

Volume 1
New Paths of Engagement

Volume 2
New Venues in the Search for Dignity and Grace

Our Changing Journey to the End

Reshaping Death, Dying,
and Grief in America

Volume I
New Paths of Engagement

**Christina Staudt, PhD and
J. Harold Ellens, PhD, Editors**



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Foreword

Robert Pollack

Director, University Seminars
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In accepting the challenge to write this Foreword to *Our Changing Journey to the End*, I have had the chance to reconsider my own thoughts and strategies for dealing with matter of death, dying, and bereavement. At the end of the last millennium, I attempted to lay out these thoughts in an essay on the place of science along that journey. Here, I am sharing them with you, but in the sharper light shed by them after another dozen years of life. I hope these reflections will serve to provide a new and useful context for the astounding diversity of contributions to these two new volumes. Also, as the current Director of the University Seminars at Columbia, writing this Foreword allows me to properly thank my colleagues and predecessors for their wisdom and foresight in preserving this remarkable institution over many lifetimes.

In 1905, Columbia University built a magnificent brick and limestone palace of science, Schermerhorn Hall, for its new and expanding departments of geology, botany, and zoology. Carved on its facade is the inscription "Speak to the Earth and it will teach you." To someone who has studied the Bible, whether the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian Old Testament, this line from the Book of Job is clearly not the motto of science that it appears to be. It is Job himself, in pain, telling his friends that neither he nor they can possibly understand the ways of Heaven and that he therefore wants to die on the spot.

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Chapter 14

Reconfiguring Urban Spaces of Disposal, Sanctuary, and Remembrance

Karla Maria Rothstein

*E*nvironmental and social imperatives of 21st-century cities require fundamentally rethinking the infrastructures of death, including what we do with dead bodies and how progressive architecture may effectively support grief, memory, and the variant, individual and collective processes of letting go. Given rapidly depleting urban cemetery space, increasing annual American deaths, and the acute environmental toll of both burial and cremation, alternative funerary practices are inevitable, yet currently wholly unresolved. New methods of corpse disposal engage the natural chemical composition of the human body, accelerating biodegradation and absorption into the ecosystem. Design proposals described in this chapter include both theoretical work from my office, Latent Productions, and projects produced in the design studios I lead at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. The spaces and practices that may emerge between the essential indeterminacy of urban life and the inevitability of human death must engage new technologies and be integrated into the discussion of the future of our cities. Critical design aims to reinsert spaces of death and remembrance into the quotidian experience of the metropolis, introducing innovative models of civic and public space, and new modalities of memorial, while questioning the need for permanent repositories and markers of our dead.

URBAN HISTORY AND IMPERATIVE

The metropolis embodies a mortal palimpsest—accumulations and traces of humanity, death, and temporality. From sacred relics and charnel houses, to battlefields and potter's fields, humans have built around and above the remains of their dead. Through the 18th century, Western city cemeteries were collective yet hierarchical spaces embedded in the urban fabric. Mass graves, nested into and under churches and their yards, were encountered by congregants during the regular rhythms of daily life. The corpses of indigent strangers were similarly collectively gathered and, generally unremembered, deposited in lands not otherwise suitable for quotidian use. In our preindustrial cities, the destitute and detached, including victims of cholera and yellow fever epidemics buried rapidly en masse, filled these municipal spaces by the hundreds weekly.¹

A city's cemeteries were also historically occupied as public spaces, extensions of the street and destinations in the era that preceded the creation of large urban public parks. In the century before New York City's Central Park was established by the 1811 Governor's Plan, cemeteries offered some relief to the congested Manhattan populace, and it was not uncommon to incidentally convene with the dead in cities that had few other public meeting places. The tradition of picnicking in cemeteries has origins in the ancient Roman festival of Feralia, an annual event of public mourning honoring the spirits of the ancestors by reinforcing mutual obligations between the living and the dead. Popular practices for propitiating the shapeless ghosts of the dead are described by the Roman poet Ovid, "the grave must be honoured. Appease your fathers' Spirits, and bring little gifts to the tombs you built. Their shades ask little, . . . a scattering of meal, and a few grains of salt, and bread soaked in wine, and loose violets . . . now ghostly spirits and the entombed dead wander, now the shadow feeds on the nourishment that's offered."²

By the 19th century burial rituals had become more individual and sanitized—each body tidily contained in its own box—and cemeteries were migrated to the urban periphery. Real and perceived public health crises necessitated the removal of corpses and their decay from immediate proximity with the living, and ex-urban oases of death emerged outside urban areas across America. Inspired by English gardens and Père Lachaise in Paris, Mount Auburn Cemetery was the first large, so-called garden cemetery in America. Situated on 174 acres including an arboretum, Mount Auburn straddles the towns of Cambridge and Watertown four miles northwest of Boston, and has offered a romantic refuge and sublime promenade remote from the city's density since 1831.

In 1825, the open space of a large potter's field in Manhattan was reprogrammed as a municipal military parade ground and eventually became Washington Square Park, a nearly 10-acre public open space in Greenwich

Village residing above the remains of an estimated 20,000 unnamed bodies.³ New York's Rural Cemetery Act of 1847 triggered the transition from predominantly religious and private burial practices to massive cemeteries as commercial nonprofit business ventures, now regulated by the Federal Trade Commission. Through the mid-1800s both churches and land speculators purchased thousands of acres of farmland, staking out pastoral burial grounds in less densely populated outer boroughs. The associated proliferation of new, often nonsectarian, landscapes of death offered quiet refuge to tens of thousands of corpses—and their tombstones—that were disinterred in Manhattan to accommodate both increasing urban transportation infrastructure projects and more lucrative real estate development in the heart of the city. As metropolitan populations and transportation networks grew, these once-segregated, fringe locations were reabsorbed into the expanding urban territory.

Today, cemeteries exist largely isolated and remote from the lives of the bereft. The largest concentrations of the living have little contact with contemporary spaces of the dead. Roughly 57,000 people die every year in New York City. Yet for the past 160 years the creation of new cemeteries has been prohibited, and new earthen burials remain forbidden south of 86th Street in Manhattan.⁴ An analogous enduring segregation of the dead occurred in Chicago with the 1859 Proposal and Ordinance to Stop Burials in City Cemetery, disinterring and relocating existing graves while terminating future urban burials in proximity to the public.⁵ City Cemetery and Morgue was comprised of Catholic, Jewish, and municipal lots, and had been the only urban burial option within the city of Chicago. Its lakeside urban land became what is now known as Lincoln Park, and rural cemeteries, like Rosehill, Graceland, and Calvary, became Chicago's preferred destinations for both the living and their dead.

Recalibration of both zoning and land use policy is needed to enable new forms of urban corpse disposal and new opportunities for city residents to commune with the memory of the deceased. Akin to provisions related to public housing, trash disposal, and sewage treatment, public policy related to the death industry has been historically contentious and slow to evolve. The saturation of cemetery space has become so dire that the mayors of towns in Italy, France, Spain, and Brazil have passed laws prohibiting death in their districts until space to develop more cemeteries is allocated. Giulio Cesare Fava, the mayor of a small town north of Naples, Italy, has forbidden his residents to die, "because the cemetery is running out of room,"⁶ and Mayor Gil Bernardi of Le Lavandou, France—where nearly one-third of the population is over 65—passed a similar law when designating land for a new cemetery was denied in court despite the reality that 19 corpses temporarily reside in friends' burial vaults due to lack of space in the existing town cemetery.⁷

We must wholly rethink how we design for the 154,000 deaths occurring worldwide each day.⁸ In America, this is not uniquely a New York

cemetery-story. Since the start of the 21st century, over 75 percent of the population of the United States is considered to live in urban areas,⁹ rendering natural burials—involving no chemical additions that retard decomposition of the corpse nor robust casketing—in a proximate, picturesque rural environment impractical for the vast majority of environmentally aware and increasingly metropolitan populations. Intensifying urbanization, projected to be 85 percent worldwide in the next decade, amplifies the need to radically reconsider our corpse-disposal practices. Traditional funerary procedures and their associated structures are no longer commensurate with the environmental and social realities of our urban existence.

The imperative for retooling funerary protocols—while solidly grounded in palpable spatial constraints of the metropolis and increasing environmental burdens of both burial and cremation—is not solely pragmatic. Society is imprinted by context, and social dynamics are informed by the spaces we collectively inhabit. By reweaving the ubiquity of death into the fabric of our cities, we remind ourselves of the finitude of life, and the fragile responsibility the living share to fortify the future.

The broadening popularity of the garden cemetery type is said to have inspired the American park movement and the profession of landscape architecture. Emerging urban public parks with their tamed landscapes integrated into city planning superseded the appeal of meandering memorial paths and the cemetery-lawn as a social extension of the urban square. These new idealized forms of nature cast off any earlier association with death, and contemplative walks and picnics moved from the sanctuary and cultivated seclusion of the rural cemetery into secular, municipal parks, leaving the physical spaces of the dead increasingly unvisited and frequently untended. The expanse of American suburbs' homogenized sprawl further delineated these former spaces of liminal existence.

As terrains devised exclusively for leisure have been added to dense urban areas, and as death has become an increasingly medicalized event most commonly occurring in a hospital, the presence of the dead has diminished in public consciousness. Ostracized memorials are gated into necropoleis separated from where most of us live. This physical remoteness is amplified by the sphere of death being largely limited to the elderly, as child mortality in developed countries has dramatically declined through preventative measures and medical care advancements over the past century. Today, it is common for a family not to have faced a close occurrence of death in decades. Spatial environments shape our psyche, and the physical and emotional detachment of spaces of death and remembrance from everyday life—symptomatic of the increasing placeless-timeless-mediated reality of global existence—has atrophied our collective perception and appreciation of tangible human existence. This severing of experience facilitates death-denial and hinders cognitive and emotional acceptance of loss.

Together with the migrations of socio-spatial concentrations, our increasingly global cities produce intensely diverse cultural environments. This

coexistence of customs both amplifies and flattens the evolution of belief. In 2012, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life published a research paper subtitled, "One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation." Survey data from 3,500 adults indicated that a full third of the U.S. population under age 30 consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, including 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics. Thirty-three million Americans (14% of the U.S. public) say they have no particular religious affiliation, and are not looking for one.¹⁰ These numbers indicate a significant spectrum of nontraditional relationships to spirituality and ritual, and may presage increasing acceptance of new forms of corpse disposition and evolving associated funerary protocols. Although it remains largely unarticulated, I believe that a growing number of Americans desire sensible and sensitive alternatives to the limited and largely outmoded options currently practiced. Societal engagement of this issue should be a global imperative.

More people will die annually in America in 25 years than die today. While advances in health-awareness and medicine have led to a consistently declining death rate for the past 20 years in the United States, by 2020 annual deaths are certain to increase. By 2050, 20 percent of Americans will be over 65, resulting in a steady swelling of funerals as the dense post-World War II generation continues to age and dies. The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau project that 4,249,000 people will die in the United States in 2050—1.6 million more corpses to contend with than in 2010, and a return to percentages of deaths equivalent to the 1950s.

While our heritage of death practices may include some of humankind's oldest cultural patterns, the United States is a young country whose traditions are at most a few centuries deep, and persuasive circumstances inevitably shape evolution—even in seemingly ossified domains. The choices we make in honoring our dead should be influenced by individual and collective psychology, necessity, philosophy, and belief. Currently, options at death remain heavily prescribed by an archaic set of rituals that often dislocate the bereaved from how they choose to live, love, and honor the people in their lives. I will briefly sketch the context and impacts of prevailing mortuary activities and associated corpse decomposition, then introduce contemporary alternative technologies for corporeal metamorphosis that support new concepts of remembrance and provide potential replacements of, or at least additions to, extant earthen burial and cremation options.

CURRENT MORTUARY PRACTICES

Embalming

Embalming, linked to ancient Egyptian practices of mummification, began in the United States during the Civil War using arsenic to preserve dead soldiers on their journey home. Delaying natural decay became increasingly culturally