals, which are also usually connected with a Shrine or Temple, such as the Takayama Spring or Autumn Festival.

It similar for Europe, where most tourists visit culturally significant sites such as Stonehenge through to Notre Dame. The recent response by the global community to the fire at Notre Dame reflects the importance and interest of these sites.

The point I am making is that all of these internationally recognised tourist icons are about or associated with life and death and thus cemeteries. They also tell the story of a culture as Notre Dames' recent episode confirms.

My own trip to Japan, has been dominated by visits to Temples and Shrines or communities that are associated with life and death. Ranging from Koyasan (one of the homes of Buddhism in Japan through to the Pilgrims path of the World Heritage Kumano Kodo).

Western and mainly USA, Australian and Canadian city planners have yet to grasp the significance of the cultural legacy of cemeteries and the importance of the cultural flow of life and death. In societies such as Japan, cemeteries (Shrines and Temples) and their related festivals are intertwined into all local communities and have become the foundation of their tourism success.

A few western leaders have been trying to reinvent or just regain the importance of cemeteries as open space. A Cemetery based organisation in Australia (The Greater Metropolitan Cemetery Trust), has been rethinking the cemetery paradigms to create new landscapes for all. They have started the journey, which may help redesign communities at a local and regional scale. However, they have yet to explore the role of cultural festivals and how existing culturally institutions relate to cemeteries, but their willingness and their leadership indicates they are heading in the right direction.

Designing cities without the understanding of the life and death and how this defines a culture will lead to disconnected communities and poorly designed open space. The Western habit of narrowly defining



the purpose and role of a space, has resulted in poor outcomes that are generally costly to remedy and typically fail to understand human nature.

When we all travel, and visit Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, Notre Dame, Meiji Shrine, the Pyramids – we value and appreciate the importance, the cultural and the moment of the experience. They have all resulted in exceptional open space or settings. They are all associated with the process of life and death and thus a concept called emotive landscapes (“cemeteries”).

As Cities grow the importance of this open space element cannot be underestimated – just the fact that there will be a greater city population and thus greater demand for death. If the divide and separate mentality of planners continues, we will design cities to fail.

To address this, planners need to think in terms of legacy, legislators need to remove barriers that constrain thinking and a new era of park leaders need to emerge and think differently. It is a challenge that we will struggle with and many will say that it isn't our role and may say that we don't have the skills to take up the challenge. However, consider that the majority of the examples I have mentioned are management as part of an open space landscape, be it a historical reserve such as Stonehenge or integrated into a park system such as with the City of London, it is possible to learn from these organisations.

It is time to Rethink Cities, and World Urban Parks through its recent “[MELBOURNE Statement](#)” outlined four important areas of focus –



Redesign Cities: Cities of the world have become focused on the concept of efficiency- so call City Servicing, with the challenges facing Cities, it is time to focus on City Visioning. Over one hundred years ago, the likes of Olmsted and Burle Marx designed and created park systems that served cities well for over a hundred years as the ‘lungs of the city’. However, our cities have out grown them, and it is time to create the Vision of the new Cities that maximizes the multiple benefits of parks and open space.



Rethink Concepts: There is growing support and evidence that makes the case for connecting people to nature is critical for people's overall wellbeing and improving the urban environment. It is now time to respond with brave, energetic, and innovative ways that puts all of these findings into action. Concepts diverse from Cool the Cities- Urban

Forestry, The Living (Yarra) River, Cemeteries and Pop-up parks and the London National Park City need to be grasped with open arms.



Rediscover Nature: The Foundation of Cities livability will be how well we provide the opportunity to reconnect to nature: be it as an active participant gardening, or walking through the park or sitting in quiet contemplation amongst a grove of trees and enjoying the restorative landscape. There are a myriad of ways

that diverse groups can reconnect to nature. Parks can take a leading role within communities to reclaim this role.



Re-energise Communities: The Successful revitalization of open spaces in cities around the world are all highlighted by community leadership from the successful High Line and Central Park in New York to the dynamic Superkilen in Copenhagen. Where parks struggle, are where old governance paradigms prevail. We need to explore, embrace and develop new governance models that unlock the capability and leadership of the

community. This goes beyond the concepts of participatory design concepts, but community involvement in the design, activation, and maintenance, which will garner a greater sense of pride and facilitate a unique sense of place and community gathering. It is also to work globally in open and inclusive ways that allows the rights of all to choose and honour the local community context and its needs.

It is now clear that cemeteries need to be central to re-imagining cities.