
Introduction

Crematoriums After the Covid-19 Pandemic

KASOUKEN

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH INITIATIVES FOR CREMATION, FUNERAL AND CEMETERY STUDIES

Chairman I TARU TAKEDA

As we near completion of the second year in the Covid-19 pandemic, it continues to gravely affect our lives. Just as we thought the spread of the infection had subsided, variant strains augmented the infection rate. It is clear the Corona virus will be a factor in our lives in the foreseeable future. It is likely that ever decreasing waves of infection will continue to occur. The rate of vaccination has been increasing in many countries, starting with the most vulnerable elderly and those with preexisting conditions. As a consequence, the death rate has decreased, permitting damaged economies to slowly recover.

In Japan, the pandemic accelerated the downsizing of funeral services. Covid related or not, mourners other than the immediate family were asked not to attend the service, and in many cases the viewing and funeral service were cancelled altogether. If the cause of death was Covid related, even the immediate family members were prohibited from attending cremation. The bereaved need the comfort of their friends and family to support them in their time of loss. Without this necessary interaction they endure the sense of incompleteness in the final farewells to their loved ones. Often with the Japanese people, a sense of guilt follows when infected by corona virus, resulting in family members becoming withdrawn. Even at this stage of vaccination, the number of people attending the cremation is limited. There are cases in which the use of anteroom is not permitted. Eventually, these restrictions will be lifted, but pre-pandemic normalcy still eludes us.

Many European countries have lifted restrictions and bans on or before the end of September. Despite under ongoing uncertainty, they are on their way to reclaim lives they used to lead. Travel is allowed with certain conditions and people are resuming direct interaction. Most restrictions related to funeral services have also been lifted. The number of mourners is slowly going back to pre-coronavirus days.

The Crematorium Hofheide in Holsbeek, Belgium has approximately 4600 cremations and 700 funeral services annually. In order to accommodate many visitors it receives, the Hofheide recently decided to add 147 more parking spaces to the current 165. The projected completion is in November, 2021. As a part of service improvement, Hofheide has also extended the promenade along the large pond so that the visitors can enjoy the beautiful scenery as they take the longer stroll. In Belgium, crematoriums are financed by local governments. They are not-for-profit but self-supporting entities. As such, they are constantly reinvesting to better serve their clientele.

In Japan, finances of local governments have been drained by the burden of dealing with Covid-19 and the tax revenue shortfall due to the pandemic. This has caused public construction projects to be delayed or cancelled. Crematorium construction plans have been reviewed. Renovation of existing crematoriums supersedes the building of new structures. In anticipation of the baby-boomer generation reaching end-of-life, we have received more requests for feasibility assessment than ever to handle this inevitable need. In a rare instance of new crematorium construction, facility and budget have been downsized. This is a stark contrast to the crematoriums of 30 years ago that were competing for luxuriousness. These opulent crematoriums are now reaching the phase requiring overhaul. We now face a challenge to come up with means to renovate and improve the capacity of crematorium that were originally built when preference was given to luxurious design.

The importance of crematorium as the final place to bid farewell does not change even under and after the coronavirus pandemic. We will be searching for creative ways to maintain, improve and manage crematoriums. Doing so under the economy that has been badly damaged and exhausted by the Covid-19 pandemic will be a true challenge.

English text by Yukiko Izumi

Contact:

KASOUKEN (General Incorporated Association)
 2-5-9 Kandanshikicho Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-0054 Japan
 TEL +81-3-3518-2821 FAX +81-3-3518-2820
 E-mail : kasouken@mbe.nifty.com <http://kasouken.c.ooco.jp/>