

## ‘AFTER’THOUGHT: AFTER LIFE URBANISM

This excerpt is a review on the the edition of MONU : Magazine on Urbanism’s issue #31 on ‘After Life Urbanism’. The said issue of MONU intriguingly and profoundly lays emphasis on the facet of the funerary industry and the ‘lesser talked about aspects’ of the after life.

Death is just as inevitable and natural as life and yet it is not given as much attention and concern as it deserves in context of the planning & infrastructure, its impact on the urban settlement and its adverse effects on the the environment. Death is one of those notions of which people are not only very sensitive about, but even orthodox in a culturally strong nation like India. It was thus, intriguing to realise the proposed change in this tangent. It is not only challenging yet bold but also very much empirical.

Carrying out the last rites of your dear ones is a form of testimonial that you pay to them which generally follows traditional and religious methods of performing the rituals. To being able to get flexible with these methods for the greater good of the environment is not an easy shift that for the set of population with traditional and orthodox mindsets, but is definitely pragmatic need of the hour. Especially in a country like India where religiosity prevails very strongly and is so deep rooted, that ideas pertaining to the multi-functional use of burial grounds or crematoriums, as put forth in the issue are hard to accept and follow. In fact, these crematoriums or the burial grounds are considered auspicious and holy, thus to coin the idea to have multi-functionality in such a space seems inadmissible. Concerning to the facet of a ‘physical premise’, these are looked upon as ‘Sacred Landscapes’. Whilst, in regard to the aspect of ‘practice’ of rituals, aspirations for a more sustainable future, alternative methods are being adapted, but on a moderate pace.

For example, in Hinduism, the dead body is burnt with ritualistic methods as fire is considered to be a purifying element and the ashes are then laid in



Images: **Manikarnika Ghat** is one of the holiest cremation grounds among the sacred river fronts (ghats), alongside the river Ganga, in the city of Varanasi in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Image source: Flickr

a holy river which is believed to be the path to another life or *Moksha*, based on the *Karma*. Although both these activities of firing the corps in wood and offering ashes & flowers into the rivers create pollution and contamination of nature, the common folk still choose to believe in these methods and thus shaping up as a karma-tic limbo. To choose between the social, cultural & religious obligations and environmental responsibility is what a country like ours gets stagnant at. Albeit, measures such as use of wood for cremation is replaced by electric furnaces and disposal of ashes into rivers leading to contamination is looked upon as a serious concern to address by bureaucrats as well as individuals in few numbers.

So as I went through this issue and fell upon these ideas and philosophies which are definitely intriguing and alarming, it was a little difficult to relate it to my local context. Having been said that, the depth of seriousness of the issue of afterlife urbanism is very well addressed and openly talked about, which is commendable. Be it Karla Rothstein's detailed understanding about this aspect or James Norris' idea of preserving the words of the dead, the fact that death is addressed as simply as life is in itself very moving. Every column unfolds a different angle of this multifaceted dilemma and makes us wonder about new underlying alterations needed in any society. To have realized the need of addressing it is just the start of the ripple of change that needs to be brought upon to break the stereotypical mindset of people and to press upon the fact that environmental needs are of utmost priority in these times of urgency.

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