1 | Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the Dutch town of Ommen there stands a bench that looks like any other bench in the municipality. However, on some days the bench has flowers, candles and stuffed toys on it. A closer look, will reveal the small iron plaque fixed in the middle of the bench, bearing the name ‘Patricia’ and a date of death. This is a memorial bench that Patricia’s mother Hilde has put in place on the spot where her six-year-old daughter was killed in a traffic accident. Hilde regularly walks with her partner David from her house nearby to the bench to perform certain rituals, such as lighting candles and placing flowers under the iron plaque with Patricia’s name. Hilde and David will then sit on either side of the plaque. They experience a gamut of feelings, from sadness or anger to love. After a while they walk back home, but not before Hilde has waved a hand-blown kiss to say goodbye. ¹

Figure 1. The commemoration bench for Patricia

The commemoration bench for Patricia is an example of a roadside memorial that marks the location of a death. Placement of the bench transforms anonymous space into a place with special meanings for the bereaved. Hilde’s story illustrates that a roadside memorial is a place laden with intense emotions, where rituals are performed to commemorate the deceased.
The commemoration bench makes one wonder about roadside memorials. Why are roadsides turned into places of remembrance? Who sets them up? Whom do the memorials commemorate? What kinds of meaning do the establishers ascribe to the memorials? What do they look like? What kinds of object are placed at the memorials? Are they places of harmony, or contestation and potential conflict? Answers to these questions are provided in this dissertation, as it focuses on places of death and/or remembrance, including, but not exclusively, roadside memorials.

The aim of this dissertation is to obtain more insight into contemporary places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands. It seeks to understand the role that places play in the way bereaved people cope with the death of a loved one, in a time when attitudes towards death and dying are changing. In order to obtain a better understanding of the place of death in contemporary societies, we provide a context that describes the attitudes towards the place of death and dying in the modern and post-modern eras. We use this division, following Walter (1996), to indicate changes in dealing with death and dying that have occurred as we move from a modern to post-modern society.

1.2 Modern death and its social and spatial implications
Death does not seem to fit Modernity, as it is non-rational, non-predictable, non-calculable and non-controllable (Ritzer, 2004). The sociologist Gorer (1965) argued that death became the final taboo, and suggested that a coping strategy found in modern Western countries for dealing with death is to deny it. In his seminal work on Western attitudes towards death, the French historian Ariès (1981) terms the modern death hidden or forbidden. It seems that in Modernity spatial exclusion of the processes of death and dying has been used as a rational coping strategy for this most irrational transition of life. Places of death and dying were literally kept out of sight. Modernity has several ways of accomplishing this.

Death has been confined to medical or scientific discourses, and anything outside these are viewed as taboo or ‘pornographic’ (Gorer, 1965). Doctors try to relieve the pain and to extend the life trajectory of the sick, making death become the ultimate enemy in modern times (Howarth, 2007). The medicalization of death meant the end of a ‘natural’ death, which was replaced by a technological death (Illich, 1976). Illich stated that “Western man has lost the right to preside over his act of dying…..Technical death has won its victory over dying” (p. 207-208). As a consequence, in the Netherlands most people die in hospitals or in other institutions; only 25 percent of the Dutch die at home (CBS, 2004). Because of the professionalization in the funeral industry, the distance from the dead has become even greater, as the control over the care of the dead body and the arrangement of the funeral are handed over to professionals and experts (Walter, 1996). The funeral service has become
rather fixed and uniform and is confined to the immediate family (Wouters, 2002). Rituals have been undermined (Walter, 1991), as traditional religious rituals have increasingly fallen out of favour in the course of secularization and individualization (Bernts, Dekker & de Hart, 2007).

The rate of cremation began to increase more rapidly in the Netherlands during the 1970s and 1980s. This is not surprising, as cremation fits the ideology of modernity because it is largely a utilitarian rite, a product of late nineteenth-century liberal and scientific thought combined with technology (Davies, 1997; Davies & Guest, 1999). In fact, cremation itself may be seen as one of Modernity’s strategies for dealing with death. It is a rational and clean way of dealing with a dead body. Crematoria are functional buildings that efficiently reduce dead bodies to cremated remains, while the routing through the building is a dominant feature of crematorium design intended to speed up the flow of congregations. Even if the purpose of a crematorium is to reduce a corpse to ash, the act of cremation is seldom witnessed and takes place behind the scenes. It is acknowledged implicitly rather than explicitly; the smoke and the smell of burning are avoided as far as technically possible (Davies, 1996).

Spatially, crematoria are located on the margins of urban areas (Duijnhoven, 2002). The buildings have been described as self-effacingly anonymous, discrete and modest buildings that are hardly distinguishable from other types of building (Grainger, 2005; Hekkema, 2002). As these marginal buildings are not related to their function of cremating dead bodies, this is another example of how death is socially and spatially removed from world of the living. This applies to cemeteries as well that were, due to health considerations, developed within the domain of medicine, removed from the churchyard to the outskirts of the city from the middle of the nineteenth century. After the Second World War, cemeteries in the Netherlands were described as the ‘empty cemetery’, as the graves became uniform and there was hardly any scope for individual expression. The aesthetics were inspired by war cemeteries, which were highly standardized and uniform (Wille, 2004).

In sum, modern death has become excluded from the public domain both spatially and socially through processes such as medicalization, institutionalization, professionalization and de-ritualization. Visible indications of mourning were banned from public life, for example, the ritual of wearing black mourning attire and black bands had disappeared completely by the early 1970s (Wouters, 2002). However, this does not mean that death is not present at all, but that it has been ‘sequestered’, that is removed from the public sphere into the private world of the individual (Giddens, 1991; Mellor & Shilling, 1993).
1.3 The post-modern reaction: The reappearance of death

In the Netherlands, Modernity’s strategies to insulate and conceal death socially and spatially from everyday life seem to have been gradually giving way to a reappearance of death as a ritualized and almost openly performed life event. Changes in attitudes and approaches towards dying and mourning have occurred in most Western countries in recent decades. By the early 1980s a quest for new rituals emerged (Wouters, 2002). These new rituals are “not only more varied and informal, they are also more individualized and personal” (Wouters, 2002, p. 2). Walter (1996) describes the post-modern death as a matter of choice, personal expression and celebration of personality. In contemporary societies, modern crematoria are severely criticized for not providing a suitable place for celebrating a lived life. A target of criticism is their functional rather than ritual character (Walter, 1990). They are described as self-effacingly anonymous, discrete and modest buildings (Grainger, 2005) which fail to fulfil basic human requirements (Hellman, 1982). Crematoria are regarded as uniform buildings without a sense of place and identity, which makes them ‘non-places’; places that are regarded as rather meaningless (Augé, 1995).

The establishment of the Natural Death Movement in Britain reflects an attempt to construct more personalized death rituals (Alberry et al., 1993). As this movement criticized technological death and the funeral profession, it has sought to fundamentally change the funeral industry by encouraging people to regain control over dying and death (Howarth, 2007). The ultimate way of achieving this is by conducting a ‘do-it-yourself’ funeral. In the Netherlands, these funerals are not yet very common (Enklaar, 1995; Sax et al., 1989). However, for bereaved people to be more involved does not imply that they have to arrange everything themselves. In contemporary society, an increasing number of the bereaved family keep the dead body of their deceased loved one in their home, whereas this was out of fashion until the 1980s (De Baar, 2010, Krabben, 1997). This reflects how death is being more incorporated within the world of the living. It seems to be important that the bereaved feel in control, making their own decisions during the preparations and about how the funeral service will take place. Some examples of how the bereaved become more part of the funeral ceremony itself are the carrying of the casket and the lowering of the casket into the grave by family and friends, painting the casket and writing personal texts on it to personalize it, or constructing the casket oneself (Enklaar, 1995; Krabben, 1997). This notion of individuals having control is arguably applicable to the way they encounter death as well (Pool, 2004), as liberal attitudes towards euthanasia are gaining acceptance in the Netherlands (Venbrux et al., 2009).

In dealing with death, the boundaries between the public and private sphere have changed and the emotional repressiveness of many Western societies has gradually given way
to greater expressiveness in public mourning, as is evident in the response to the passing of famous people, to disasters and roadside tributes (Howarth, 2007). Spontaneous memorials indicate a desire to construct new forms of ritualized mourning, indicating that the traditional mourning rituals of conventional religion seem to be inadequate (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Haney et al., 1997). It is suggested that these communal practices of memorialization reflect the increasing need of individuals to join a community of mourners in an individualized country (Bijma, 2007; Wouters, 2002).

1.4 Aim and research questions

The literature presented in the foregoing indicates that the place of death and remembrance is changing in contemporary societies, and this results in the appearance of non-traditional places of death and/or remembrance where rituals are conducted. The emergence of these contemporary places, as the example of the bench put in place by Hilde illustrated, suggests that the establishment and visits play a role in coping with death and bereavement. However, the specific role that place plays in coping with death has been understudied. This dissertation aims to fill this research gap, by looking at final places from a cultural geographical perspective.

In this dissertation different types of place of death and/or remembrance have been selected, based on the literature already discussed. The places studied are roadside memorials, individual Web memorials, natural burial grounds and crematoria. In order to examine these specific places in sufficient depth, the dissertation consists of independent and separate studies. The main objective of this dissertation is to obtain a better understanding of the meanings that different groups of people attach to places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands. This aim is formulated in the following research question:

1. What kinds of meanings do different groups of people attach to places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands?

The studies concern different groups of people, as different actors attach different meanings to places of death, because they are involved in these places in different ways and on different levels, for example in a more functional way, such as professionals, and bereaved laypeople who are more emotionally involved with places of death and/or remembrance. The latter group is in particular the focus of the chapters dealing with roadside memorials and individual Web memorials (Chapters 2-4). The perceptions of people who are more professionally involved with places of death, such as the natural burial ground owner/manager and staff and the architects of post-modern crematoria, are taken as the starting points of Chapters 5 and 7.
Different aspects of places of death and/or remembrance are examined in order to understand the meanings that are ascribed to them. The next research question focuses on what the places look like (see Foote et al., 1994):

- What kind of cultural meanings are reproduced and communicated through the design of places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands?

This research question is addressed in all the chapters of the dissertation. The design and composition of both roadside memorials and individual Web memorials provide information about the way mourners express their grief, deal with death and how they construct meaningful places of remembrance. The study on the Bergerbos natural burial ground helps us to understand what a contemporary place of death looks like and how it is communicated to the public. The design of crematoria over time, and in particular in contemporary society, is the focal point of attention in the crematoria studies, as the architecture, interior design and landscaping of crematoria are thought to influence the emotions of the users of these buildings.

If the places that we have examined are meaningful in coping with death, we are interested in which bereaved people they are meaningful for. This leads to the following research question:

2. For whom are places of death and/or remembrance meaningful in coping with death in the Netherlands?

This research question is addressed in particular in the chapters that concern laypeople who are emotionally involved with places of death and/or remembrance, such as roadside memorials, individual Web memorials, and to a certain extent natural burial grounds. To obtain more insight into who these people are, we are interested in the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased person, as is formulated in the next research question:

- What is the relationship between the bereaved people who attribute meaning to places of death and/or remembrance with the person being commemorated by means of that particular place in the Netherlands?

To understand what kinds of death are commemorated at the places of death and/or remembrance being investigated, we examine the background characteristics of the deceased person being commemorated, as addressed in the following research question:
What is the age, sex and cause of death of the people who are commemorated by places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands?

To obtain more insight into the significance of places of death and/or remembrance, and to explain why these places have emerged in the Dutch ‘deathscape’, we are interested in how they work (see Foote et al. 1994). In other words, what is it about these places that helps bereaved people to cope with death and bereavement? This is reflected in the next research question:

How do places of death and/or remembrance work in the Netherlands?

This thesis examines what kinds of meanings different groups of people attach to places of death and/or remembrance. The range of meanings that persons attach to these places is not necessarily shared by everyone, and this may lead to contested meanings. This is formulated in the following research question:

3. To what extent do contested place meanings occur and result in conflicts between the different groups of actors involved with places of death and/or remembrance in the Netherlands?

An enhanced understanding is generated regarding the multiple and possibly contested meanings attached to final places. In particular in the studies of roadside memorials and natural burial grounds, the meanings of different actors are explored, for example in the case of roadside memorials: the establishers of the memorials, people living near the memorials, authorities and other bereaved people. In the case of Bergerbos, not only the providers of the natural burial grounds but also the users are taken into account in the study.

1.5 Outline of the dissertation
In this dissertation different types of place are examined, such as roadside memorials (Chapters 2 and 3), Web memorials (Chapter 4), natural burial grounds (Chapter 5), and crematoria (Chapters 6 and 7). The different studies included in this dissertation adopt a combination of methods for gathering data, both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In each independent study we have applied research methods that suit the aim of that particular study.
Chapter 2 explores the practice of establishing roadside memorials, by examining what they look like, how they work and what they mean. We obtain more insight into the motivation of the people who set them up and the meanings that they attach to these places of death, in order to explain how these memorials benefit the bereaved in the process of bereavement. In this chapter we make a distinction between spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials, as we found that they differ in their construction and composition.

In Chapter 3, we analyse in greater detail how spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials differ and discuss what this reveals about the way in which mourners use the memorials to deal with death. Although the literature on roadside memorials is substantial, many of the publications mostly document and describe small numbers of roadside memorials in particular regions, usually applying a case-study methodology. Research findings reported in this paper will contribute to this research as it analyses in detail the composition of more than 200 roadside memorials in the Netherlands, using a visual content analysis of photos of roadside memorials constructed in the Netherlands.

Chapter 4 focuses on the establishment of memorials in virtual space, which constitutes a new ritual to commemorate the dead in contemporary societies. In the Netherlands limited research has been conducted on Web memorials. However, several studies in the United States are carried out on this theme, which have indicated that Web memorialization is experienced as beneficial in the bereavement process and is thought to constitute a meaningful ritual. The purpose of this present study is to obtain a better understanding of those who create Web memorials in the Netherlands, for whom, and how these memorials benefit those who set them up. The design and composition of the memorials provide an enhanced insight into the ways bereaved persons create meaningful places of remembrance. We have analyzed more than 180 Web memorials and used a content analysis of the messages posted on four ‘guest-books’.

In Chapter 5 natural burial grounds, which represent a new burial provision in the Netherlands, are studied. The British Natural Death Movement has striven for a more personal funeral since 1991, in which bereaved people are more involved in arranging the farewell the way they wish to have it. In the Netherlands, little research has been conducted on natural burial grounds. In this chapter we use a single natural burial ground, to first examine how this new model of burial grounds is interpreted and implemented in the Netherlands, and second, the people who have chosen to be buried at this natural burial ground. To achieve the first aim of this particular study, we conducted interviews with the manager and staff of the Bergerbos natural burial ground. We used the information provided by the website constructed by Bergerbos, as this provides additional information about how Bergerbos presents itself as a natural burial ground, and how this is communicated to the public. For the second aim, burial
records of the dead laid to rest at Bergerbos were used, supplemented with information from
an interview with the manager and a documentary film documenting the personal stories of
individuals who made Bergerbos their choice.

In Chapter 6 a historical overview of the development of crematoria design in the
Netherlands is provided. We have constructed a database containing architectural information
on all the crematoria that have been built or are currently being planned in the Netherlands.
This contains information regarding year of opening, architects, location, photographs and
floor plans. Additional information was obtained from visits to crematoria, interviews with
staff, a number of crematorium architects and interior designers. This resulted in a four-phase
model of the development of crematoria design, namely pre-modern, shake-hands modernist,
sub-modernist, and post-modern.

In Chapter 7, we examine whether post-modern crematoria differ from the highly
criticized sub-modernist crematoria and whether their design principles answer the needs of
contemporary mourners. In this chapter Dutch crematoria in Haarlem, Leusden and
Zoetermeer are analyzed as case studies. We discuss whether post-modern crematoria provide
ritual buildings that fit contemporary mourners’ needs. In order to obtain an idea of the goals
and inspirations of the designs, we conducted in-depth interviews with the architects of these
three crematoria. As some of the design principles of the architects were regarded as
contestable and progressive, it was important to link the architects’ aspirations with the daily
functioning of the crematoria. Therefore, complementary perspectives on the cases were
obtained by interviewing and informally talking with location managers and staff members of
the crematoria.

Chapter 8 contains the conclusion and discussion of the dissertation. This concluding
chapter answers the research questions and presents some pivotal themes that have emerged
from the different studies. It takes all the different studies and their results into consideration
and discusses whether the places investigated do matter, for whom and why. The end of this
final chapter offers some recommendations for further research.

1.6 Societal and scientific relevance of the dissertation
Death is something everybody will experience at one point in their lives. Death is therefore a
universal phenomenon, but how societies respond to it differs across cultures. The variety of
responses it evokes not only reflect societies’ cultural meanings and attitudes towards death
and dying, but also ideas about life itself. How societies deal with death and dying not only
differs between cultures, but changes over time as well (Ariès, 1981). In the literature it is
suggested that places related to death and remembrance are becoming more meaningful in
helping the bereaved to cope with death and bereavement, as the place of death is changing in contemporary societies, as well as the search for new rituals.

It is surprising that so few studies have explicitly analysed the alleged importance of place for coping with death (Pitte, 2004). Until the cultural turn in human geography in the late 1980s, it has mostly left the academic debate to the disciplines of history (e.g. Ariès, 1981; Curl, 2002), sociology (e.g. Gorer, 1955, 1965; Walter, 1991, 1994), and anthropology (e.g. Durkheim, 1915; Douglas, 1966; Hertz, 1960, Metcalf & Huntington, 1991). Since the cultural turn, within geographical research, new perspectives on space and place are addressed through interrogating death, dying and remembrance (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010) For example Cloke and Pawson (2008), Foote (2002), Hartig and Dunn (1998), Johnson (1995), Kong (1999), Maddrell (2009) and Van Steen and Pellenbarg (2006). In the Netherlands, studies related to death got a boost, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the faculty of Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen initiated the project, ‘Refiguring death rites: Post-secular material religion in the Netherlands’. It addresses changing attitudes towards death and the related adoption of mortuary rites in the Netherlands. Even so, little research has been done on the specific role that place may play in coping with death. This is surprising, as since at least the 1990s cultural geography has become synonymous with the analysis of the meanings of place. Places of death and remembrance are laden with intense meanings, and are thus extremely interesting subjects for analysis.

This dissertation seeks to understand the meanings that people ascribe to places of death where they can perform rituals and how this helps them to cope with death. It aims at providing a cultural geographical perspective in the academic literature. However, the dissertation serves a societal purpose as well. The studies in the dissertation offer information on whether places of death and/or remembrance matter, for whom they matter and how, that is, the role that these places may play in people’s well-being. Consequently it provides information for different groups of actors on how to deal with these places, and may offer implications with regard to planning, design, formulating regulations, or providing information to the public about options that may help them to deal with death. In the case of roadside memorials, the studies provide knowledge for policy-makers about the existing regulations regarding roadside memorials. A better understanding of the number of burials at the Bergerbos natural burial ground and the people choosing a natural burial ground can lead to changes in the provision of burial space in the Netherlands. Moreover, more insight into the rituals performed at the places investigated may help the funeral industry to understand their market and allow them to adjust their services to the demand.
Notes
[1] The names of the interviewees are fictitious in order to ensure anonymity.

References


