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YOUR DEARLY DEPARTED ... IN A VENDING MACHINE

BY FARAH HALIME • DEC 10 • 2014

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because as cities run out of room for the deceased, all those bodies have to go somewhere.

Welcome to Constellation Park, population 5,000. Only everyone here — suspended in hanging vessels under New York’s Manhattan Bridge — is dead.

No, it’s not the set of a dystopian film, but rather a proposed solution to an urgent problem faced by cities around the world: Where can the urban dead rest in peace these days? Constellation Park is one of several concepts by **DeathLab** (<http://www.deathlab.org/>), a Columbia University-based research and design space focused on “re-conceiving how we live with death in the metropolis.” And you might not believe some of the other ideas this group of researchers and architects are quietly working on: a looming tower that holds “pods” (i.e., graves) that light up and above which people can stroll, and a spaceship-like structure on Manhattan’s waterfront that’s like a park where waking can slip in and out. “We are running out of space,” says Karla Rothstein, a Columbia professor who is part of DeathLab. It’s not just a New York problem, she says: “It’s happening all over the world.”

Designers are working on an underground “Tower for the Dead” — basically an inverted skyscraper cemetery.

Fantastical as these designs sound, cities are being forced to rethink how to — affordably — bury their dead as they grapple with growing populations, soaring funeral costs, limited plots of land reserved for new graves and, of course, the fact that we’re all going to die at some point. (At least for now.) Some have already toyed with creative solutions, like Meguro Anyoin, a Buddhist temple in Tokyo, where, a spokesperson tells OZY, vaults large enough to hold the urns of 7,200 families are stored in a massive warehouse developed by the carmaker Toyota. (After mourners who are visiting their long lost loved ones punch in a code, a small urn with a person’s remains pops out of a slot, rather like a soda from a vending machine.) “Vertical cemeteries” in Norway and Iraq ensure locals can be buried where they grew up, while designers in Mexico City are working on an 820-foot-deep, underground “Tower for the Dead” — basically an inverted skyscraper cemetery.

Of course, many of these deathly dreams are far from perfectly realized — or even partly realized — and some concepts might not come to life in time for us to avail ourselves. To do so, they’ll have to overcome a skeptical public, longstanding rituals and the funeral industry, which in the U.S. is **projected** (<http://nfda.org/about-funeral-service-/trends-and-statistics.html>) to reach \$16.2 billion in revenues this year. “This is not reality,” says Keith Senko, a Brooklyn funeral director who’s been in the business for more than 40 years. During that time, death rites have become more celebratory, but tradition is hard to beat: “Even when it’s not sectarian, they follow the basic plan, whether it’s a burial or cremation,” says Senko.

There’s not much basic about DeathLab’s suspended pods. In them, bodies would decompose and their biomass would be converted into energy that would power “mourning lights” — creating a starry, constellation effect across the bridge. These lights would dim at the end of a year, and then families could collect the remains, freeing up a grave for another body. “Grief is a very personal

process,” Rothstein says. DeathLab execs say the process is cleaner and much more efficient than a traditional burial using a metal casket. (Today’s process deprives a body of oxygen so that it putrefies rather than decomposes.)

A new form of cremation disintegrates bodies into ashes in minutes — like the demise of that one “*Indiana Jones*” villain.

DeathLab is not the only one trying to reimagine the sector. Promessa (<http://www.promessa.se/>), a small company in Sweden, is at the forefront of a new and, it says, improved alternative to cremation, in which a corpse is sprayed with liquid nitrogen until it is frozen and very brittle. The body is then vibrated so vigorously that it disintegrates into ashes within minutes — much like the demise of a certain villain in an *Indiana Jones* film. (You know, the one who failed at his attempt to become immortal (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36WEn-9zs1U>).) The company tells OZY it already has agreements as well as actual orders from countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, South Korea and Spain to lease its so-called Promator technology.

However, even if DeathLab got Constellation Park built, it would have capacity for only about 10 percent of those who die each year in the Big Apple.

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for Anyoin Temple in Japan says it, too, is being squeezed for space and is considering expanding. And while Promessa’s process costs around \$500, compared with up to thousands of dollars for a standard burial or cremation at a funeral home, it has not yet been used on human corpses, nor has it been approved for use in many countries.

Even so, some people are keen to be remembered in a new, unique way. As morbid as it might seem, April White, a 31-year-old nursing student from Rock Hill, South Carolina, keeps bringing up Promessa’s process to her family — “and they all think I’m crazy,” she says. What’s more conventional, though, is that she wants her remains returned to her family to help fertilize a favorite flower or tree.