

## Introduction



KASOUKEN

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH INITIATIVES FOR CREMATION, FUNERAL AND CEMETERY STUDIES

Chairman I T A R U T A K E D A

### **Crematorium-related issues are difficult to identify**

Crematoriums facilitate funerals. The crematorium directly deals with death that is inevitable for each and all of us. It is inseparable from our lives, but because the crematorium is not a facility that we encounter every day, the issues and problems associated with it tend to be difficult to identify.

In Japan, cremation fees are regulated under government welfare policies and are set within an affordable range, in some cases close or equal to free. However, building the facility is a different story. The Japanese government does not have any financial assistance program for building crematoriums. Thus, local municipalities that have been in a tense economic situation for quite some time have been struggling to find ways to self-finance the cost of building and maintaining facilities in order to provide cremation services to their residents.

Japan has to face and accommodate the expected steady increase in the death rate for some time to come. Further, the recent rise of less conventional approaches regarding funerals, i.e., direct cremation and different ways to bury ashes, force us to seriously examine how far the authorities should go in adapting to such diversifying needs.

### **Crematoriums: Being accepted by the society**

As the population of Japan steadily declines, most of the public facilities are streamlined either by being reduced or combined. Unlike those facilities, there has been a growing need for expanding cremation capacity in order to meet the steady increase in the death rates that will continue in the foreseeable future. Ironically, it is the characteristic unique to crematory that it is difficult to get the consensus of nearby residents not only when building new ones, but also when expanding the capacity of the existing ones.

Recently, however, the situation surrounding building crematoriums is showing changes. There have been cases where residents participate in the process of getting new crematoriums built. Residents in such municipalities voluntarily and actively take part in crematory construction from the inception stage by

voicing wishes and demands as to how the new crematorium should be situated. It is fair to state that crematoriums are being more widely accepted by the society, and I perceive this change to be one of the elements unique to today's matured society.

### **Crematoriums in our matured society: Status quo and beyond**

At the crematorium, we accept the loss of someone special to us by bidding them a final farewell and putting the ashes in an urn. The facility, therefore, is required to be sensitive to the needs of the grieving families and friends. Keeping that in mind, we need to be careful not to make the crematorium a processing facility by blindly pursuing efficiency.

The changes in people's thinking are evident from requests and expectations voiced by them. It used to be that area residents wished to conceal the existence of the crematorium by demanding it not be visible from outside the premises. These days, we hear requests such as "We want it be built at a scenic place." or "We want a crematorium that is unique to our community." Indeed, the residents are voicing their wishes as to how the crematory they use should be designed.

How the crematorium is viewed is also changing. The growing trend for information disclosure and access to the internet have definitely contributed to accelerating this shift. However, just building another conventional facility is not the answer to all outstanding issues. Demands, requests and wishes of involved residents are growing while the financing remains as the major obstacle. Fulfilling residents' requests requires the builder to possess extensive knowledge and imagination. The ability of architects to design and create a comforting space is being continually tested. What is most important is a paradigm shift by those involved in building crematoriums. (訳 泉幸子)

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