

# DeathLAB :

## Democratizing Death

We have begun to see signs of a paradigm shift poised to revolutionize our approach to death and the city.

From the latter half of the 20th century up through the present day, a changing Japanese urban landscape – marked by the proliferation of IT, an influx of multiculturalism accompanying globalization, extreme overcrowding, a rise in nuclear families, declining birthrates with an aging society, climate concerns, the emergence of terrorism, etc. – has dramatically impacted the environment and culture surrounding death.

Shifting cultural norms have been evinced in a severe shortage of burial space, a sharp uptick in “solitary deaths” as a consequence of increased social isolation, downsized tombstones, the simplification or altogether eradication of funerary rites, the availability of secular or unconventional alternatives such as space burials, a dematerialization of mourning through online funerals coupled with the live-streaming of gravesites, as well as joint funerals conducted irrespective of nationality and religious denomination. These fluid attitudes toward death call into question the conventional approach to funerals, which were once codified by specific systemic constructs such as religion and family, let alone the logistical need to own an expensive plot of land for a gravesite. Indeed, these changes testify that we are on the cusp of a new era that is redefining how we think about death.

DeathLAB engages with this changing milieu head-on. Based at Columbia University, the team probes strategies to handle the future of death in a manner that responds to a host of complex challenges such as environment, time, and space that are inherent in the metropolis. All eyes are on this prescient “laboratory of death,” their transdisciplinary work traversing diverse academic fields (including religious studies, architecture, environmental engineering, and biology) with global ramifications.

Organized with DeathLAB Director and Columbia University GSAPP Associate Professor of Architecture Karla Rothstein, this exhibition showcases DeathLAB’s ongoing corpus of work through a three-part film and selection of architectural models.

The film’s first act introduces DeathLAB’s background and mission, while the second segment presents the team’s design and studio work. The third installment consists of a “dialogue on death,” grounded in interviews with experts in areas ranging from philosophy to religion, architecture, environmental studies, and historic preservation.

The exhibition space also features an illuminated, 3D-printed model suspended in mid-air as a partial representation and evolution of Constellation Park (2014). Conceived as a public memorial, the project proposed nesting thousands of light-emitting “memorial vessels” underneath New York’s iconic Manhattan Bridge, connecting the Manhattan and Brooklyn boroughs. Harnessing the human body’s latent bio-energy, the memorial vessels would be populated with calibrated microbail to gradually decompose corpses over the course of a year, generating methane that would in turn be used to illuminate the vessel network in a dazzling constellation of “mourning lights.” The light would gently dim in tandem with the decomposition process, and upon year’s end, contingent members of the constellation would be replenished anew. In this way, the remembrance of the departed is not cloistered in individual graves, but rather, directed toward a symbolic, illuminated whole. While still memorializing the individual, the project is simultaneously a larger monument that symbolically honors those who came before to build the past which we, the living, have inherited in the present. Overcoming ethnicity, religion, and political/economic constraints, the project denotes a guiding light from the legion deceased, illuminating our present and a showing the way toward a brighter future. In this sense, Constellation Park could be contextualized as a bold effort to truly democratize death in the metropolis.

Philippe Ariès – a noted historian who studied Western attitudes toward death from antiquity to modernity – compared death to a mirror on our era, citing contemporary attitudes toward death as society’s greatest taboo. Ariès decried what he saw as the increasing solitariness of death: rather than volitionally accepting an impending mortality and spending one’s final days at home surrounded by family, death has become an unwelcome disruption antithetical to a happy life. The terminally ill are quarantined in hospital, where even after losing consciousness, life is artificially maintained and extended, consigning the patient to an isolated end. DeathLAB seeks to wrest death from its contemporary alienated status, restoring control once again to the individual. Furthermore, this praxis transcends the timescale of the living, returning death to a seat of primacy in the heart of the city as a perpetual and essential archive of collective memory.

As a reinterpretation of natural burials from the context of modern culture and technology ultimately redesigning the very ecosystem of death, Constellation Park reflects an emergent widespread effort to update received conceptions of architectural spaces. Across the globe, the power of fungi has been re-motivated in towers made of biodegradable bricks, and acetic acid bacteria has been tapped to produce self-propagating cellulose tile. These projects are part of a movement to design urban and architectural metabolic processes from a micro-level attuned to natural environmental cycles. Granted, highly influential collectives such as the postwar Team X and the 1960s Metabolists attempted to apply a biological model to the mechanized architecture of industrialization and rationalism. However, it would seem the contemporary movement embodies a qualitatively new mode of cyclical architecture that organically grows and ebbs on a scale unmatched by those earlier theoretical forebears.

What is the essence of death and funerary rites on a universal plane, transcending ethnicity and religion? How might we achieve a more cogent expression of the life and death cycle suited to modern urban culture? Long banished to the suburbs, how might we once again reincorporate death as a visible and living part of the city?

It is my ardent hope that the present exhibition proves fertile ground for discussion of these pressing themes, fostering a timely impetus to re-examine and envision anew the nature of death in the future to come.

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\*1 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, Helen Weaver (translation), Knopf, 1981.

\*2 David Benjamin’s “Hy-Fi” is the Organic Mushroom-Brick Tower that exhibited at MoMA’s PS1, 2014.  
See also: <https://www.moma.org/slideshows/74/0?locale=en>

\*“Xylinum Cones” are the grown geometrical objects made from bacterial cellulose by designers Jannis Hülsen and Stefan Schwabe.  
See also: <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/growyourown/xylinumcones/>

\*3 Team 10 was a group of architects and other invited participants who assembled starting in July 1953 at the 9th Congress of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) and created a schism within CIAM by challenging its speculative approach to urbanism.

\*4 Metabolism was a post-war Japanese architectural movement manifested by young architects including Kisho Kurokawa, Kiyonori Kikutake etc. in 1959. They took the group name from biological term “Metabolism” and fused ideas about architectural megastructures with those of organic biological growth.