Events management for the end of life: mortality, mourning and marginalisation

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Abstract

The rituals, ceremonies and celebrations marking end of life are a vital aspect of human society. There is a diverse literature associated with this lifestage, yet much of this sits outside the events management body of knowledge. Whilst such occasions clearly meet accepted definitions of an event, there remains little research into the meanings and management practices associated with events at the end of life. In this way, marginalisation is expressed both through prevailing attitudes, and in the absence of research from an events perspective. In this chapter the authors address both concerns using a critical event studies approach to draw together key concepts, issues and links to professional practice. It emerges that wider societal trends such as secularisation, personalisation and co-creation are present in the contemporary funeral event. Furthermore, there will be increased demand for tailored services as more people move into the "death demographic". The professional experience of the second author is used to illustrate how this affects current practice. What is apparent is that by adopting a design approach to the total experience environment, events professionals are well-placed to meet the growing demand for customised experiences at the end of life.

Introduction

Celebrations and rites of passage play an important function within human society (Richards, Marques & Mein, 2014; Laing & Frost, 2015) and have done for millennia (Falassi, 1987;

Ayot, 2015). For celebrations marking the passage of an individual life, the emphasis placed on certain thresholds for example the transition from childhood to adulthood (Van Gennep, Vizedom & Caffee, 1960) are 'much more than mere reflections of social order' (Thomassen, 2012: p.23). These thresholds offer an opportunity for transformation through a liminal state, within which participants are literally and symbolically marginalised before being re-incorporated into society in a new way (Turner, 1969/2017). Andrews & Leopold (2013: p.36) recognise that funeral rites in particular reflect one of the greatest symbolic and literal shifts, from 'person to ancestor, from present world to beyond' and therefore constitute a rich area of study. Lifestage celebrations can be characterised as a form of private planned event (Getz & Page, 2016). As the events body of knowledge has matured, it has been acknowledged that such occasions present a distinct area of both study and professional practice (Daniels & Loveless, 2013) and are expressions of a certain world-view (Spracklen & Lamond, 2016), yet they remain an under-investigated aspect of professional events work.

Currently within the Anglophone world there is a marked tendency to focus research on events with a positive celebratory character (such as birthdays, weddings and anniversaries) and on the formative rites of passage leading into adulthood (Pleck, 2000; Andrews & Leopold, 2013). However, Goldblatt (1997) predicted that changing demographics would lead to new opportunities for marking the milestones of later life, suggesting that future events managers would need 'to design a total life cycle event environment providing services including accommodation for these important events in a resort or leisure setting' (p.9). The growth of retirement communities, particularly in the North American context and the prediction that in the UK 25% of those born in the late twentieth century will live to one hundred years, suggest that later life is a time for activity and engagement, not disengagement from society (Clifont, 2009; Jepson, Stadler & Wood, 2018). By extension, we can extrapolate that attitudes towards end of life and demand for information and services will also change. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2017) identified a recent sharp spike in the UK national death rate, leading to greater need for services at the end of life. Indicators are that planning for end of life is an increasing concern with the UK National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) estimating their industry was worth £1.5bn in 2016 (Beame, 2016).

In this way, later lifestage and end of life events now constitute a growing area of the modern events and hospitality industries, where wider shifts in contemporary society are well reflected. These shifts include: the effects of secularisation (Andrews & Leopold, 2013) cross-cultural

awareness fostering heterotopic attitudes towards death (Laing & Frost, 2015), the contestation of accepted traditions of mourning (Walter, 2005), the de-sequestration of death (Stone, 2012) and alternative modes of consumption (Otnes & Lowrey, 2004; Beame, 2016). All of these speak to the central concept of contestation within the critical event studies approach (Lamond & Platt, 2016).

Reappraising the role of events management for end of life within a critical event studies framework presents an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the private sphere of events, beyond the dominance of standard event typological models (Lamond & Platt, 2016). Moreover, an approach which challenges prevailing negative attitudes towards ageing and end of life (Tornstram, 2005) and addresses the impact of marginalisation in how mortality is acknowledged, expressed and made meaningful through the planned event experience (Getz, 2012) is much needed.

In this chapter we unpack these twin topics of marginalisation and mortality, exploring the conceptual and practical ways in which our understanding can be further enriched. We draw on the professional event design experience of the second author to consider how current mourning practice foregrounds issues of personalisation, meaning making and place, using an illustrative vignette to explore implications for roles and relationships. We conclude by pointing the way for further research developments in this area.

Setting the scene

Before considering particular issues around the management of end of life events, it is helpful to frame this discussion in the context of marginalisation, reflecting how both personal and professional perspectives are shaped by the cultural history of mourning.

Defining marginalisation and the end of life
In regard to lifestage events focused on later and end of life, the concept of marginalisation is not only present through treatment within the events management literature, but also in more general attitudes towards ageing, dying and the grieving process. In many respects, whilst late modernity and postmodernity have been marked by the rise of individualism and the cult of the self (Miller & Brewer, 2003; Bruce & Yearley, 2006), in reflecting on the end of life Machin

(1998) and others identify that the personal dimension of grief and mourning has been suppressed within a system of rational bureaucracy of health and social care.

Both the centrality of the self and the intercession of administrative systems in the organisation of daily life are symptomatic of something that Giddens (1991) termed the 'sequestration of experience'. Here the rhythmical structuring of life cycles through ritual, tradition and intergenerational experience are made separate from individual lifespan. Giddens further argued that death was subject to processes of concealment which helped to foster a sense of ontological security in high modernity. And yet, 'Death remains the great extrinsic factor of human existence; it cannot as such be brought within the internally referential systems of modernity' (p.162). This ultimate otherness of death is problematic in Giddens' argument yet Elias (1985, 1994) posits that there is an interplay between the other and the known through *the figuration* or network of social relationships by which 'the unknown and ineffable are tamed' (Stanley & Wise, 2011: p.953). Adopting Elias' viewpoint, the sequestration of death can therefore be perceived as part of a continuum of practices where the de-sequestering of death is also favoured among alternative methods to achieve ontological security (Stone, 2012).

Lastly, the issue of who has died, and how, may involve value judgements that privilege some forms of death and mourning over more mundane kinds of passing (Coombs, 2014; Green, 2016). Death-phobia at both individual and societal level are also contributing factors in the creation of taboo topics, which groups such as The Order of the Good Death (www.orderofthegooddeath.com/) and the Death at Winchester Facebook Group (www.facebook.com/groups/104742819300/) actively seek to address through death positivity. Caitlin Doughty, a mortuary graduate and founder of The Order states:

> 'The Order is about making death a part of your life. That means committing to staring down your death fears - whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not.' (Doughty, 2011, para. 4, lines 1-5)

Death and funerals are now not only a key area for academic study but an increasing focus of public discussion. For example, 'Death Cafe' events where people (often strangers) gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death. Their objective is 'to increase awareness of death with a

view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives' (Deathcafe.com, 2018, para. 2, lines 1-2). Since 2011 over 6608 Death Cafe events have been held in 56 countries.

Changing attitudes towards end of life in late modernity

As identified in the introduction, mourning is configured in particular ways within the Anglophone world, and established practices are heavily influenced by historic attitudes. However, over the course of the twentieth century social conventions have been challenged by disrupting influences such as conflict and economic upheaval (Bedikian, 2008). As Crabtree (2010) notes, the funeral industry is always responsive to prevailing socio-cultural attitudes and this is particularly pertinent for those born from the 1940s onwards, often identified as the Baby Boomer generation (Wuthnow, 2010), as they have experienced both profound social change and increased longevity.

Clark (2018) observes that death and dying are now 'having a moment' (para. 2, line 2) with growing media coverage of funerals and end of life issues. These topics are also current concerns for public policy, debate and planning. The ageing population in Western societies is forcing issues of end of life to be discussed more widely, particularly as the Baby Boomer generation are used to making more personalised choices, more likely to challenge received wisdom and are more technologically-engaged than their parents' generation (Storch, 2017).

As Holloway et al state (2013: p.30) both academic and popular writing on funerals reflects 'a growing trend towards secularisation and personalisation'. Although the funeral remains a significant ceremonial event with psycho-social-spiritual character and purpose, its content and format are evolving. As such, the bereaved and funeral professionals are actively engaged in co-creating the meaning of these end of life events. As well as facilitating and guiding existing choices, professionals are often involved in interpreting exactly what is required. Rather than following a set of prescribed traditions, or the formalities and scripture of a religious ritual, there is a focus on drawing out meanings and beliefs and incorporating different needs by attending to the nuances in each situation.

The Death Care Industry

As part of the professionalisation of end of life services, a discrete set of related business has been identified which is termed either the funeral or death care industry. The latter phrase

originates in the United States of America, with the Department of Commerce (Lawton, 2016: p.1) defining it as 'divided into three segments: the ceremony and tribute (funeral or memorial service); the disposition of remains through cremation or burial (interment); and memorialization in the form of monuments, marker inscriptions or memorial art.'

The US industry is identified as highly fragmented, with a prevalence of SMEs and family-owned business across the range of funeral services, which overall generated $14.2 billion for the US economy in 2016. The supply structure is quite similar to other lifestage events, such as weddings, where the person responsible for organising the event acts as a coordinating hub in their client-facing role (Daniels & Loveless, 2013). Lawton further identifies that innovation across the supply-chain is a growing trend. This is reflected in UK consumer data collected by Mintel (Mitskavets, 2014) highlighting increased demand for innovative product design and personalisation, and better advertising of available products and services to give consumers clear and free choice in deciding their end of life wishes.

One of the ways in which consumers access the latest market developments is by attending exhibitions and shows. Lawton (2016) identifies a number of international expos catering to the funeral industry from large established shows to smaller fairs, such as Uitvaartbeurs Amsterdam (2018) which recently hosted its third edition and addressed more controversial topics such as assisted dying. The UK's biannual National Funeral Exhibition attracts over 4000 funeral industry professionals (National Funeral Exhibition, 2018) and is wholly owned and organised by the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD, 2018). This professional association, established in 1905, lobbies government at all levels on issues related to death and bereavement as well as providing education and qualifications for those wishing to enter the death care professions. Internationally, the National Funeral Directors' Association (NFDA, 2018) fulfils a similar mission and there are many other professional associations representing the sub-sectors that make up the wider death care industry. The business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) events hosted by the funeral industry in themselves represent a segment of the wider events industry (Bladen et al., 2018) - another under-explored aspect in the events literature.

Having set the scene, we now consider how the issues outlined above are evinced and challenged in practice, focusing on how events can open up new spaces, places and approaches to marking the end of life.

Spaces, places and practices for end of life events

According to Kong (in Maddrell & Sidaway, 2016: p.xv) 'Death foregrounds the most important social and cultural values that we live our lives by, including those values that we acknowledge and express, but also those that are neither ordinarily recognised nor explicit.' These values are intimately connected with the spaces, places and practices for mourning events.

The somewhat sporadic treatment of end of life events across a range of subject literatures (Green, 2016), and almost complete absence from the events management literature, is partly attributable to a reluctance to discuss death but also because organising these events has long been the province of families - particularly women - and seen to belong to the private domestic sphere (Stanley & Wise, 2011; Hochschild, 2012). Until the 1950s most people died at home and dead bodies were often cared for in the home until the funeral. Now over half of all deaths occur in hospital and the removal and care of the deceased is more likely to be handled by a professional funeral director, who also takes responsibility for arranging the funeral (Goulding & Miller, 2017). This sequestration of death (Giddens, 1991) is often reinforced through institutional settings and a limited supply chain for professional services, yet de-sequestration is also evident in the changing discourse of dying, death and bereavement (Stone, 2012; Maddrell & Sidaway, 2016; Andersson, 2017).

Mundane or everyday kinds of death in particular are being opened up for public consumption (Coombs, 2014) often through direct personal interactions by the dying using blogs, live-streaming and social media platforms (Andersson, 2017) or through the Ritual Fields 'Before I die I want to _____' global art project (Chang & Reeves, 2018). This project, initiated in 2011 as a participatory installation to open up conversations and spaces around death and grieving (Figure 14.1) is also used in workshop settings to consider alternative approaches to dying and living.

Figure 14.1 Before I die I want to _____ board, interactive exhibit at 'Death: The Southbank Centre's Festival for the Living 2012. Source: Katie Deverell.

In common with wedding planning, the proliferation of choices not only opens up new possibilities but new roles and market opportunities as people seek paid expertise to help organise these most personal aspects of their lives. As Hochschild (2012) identifies, services related to end of life care, death and funerals are increasingly being outsourced, no longer carried out by the family but paid for and undertaken by professionals. Families still express their feelings for the deceased, and grief at their loss, but they are doing so in a context far more oriented to consumerism. This requires more attention to the design aspects of an event to achieve a personalised result.

Event design perspectives

Event design is a recognised area of the events management literature (Berridge, 2012) and an important function for the events professional (Silvers, 2012; Sharples et al., 2014). Such design is far more than a practical proposition, as events act as 'catalysts, symbols, conduits, and lenses that enable people to function within and reflect upon their own role in society' (Richards, Marques & Mein, 2015: p.4). Drawing on the work of Falassi, Laing and Frost (2015) recognise the continued significance of ritual practice in modern events, identifying lifestage events as an area where the contrast between traditional and contemporary approaches can be clearly contrasted. Furthermore, by considering the total experience environment or

experienscape of an end of life event, we can map the interplay of meanings and associations found in or at places of death and for the dying. Maddrell and Sidaway (2016) acknowledge that the deathscape engages with art and design to demarcate and privilege these spaces and places.

We identified earlier how changing attitudes lead to changing expectations and demand for services at the end of life. The Order of the Good Death recognise this shift and showcases designers working at the forefront of this change. There are photographers and videographers choosing to specialise in this area, with one UK photographer coining the term 'Funeography' for her work (BBC News, 2010). Floristry is another area where providers are adjusting their services to incorporate alternative approaches, with sustainable and natural flowers increasingly in demand. Instagram and Pinterest are key sites for sharing design inspiration, and as identified by Gibbs et al. (2015) these platforms are ideal for creating affective and influential content.

Increasing secularisation and personalisation is leading to a shift in the meaning and experience of funerals. As noted by Holloway et al. (2013) the purpose is less about committing a person into God's care and more about creating a space to remember a life and make sense of loss. This approach places greater emphasis on how a person lived their life, their beliefs, personality traits and the memories of mourners.

Holloway et al.'s (2013) study of 46 funerals in the North of England found two common features that define their essential character and purpose. Firstly, that participants are actively engaged in the staging of a dramatic narrative of the deceased's life and that secondly: 'Rather than accepted wisdom that today's funerals are about celebrating the life rather than focusing on the death, we found that making sense of the relationship between life and death was an important pre-and-post-requisite to the life-centred funeral' (p.35).

This sense-making is a key aspect of contemporary funeral design, impacting both religious and secular funerals. Historically most ceremonies took place in church, and with religious rites and practices already laid down there was little scope for event professionals to influence their content or design. Generally, funeral directors (those often responsible for the logistical organisation) have been concerned with the dignified care and disposal of bodies rather than

the ceremonial content. The key aspects of the funeral ceremony have usually been left to a religious leader or celebrant to organise with friends and family.

In a similar way to weddings, funerals are now evolving beyond recognised traditions and prescribed rituals to more curated, personalised experiences. This may involve the use of different types of music and words, family decorated coffins or even a fully themed event. Indeed, research by ICM on behalf of the Co-op Funeral Care (2015: p.7) suggests that the funeral director role is developing to be more like that of an event planner, with 'two fifths (43 per cent) of UK adults seeing similarities between the roles.' These changes have also been observed by the Church of England, whose services are adapting to include more personal touches and popular music in addition to hymns and bible readings. Reverend Ian Meredith (2015) notes the rise in popularity of civil celebrants, observing that the number of Christian funerals is dropping dramatically and suggests some possible remedies, including changing services so they are more about the life of lost loved ones than God.

The Office for National Statistics reported that in 2001, 15% of people in England and Wales considered themselves to be non- religious (ONS, 2004) and by 2011, this percentage grew to 25% (ONS, 2011). Increasing secularisation and a move away from organised religion to a more individualised spirituality has led to fundamental shifts in the nature and purpose of funerals; where even those identifying as religious may not seek purely religious events. Research from Sun Life's (2017) annual Cost of Dying report shows that more 50% of funeral directors have seen a decrease in religious services and 80% have seen an increase in 'celebration of life' type services. Furthermore, an increasingly multicultural society creates a need to blend different practices and beliefs. In practice, demand is not always for purely secular services rather the opening up of ceremonial content to enable more nuanced references to spirituality or the incorporation of different (or no) faiths into one service.

More widely, the design emphasis on delivering experiences is influencing the way private events are organised (Daniels & Loveless, 2013; Brown, 2014). As people look to create something more individual and unique, practices that were once seen as marginal are becoming mainstream. For example, many crematoria no longer employ an organist to play hymns but use a computerised system to broadcast all types of music. The content of ceremonies may include the use of Facebook posts, diary entries, letters, song lyrics, family written poetry or keepsake orders of service (Kuyvenhoven, 2017a). The drive towards personalisation may

incorporate elements such as the handing out of mementoes to remember the deceased e.g. a KitKat, lily bulbs or a packet of seeds.

End of life events are also taking advantage of new technology, incorporating slideshows, video footage or favourite TV theme tunes. Several crematoria and funeral venues have installed webcast facilities to help connect friends and family overseas. With a culture increasingly drawn to visual displays there is growing interest in decorating ceremony spaces to reflect hobbies and interests. These can include things the deceased made, collected or enjoyed - a bottle of beer, a football scarf, a painting, embroidery or even cardboard cut-outs of film characters. All these changes place new demands on venue managers and events professionals, often requiring a shift in role and perspective as well as new equipment, use of time and skills.

Amid all these new consumables, it is important to remember there is a growing issue of funeral poverty. In 2017, the Royal London National Funeral Cost Index report found average funeral costs had risen 3% to £3,784 with one in five people now struggling to afford to pay. This in itself has led to the development of new services, with direct cremation or no-frills funerals aimed at reducing costs to the bereaved. With more choices to navigate, there are increasing dilemmas for consumers in deciding how to spend and who to trust. In the UK several new funeral directors have emerged advertising a modern approach and emphasising their commitment to transparency, honesty and freedom of choice. They market themselves as empowering and enabling, seeking to work in partnership with the bereaved rather than promising to take care of everything on their behalf.

Place and possibilities
The space and place in which events take place offer both possibilities and constraints. Traditionally in the UK most funerals have taken place in either a church or a crematorium, neither of which have generally been designed around the need for more personal and participatory events. Mourners wanting to come up to touch or place something on the coffin may have to negotiate awkward, slippery or narrow steps and there can be restrictions on lighting candles or little space to accommodate live music or displays. It is hard to remove religious iconography where a more secular ceremony is preferred as many older crematoria have large fixed crucifixes. The limits to the flexibility of these traditional settings means there is a small, but growing trend to using alternative spaces for funerals (Storch, 2017) and a move to re-designing funeral spaces to better meet the needs of the bereaved (Kuyvenhoven, 2017a).

With changes in services one of the greatest practical issues remains the time allocated for each event. The fact that crematoria often hold back-to-back ceremonies significantly reduces the possibility to adapt the layout, seating or even do much to dress the space, as everyone has to be in and out of the room within 30-40 minutes. This time constraint is one of the most common complaints made by families and ceremony leaders (Storch, 2017). For example,

> 'The funeral was for a great uncle and it was held in Manor Park Crematorium. I remember the music starting (which I'm sure came from a CD player) and then a man said a few words and then a coffin disappeared... I remember thinking how sad it was... This just felt as though it was too quick and didn't really say a lot about my uncle's life... I wouldn't have called it a 'good' funeral it was probably one of the worst I have been to as it was so short.' (Bailey, 2012: p.275)

It is therefore not surprising that new spaces are emerging to facilitate end of life events. Since 1993 the number of green burial sites in the UK has grown (West, 2015) and several incorporate ceremony buildings which market themselves as offering greater service time, flexible seating, audio-visual equipment and the ability to hold the wake. Of course, natural burial grounds have their own constraints, with several of the smaller, more rustic ones having no toilet or catering facilities or any shelter from the elements. Some funeral directors have expressed concerns about taking their cars and shoes into dusty or muddy areas, particularly when they have to move straight to another service. A recent Farmer's Weekly article (2016) encouraging farmers to think about diversifying, reports that fifteen years ago, there was one green cemetery in the UK and now there are over 270. The article further outlines how a burial ground can be created on as little as half an acre and redundant farm buildings can be converted to accommodate funeral ceremonies.

As people become more aware of possibilities and choices there is a small yet growing interest in ceremonies being held in the deceased's home or garden, a favourite pub, sports ground, hotel or village hall, bringing new entrants into the field of end of life events. In the same way that hotels, historic homes and local landmarks have long marketed themselves as unique venues for weddings (Leask & Hood, 2001; Whitfield, 2009; Weidenfeld & Leask, 2013), some are now hiring their premises for funerals. Event venue managers who have begun to offer

wakes and funeral teas may soon find themselves hosting the whole funeral, leading to a more complex set of roles and relationships to manage.

Roles and relationships

As new demands emerge, so too have the variety of roles and services available, including those designed to help navigate this growing stream of choices. As well as modern funeral directors and celebrants, there are now funeral singers, media and music libraries and digital death managers. Companies offer woollen, cardboard or bespoke printed coffins, specialised stationery and funeral favours. Following cremation there are companies to turn ashes into jewellery, paperweights or fireworks, as well as urns and receptacles for scattering or storage.

In common with other industries, internet and social media technologies are transforming the planning of end of life care and events. Consumers are able to find information for themselves, compare prices and select different options. Not only are charities such as Dying Matters and the Natural Death Centre raising public awareness, but a plethora of websites have sprung up offering advice or providing listings of funeral directors and celebrants (West, 2015). Rather than an expert arranging and taking care of everything, a contemporary funeral is becoming more of an actively co-created event where people design and choose what they want. As Kuyvenhoven (2017b, para. 33, lines 4-7, 9-10) notes:

> 'The business model is changing: in the nearby future, the demand for full funeral packages will decrease. Clients will only buy particular services from the funeral director … Funeral directors who would like to survive in this rapidly changing world better stay ahead of the game through constant innovation and agility towards new developments.'

Much can be learnt from wider event professionals about creating and managing personalised and meaningful experiences within these changed roles. The move away from a prescribed ritual or set of activities requires the ability to handle complex negotiations, drawing out nuances, unexpressed needs and respecting different beliefs. Celebrants and funeral directors may often find themselves in the role of mediators, particularly where there are differences of opinion as to the content of a ceremony or the desired choices. This means it is essential for event professionals not just to attend to an event's efficient execution but to understand its ritual and therapeutic purpose. The growing demand for a sincere and authentic portrayal of

the life of the deceased also alerts us to ask questions as to whose voices are being heard and who has the power to speak and organise (Bailey, 2012). This raises the important issue of skills and training. Expertise in developing and building relationships, and the adoption of a creative and flexible approach, is becoming increasingly important to deliver meaningful and memorable end of life events. As Litten (1991) says of funerals 'they are highly important and emotional social events forming the final ritual in the calendar of life' (p.4). Often the design process itself is considered a valuable part of the event experience with feedback from families stating that time spent talking through ideas not only created a better ceremony but helped with the grieving process (Holloway et al, 2013).

These are special events with huge emotional significance and so subtle nuances and attention to detail matter. As O'Rourke et al. (2011: p.734) note: 'because funerals are group experiences, they represent a social context in which relationships can be established, renewed and otherwise managed…they provide an opportunity for socialisation' where the bereaved try to make sense of their loss.

As ceremonies become more actively experienced events there is greater interest in making them interactive. Rather than delivering the whole funeral, the ceremony leader may become more of an MC, introducing tributes given by friends and family, orchestrating the playing of live music or assisting with candle lighting. Adding elements of participation may require time for placing items on the coffin, assistance handing out drinks to raise a toast or facilitating open space for spontaneous tributes and reflections. This emphasis on co-creating a more involving and meaningful experience means that in addition to bearing the coffin mourners may take responsibility for lowering it at a burial or pressing the button to close the crematorium curtains. In this way different demands are being placed on the event professionals involved. As modern funeral director Louise Winter (@poetic_endings) recently tweeted: 'If you're thinking about planning your funeral with a professional, find someone who understands the value of funerals and why we have them. Stay away from professionals who reduce funerals to three pieces of music and a pre-paid plan' (2018).

The preceding discussion has outlined an increasingly complex set of roles and requirements and highlighted the need for empathetic management of the process by those involved in coordinating end of life events. We now turn to a short vignette to illustrate how one celebrant (the second author) approaches these responsibilities.

Illustrative vignette

Vignettes are employed in both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of lived situations. They are 'short stories or concrete scenarios and examples of situations, people or individuals and their behaviours that are written about or pictorially depicted in specified circumstances' (Azman & Mahadir, 2017: p.28). They are commonly deployed in professional or vocational environments (Wilks, 2004) and to elicit responses to certain scenarios (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Here, we are using the vignette technique to illustrate the key thematic strands of design, place, roles and responsibilities in planning an end of life event.

"Family, friends, flying and fun"

"The funeral planning began with a family meeting. Memories and photographs were shared with the celebrant who made suggestions; helping to draw out different views and feelings. The deceased preferred things understated, nothing too 'over the top' or sentimental. His philosophy 'to look on the bright side' guided the choices the celebrant and family made, designing a ceremony to suit.

With a woodland burial agreed on, the widow, children and grandchildren visited the site to choose the exact spot where 'grandad' would be buried. Personal stories, connections and characteristics all influenced their selection. A preference was expressed for a quiet and light aspect with mature trees and it was agreed it would be nice if there was a clear view above so he "could still see planes fly over". The tree chosen was an established oak which was felt to represent the deceased's strength of character. Being near to fields it offered a similar view to that he'd enjoyed at home. Involving the whole family in the decision enabled a certain emotional investment in the process and made the setting feel more familiar and less daunting. Viewing the ceremony room, the family could begin to imagine what the funeral would be like and were able to discuss seating, layout and the availability of audio-visual equipment. With the venue holding two events a day there was scope for a longer ceremony and possibilities to personalise the space.

The funeral began in the ceremony hall. A large, light room with views over the wood and its wildlife. Some personal items were placed near the front, creating a focal point and reflecting key interests: a model aeroplane, a teddy in flying goggles and a photo of the deceased with his pilot's licence. The wooden coffin, chosen to suit his personality, was topped with flowers selected for seasonality, colour and meaning. Family members carried the coffin; enabling those that didn't feel able to speak to make a meaningful contribution, as well as show respect and appreciation.

The ceremony was designed around four key elements it was felt summed up the deceased: "Family, most important, friends, flying and fun". Tributes from an old friend, work colleague and son-in law enabled different aspects of his personality to be drawn out, as well as important achievements. A slideshow of photographs with music, was put together by another friend using images to portray the seven decades of the deceased's life, highlighting significant moments and relationships. Words from the celebrant, and selected poems, emphasised his character, values and interests. Although the deceased had no religious beliefs, a period of reflection was incorporated for those with faith to say a private prayer. Within the ceremony the celebrant acknowledged the difficulties the family had been through in recent months, and the sadness and grief the death had brought, whilst voicing many funny stories and anecdotes. These recollections emphasised core aspects of the deceased's personality as well as less well-known incidents and attributes. Within the ceremony there were sad, poignant and funny moments: eliciting both laughter and tears from the mourners.

As the main part of the ceremony drew to a close, everyone was invited to walk through the wood to the burial spot. This procession created a moving and ritualised moment, drawing the mourners together and focusing them in the present. Once at the tree the celebrant invited everyone to gather around, saying a few words to mark the symbolic moment of goodbye. As the coffin was lowered people were invited to lay flowers or sprinkle some earth. The grandchildren each gave a sunflower, with a personal message, as for several years the deceased had given them sunflowers grown from seed. The celebrant closed the ceremony with some words of hope; reflecting the natural surroundings and acknowledging the seasons and cycles of life. Mourners were invited to stay as long as they wished before joining the family at a local hotel. The deceased had enjoyed entertaining and it was suggested he'd be delighted to be treating everyone one last time.

The hotel is a well-established wedding venue and was pleased to host the wake, providing ideas of possible layouts, table arrangements and menus. The family were able to decorate the space using personal items, including a large map of all the places the deceased had visited, for which the venue supplied an easel. Having large grounds with mature trees the venue created a sense of connection to the ceremony, as well as privacy.

The gathering was well attended, with further sharing of memories and stories. This collective experience helped mourners connect with each other and express their thoughts and feelings. It was felt that the ceremony had "hit exactly the right note. It was really uplifting and exactly what we wanted. I felt we gave him a really good send-off… it was exactly true to him."

Figure 14.2 Epping Forest, Natural Burial Ground, location of vignette story.

Source: Katie Deverell. For further details on the location see: www.greenacrescelebrate. co.uk/park/epping/

This vignette serves to illustrate our key themes, demonstrating how contemporary shifts play out in practice to impact on design, place, roles and responsibilities. The celebrant acts as a co-creator, facilitating choices, mediating different needs and supporting the family to design a meaningful ceremony which reflects the values, beliefs and personality of the deceased. The support of the staff and funeral director enables involvement from the mourners e.g. advising how to bear the coffin and providing technology and facilities. The resulting event allows those involved to give shape and meaning to their experience whilst also enacting a formal rite of passage.

Conclusion

We began by stating that the existing literature on end of life events was somewhat fragmented, yet what has emerged is a wealth of material that those studying, researching and working in events can draw on if they look beyond the immediate boundaries of their subject area. Here, we have brought together some of the key issues within a critical event studies framework to illustrate how well placed many event providers are to respond to the future challenges for end of life provision. Driven by demographic change, an unprecedented number of people dying in

future decades will put new strains on families, communities, services and governments. It also has implications for representations of death and dying within society and for the overall orientation of health and social care. Events can offer rich and accessible experiences to help navigate these societal complexities, but only if delivered with sensitivity and awareness. As such, they demand a complex skills-set yet can offer managers a rewarding and memorable professional environment with an obvious return on experience through the collective and inspirational eventscape that they have helped to create. Festivals research (Jackson, 2014; Jepson & Clarke, 2015; Wilks & Quinn, 2016) has begun to map such complex social interactions and these approaches would also find fertile ground here.

As end of life events move further into the mainstream they must be regarded as more than just another source of revenue and work for the events industry (Hochschild, 2012), rather an area to which events professionals can bring useful expertise to improve the overall experience (Bladen & Kennell, 2014; Jackson, Morgan & Laws, 2018). After all, the current focus on issues involving design/place/roles affords new opportunities for researching how these events can be enhanced across the individual and collective experience.

As Holloway et al. (2013) have outlined, the content and format of end of life events is changing, requiring more creative design skills as well as an understanding of ritual and its purpose. Many of the issues shaping end of life events: secularisation and the emergence of new forms of ritualised expression (Ayot, 2015), the emphasis on personalisation, the impact of technology and web-based media and new forms of families and relationships are also impacting on wider event design. There are both practical and theoretical implications to be explored as roles shift towards co-creation, creative design and meaning-making, rather than administering and managing (Richards, 2014).

Private events are amongst the most valued and significant occasions in our lives, marking key points in our individual and collective experience. They are planned for, spent on and shaped by wider consumer culture. As such memorable and impactful occasions, they deserve to be treated more seriously. We will all one day encounter our mortality and mourn for those who have gone before. The unique and universal resonance of end of life events must surely place them at the heart of our explorations rather than at the margins.

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