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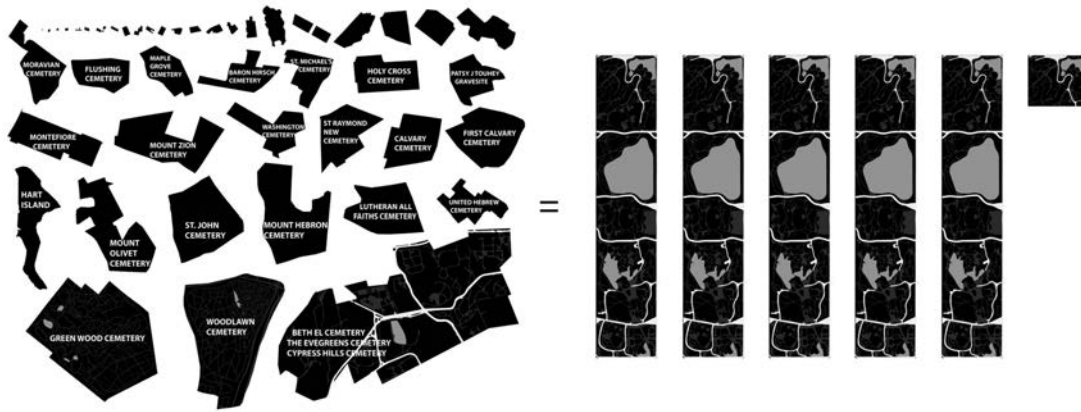
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The aggregate area of NYC cemeteries = 5.17 Central Parks
 Image by Columbia GSAPP DeathLAB

Democratizing Death

Interview with Karla Rothstein

Bernd Upmeyer interviewed Karla Rothstein, who is an architect, professor, and creative thinker living, practicing, and teaching in New York City. In both her professional work as design director at LATENT Productions and through over a decade of studios taught at the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, Karla engages with alternative and emerging methods of corpse disposal in progressive proposals of civic sanctuary and temporal urban remembrance. The interview took place in August 2019.

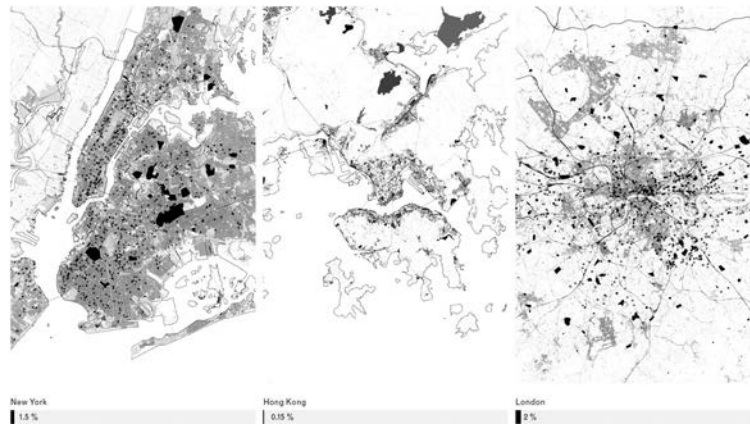
Changes in our Society Related to Death

Bernd Upmeyer: Ever since 2013 you have been directing the so-called “DeathLAB” that you founded at the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation at Columbia University and since 2011 you have been a member of the Columbia University Seminar on Death. What were your motivations as an architect to start working and researching on topics of mortality to begin with? How did you become so interested in death?

Karla Rothstein: My interest in spaces of death and remembrance emerged out of my attention to the future of the city. Starting over a decade before the dates that you reference, I taught complementary design studios at Columbia’s GSAPP – in the Fall, several studios study the same theo-

retical New York City site for its potential to host multifamily housing. In the Spring, I would select both a site and a public programme for my students to engage with. I was attracted to peripheral territories, the edges and margins of NYC, where behaviours were somewhat less regulated and the potential for transformation was fertile. In that context, I encountered NYC’s vast network of existing cemetery spaces, which in aggregate occupy an area over five times the size of Central Park. It quickly became evident that the American expectation of a cemetery plot in perpetuity for each individual was at odds with both the density and spatial limits of urbanity. I also found the historic positioning and re-positioning of the cemetery compelling – going from embedded urban churchyards to exurban sites that over time the city has surrounded. Despite the current adjacent-

“My interest in spaces of death and remembrance emerged out of my attention to the future of the city.”



Urban Burial Infrastructures
 Image by Columbia GSAPP DeathLAB students, Yang, Yi, Liu + Mater

cies, most cemeteries remain largely segregated from everyday life.

Initially, we accepted cremation as the solution to spatial constraints and focused on reincorporating spaces of reflection and remembrance into a more quotidian urban experience. But the practice of consuming fossil fuel to combust a corpse composed largely of water also felt misaligned with contemporary priorities, and so we began researching alternative disposition options, of which there were very few. DeathLAB grew out of both my GSAPP design studios and the work that we were doing in parallel in my architecture practice. The complexities of these issues extend beyond design, and the need to involve multiple disciplines became obvious, so we began engaging colleagues from across Columbia in dialogue on the topic. I launched DeathLAB with associates from Earth and Environmental Engineering, Philosophy/Theology, and the social sciences.

What compels us is influenced by so many variables, so I don't consider any one event the "explanation" for my initial interest in mortality. When I was a freshman in college, a close friend was killed in a drunk-driving accident, and I grew up knowing that my parents had to cope with an infant's death before I was born, so perhaps I formed a personal connection to grief and loss at a relatively early age. Many years later, I was in Manhattan on the morning of 9-11. As the shock subsided, the absence of the Twin Towers was a remarkably palpable example of societal loss – these visual anchors and orienting devices had been erased. In that instance, the connection between architecture and death was unavoidable.

BU: Today we are witnessing many changes in our society that are related to death. Which are the most important changes in your view?

KR: Relative to twenty years ago, the degree of interest and willingness to engage in the topics of death and disposition is truly remarkable. In the U.S. and around the globe, populations are living longer. As the past issue of MONU conveyed, the numbers and differentiation among the middle aged and elderly are increasing. This reality, together with the post-WWII increase in childbirth, means that in the U.S. alone there will be about one million more deaths in 2035 than in 2015. At that time, 78 million people will be over age 65, making it the first time in U.S. history that this cohort will outnumber those under age 18. The sheer number of corpses, especially in urban areas, will require thoughtful planning.

Diversity of belief structures and expanding interpretations of spirituality are also relevant. Ritual practices and a sense of community are important scaffolds during milestone events and life's transitions, but dogmatic structures no longer resonate with many people's values and priorities. This dissonance opens up space where new practices and processes are welcome and can develop in dialogue with contemporary needs and principles.

But perhaps most significant is society's belated but increasing awareness of environmental consequence. Most enlightened people now understand that the choices we make have repercussions that impact the health of the planet. And when given an option with a benign or positive impact, people are motivated to select that choice. Both

“The sheer number of corpses, especially in urban areas, will require thoughtful planning.”



Exhibition 'DeathLAB: Democratizing Death' at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa, Japan, July 2018 - March 2019
Photo by KIOKU Keizo, courtesy of Kanazawa 21C Museum

embalmed casketed burial and cremation are resource-consumptive acts. Neither engages the body on its biological basis, and both take from the earth rather than supporting it. We are finding that people are extremely responsive to the prospect of funerary options that are both natural and elegant and allow us to honour the dead within the communities and contexts in which we live.

In a time of global mobility and increasing geographic dispersal, a static geographic centre (yet alone definition) of "family" is waning. The "family plot" is becoming an outmoded model. I think also in the context of sharing economies, where value constructs of ownership are clearly shifting, the notion of possessing a plot of land in perpetuity after death has come to seem a bit absurd.

BU: How will those changes impact our cities and buildings?

KR: As you know, urban populations are growing – the United Nations forecasts that over 65% of the global population will live in cities by 2050. Space for permanent ownership of land after death has been largely exhausted and displacement of the dead by urban development has a long history. In New York, tens of thousands of disinterred corpses, mostly from Manhattan, were relocated in the mid-1800s to the then-rural cemeteries newly developed in the outer boroughs. In some parts of the world, mass exhumation practices are ongoing.

Culturally, some urban cemeteries are responding to the diverse priorities of their constituents. Certainly in NYC, dedicated spaces for specific cultural rituals have been added to many cemeteries. Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn

has a wonderful cultural calendar of public programming, including theatre, music performances, art projects, and yoga, in addition to historic tours and gatherings more directly related to its funerary operations. This move away from single-purpose programming is significant. It both keeps existing cemeteries relevant to a broader audience and raises the possibility of the core programme of the cemetery migrating beyond its gates.

We are also witnessing a revival in intergenerational appreciation. There is a really interesting project underway called *Nuns and Nones*. Progressive millennials who are not affiliated with any religion – a description that applies to over one third of all Americans under age 30 – are living for six months in a convent with elderly nuns as their roommates. The practice of young progressives meeting regularly with Catholic sisters to discuss social change and justice work is now active in many U.S. cities. This sort of intergenerational alliance is a crucial aspect of effectual change.

We are in a time of climate crisis. Energy consumption, carbon emissions, sea level rise, land preservation – we must be cognizant of the opportunities and responsibility to do better than we have done, including within the funerary industry. Design has a central role to play in those transformations.

DeathLAB

BU: The DeathLAB's website states that its research and design is committed to the radical reshaping of urban public spaces and reconceiving how we live with death in the

“This move away from single-purpose programming is significant. It both keeps existing cemeteries relevant to a broader audience...”



One of DeathLAB and LATENT Productions proposals at the exhibition 'DeathLAB: Democratizing Death'
Photo by Karla Rothstein

metropolis, which enable us to better honour our dead. What are the most important proposals and outcomes of the DeathLAB to do that?

KR: DeathLAB's initiatives intertwine the theoretical, the inspirational, and the practical. Through design and education, we help people imagine possible futures and instigate important conversations. We also engage science and politics to catalyze tangible change. So our work spans from cultural awareness and the critical imaginary to applied research instigating real-world transformations.

Through my graduate-level architecture students, public lectures, stake-holder events, exhibitions, and published works, we are promoting and scaffolding a broad awareness of the necessity and potential to alter the funerary landscape.

Our recent eight-month solo exhibition, DeathLAB: Democratizing Death, at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, was a great opportunity to expand awareness and discussion around our initiative. The installation included a video presentation of DeathLAB's manifesto and mission together with several proposals demonstrating how design can change the way we think about death by reweaving it into the rhythms of daily life to simultaneously honour the dead and create new public spaces for the living. Two monitors were dedicated to our *Dialogue on Death* videos - interviews with architects, urban designers, scholars, heads of cemeteries, and funeral directors, edited into curated conversations addressing the ecology of death, confrontations with death, spaces for remembrance, and cemetery culture. During that same period, a parallel solo show focusing on our *Constellation Park*

project was hosted at ART OMI in Ghent, NY.

When *New York Magazine* named DeathLAB a "Reason to Love New York," we reached a broad new audience. Winning the "Future Cemetery" competition in Bristol, England, expanded our affiliations into Europe.

In parallel with educational outreach and design propositions, we are currently exploring development toward commercialization and the associated legislative changes necessary to facilitate new disposition options in the state of New York.

BU: What kind of legislative changes would be necessary in general and in particular related to your projects? The Seattle-based organization Recompose that is led by Katrina Spade, has, for example, just recently achieved legalization of the conversion of human remains into soil in Washington State. Would that play a role for you too?

KR: Laws intended to ensure respectful treatment of the dead and protect public welfare are multifaceted. In the U.S., each state shapes its own regulations. Some of these statutes date back to the colonial period, and most need modifications to be brought in line with the priorities of contemporary society. Tanya Marsh, who teaches at Wake Forest University, is the expert in this area, but I can tell you that current New York state law dictates that human remains can be buried, cremated, or donated for anatomical research -- so we do need to expand that list to include new, environmentally conscientious options. The law must evolve to reflect contemporary values and circumstances. These regulations are meant to support basic human and social requirements, not obstruct them.

"The installation included a video presentation of DeathLAB's manifesto and mission together with several proposals demonstrating how design can change the way we think about death..."



'Dialogue on Death' videos at the exhibition
'DeathLAB: Democratizing Death'
Photo by Karla Rothstein

Local zoning stipulates where disposition may occur. It is possible that the first realized site of our projects will be within an existing cemetery. We won the “Future Cemetery” competition with a proposal sited in the historic Victorian cemetery of Arnos Vale in Bristol, England.

The recent legislative change in Washington State is very exciting. It's terrific that they are leading the way in broadening available disposition choices. The process we are developing is the anaerobic corollary to aerobic composting. In our case, the end product is energy in the form of light, and organic fertilizer primarily consisting of nitrogen, calcium, phosphorous, and potassium. In the Recompose process, the end product is soil. Other than that, the language of the statute for controlled, accelerated decomposition is applicable to both methods, so their success is both significant and encouraging.

BU: Your “Constellation Park” project seems to be especially interesting when it comes to After Life Urbanism since it received quite some recognition for its re-interpretation of the cemetery in the urban landscape and its democratizing aspects. Could you explain this project and its urban role to us?

KR: “Constellation Park” is a new form of public space that intertwines cemetery, memorial and everyday life. The series of projects that we refer to as “Perpetual Constellation” amplify existing urban infrastructures with new funerary landscapes. The proposal that envisions memorial vessels suspended below the Manhattan Bridge was the second generation of our exploration into the spatial potentials facilitated by engaging anaerobic bio-conversion as a form

of corpse disposition. In these projects, the deceased is placed in a memorial vessel, which replaces the traditional casket. After a personal ceremony with friends and family, the vessel is closed and controlled anaerobic decomposition begins. Natural processes are accelerated within the memorial vessel, and the biogas that is produced during conversion is collected and utilized to fuel a memorial light. The glow of that light will slowly intensify as decomposition unfolds, and then dim as the process concludes. We are each energetic beings, and in these projects, the latent energy of the deceased is manifest as light.

Once decomposition is complete, a small amount of nutrient-rich material can be utilized to fertilize memorial gardens, and the vessel is prepared to receive and support a new occupant. The cyclical nature of the process and the aggregation of vessels are significant in terms of repositioning both time and ownership within the space of death and remembrance. Because the vessels are serially reutilized, the capacity of the system is infinite. And while the light from your loved one has a finite duration, the aggregate constellation of memorial light remains a meaningful and enduring reminder of those we've lost, and also of our collective and shared co-existence.

You mentioned the democratizing aspect of our work. The social impact of our work is important to us. Especially in today's fractured world, we need reminders of our intertwined lives and our shared obligation, not only to one another, but to the future of the planet.

BU: What was the main goal of the “Future Cemetery” com-

““Constellation Park” is a new form of public space that intertwines cemetery, memorial and everyday life.”



Constellation Park project
Image by DeathLAB and LATENT Productions

petition? Was it a competition of ideas? How did you manage to win it? Please explain your entry to us.

KR: The “Future Cemetery” competition was a call for design innovation and creative research related to death and remembrance. It was organized by the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath and the Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust. Arnos Vale, a working historic cemetery in Bristol, England, is proactively planning for its future. It was an intriguing and exciting opportunity because the cemetery is directly seeking new possibilities and creative vision.

For that competition we developed the third generation of our design research, submitting “Sylvan Constellation”, which engages the existing woodland space at Arnos Vale. In this instance, our project is partially grounded, strategically embedded where space amidst the Victorian monuments allows. The majority of the memorial vessels, however, are lofted in dialogue with the tree canopy. Ramps and stairs give access to this parallel space, expanding both the territory and the capacity of the existing cemetery. One exciting aspect of integrating these projects into existing cemeteries is that, in addition to supporting the cemetery’s ability to continue to serve its constituents, the memorial illumination will extend occupancy of the grounds into the evening. Most cemeteries close at dusk because they don’t have the infrastructure necessary for safe access at night. And one of the beautiful things about Arnos Vale Cemetery is that neighbourhood children use it as a shortcut to get to and from school. I really love that image.

As part of the award, DeathLAB spent a summer in Bristol, working within Arnos Vale and together with Calling the

Shots and The Pervasive Media Studio to develop the proposal. Some of the video footage recorded during that time is included in the “Democratizing Death” exhibition. We are in ongoing dialogue with the Centre for Death and Society and hopeful that their fundraising efforts will facilitate a prototype and eventual realization of Sylvan Constellation at Arnos Vale.

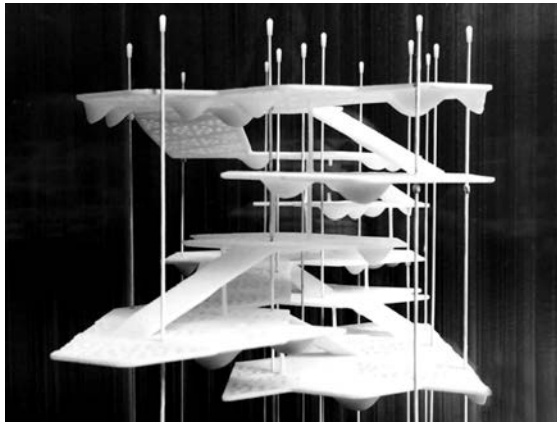
Research and Provocative Exploration

BU: When I first contacted you for this interview, you wrote that you were teaching a summer design studio engaging topics that are very closely related to the ones we want to address with this new MONU issue. How did the studio go and what was its focus?

KR: Yes – I’ve been teaching in the Master of Architecture and Advanced Architectural Degree (AAD) programme at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation for over twenty years. This summer’s AAD studio has just concluded, and the students produced really compelling and innovative projects. As you know, the design studio is a theoretical space of research and provocative exploration. The students in this programme come from all over the world to earn their second professional degree, making it a wonderful opportunity for cultural exchange. And of course, this topic has broad social implications, navigating diverse traditions and beliefs.

My studio was titled “Urban Palimpsests: Accruals and Erasures in the 21st Century Metropolis” and took on the seven-linear block site of Sara D. Roosevelt Park in Man-

“As you know, the design studio is a theoretical space of research and provocative exploration.”



Sylvan Constellation project
Image by DeathLAB and LATENT Productions

hattan's Lower East Side. It's an interesting and complex site for many reasons: the dynamic neighbourhoods that currently abut it are ethnically and economically diverse; Manhattan's early residents utilized the space for farmland and cemeteries, including an African American burial ground; in the 1930s, the blocks were cleared of tenement housing for a never-realized highway project. The Works Progress Administration-era park built in 1934 was part of a larger project of urban social reform. These rich and contentious, voluntary and involuntary histories precede and lace through the futures that the student projects evoke.

Each team responded to the current public and athletic uses of the park and integrated a sustainable cemetery into the existing park-scape. The transformation was radical in some instances and stealthy in others. Each design choreographed the dynamic activities of the living with a gradient of spaces for reflection, meditation, and remembrance. The scales of these projects, by necessity, span from the most individually intimate to the communal, the urban, and the environmental.

BU: You also wrote that you were working on a new book related to the topic. Please provide us a little preview of this book. Did you come up with new conclusions when it comes to death and the city?

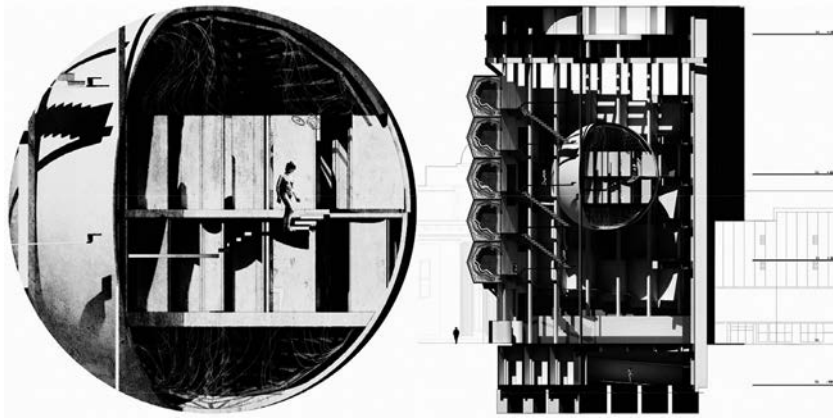
KR: We actually have two books in the works! One is a co-authored book forthcoming from Columbia University Press, with the working title *Post-Mortem: Disposition and Remembrance in the 21st Century Metropolis*. Christina Staudt – an Associate to DeathLAB, hospice volunteer, and the Chair of our University Seminar on Death – and I are al-

ternating chapters. Christina is writing on the sociocultural and community aspects of death, and I am writing on the history and future of design and urbanism related to spaces of death and remembrance, and emerging ecologically sensible mortuary practices. We start by laying out the current landscape of unsustainable burdens and unmet needs, as well as the expurgation of many aspects of death from public view. We discuss increasingly diverse urban populations, values, and priorities and present the imperative for change and dignified, viable solutions. I imagine that the book may have some resonance with this current MONU issue. These topics are so much more widely discussed now than when we first began our research. The University Seminar on Death has been meeting since 1971—the conversation has definitely evolved over the past 50 years!

The book argues that personal rituals and human connections should be scaffolded within cities in ways that enhance public space, enrich spiritual life, and respect the earth's ecology. We think people are ready for design projects that engage sustainable disposition practices and produce elegant civic-sacred urban public spaces.

The second book, an edited volume with ABC-Clio Praeger, follows on a stakeholder colloquium that we organized at Columbia University. Christina and I are primarily serving as editors, and I will write a chapter on DeathLAB's current initiatives. The terrific diversity of authors is both relevant and necessary to this topic. Our cohort includes a historian, a bioethicist, a legal scholar, a public policy expert, a cultural anthropologist, and a specialist in world cultures and religion. I feel so fortunate to be immersed in a topic of such

“We think people are ready for design projects that engage sustainable disposition practices and produce elegant civic-sacred urban public spaces.”



Student Project at Columbia GSAPP DeathLAB
Student Matthew Kennedy

genuine range and consequence.

BU: When looking to the future, which are, according to you, the most pressing changes that need to happen in our society and cities when it comes to After Life Urbanism? How can we achieve them?

KR: So many things would benefit from better design. For sure, when the time comes for our final impactful act, we should each have access to honest, beautiful disposition and memorialization options – choices that resonate with personal priorities and values.

I think that we need to take our connections to and responsibility for the planet and one another more seriously. The perspective and framework of legacy is crucial to this. What impacts do we wish to have? What residues will our children inherit?

The world is fractured but not yet broken. Nature is resilient, and human beings are capable of intentional adaptation. But fundamentally, I think we all need to be more aware, more present, and more generous. I believe that thinking about our own mortality brings these very human qualities to the surface and makes them more accessible. This is why the re-engagement with and coexistence between life and death is central to our work. Most people don't think about what they don't see.

Everything is intertwined. We need to synthesize the capacities of science with evolving cultural beliefs to develop elegant, resourceful solutions to urgent and ubiquitous challenges. By shifting architectural and experiential rela-

tionships to death, we are responding to society's impacts on the Earth and the consequences of the choices we make while alive. Changing what we do at the end of life can inspire and inform the decisions we make along the way and encourage intergenerational connections, a sense of stewardship, and thinking for the long term.

We need to be simultaneously pragmatic and visionary.

Karla Rothstein is an architect, professor, and creative thinker living, practicing, and teaching in New York City. Her areas of research span intimate spaces of metropolitan domestic life and infrastructures of death and memory. Her interest focuses on the intersections of social justice and the built environment. In both her professional work as design director at LATENT Productions and through over a decade of studios taught at the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, Karla engages with alternative and emerging methods of corpse disposal in progressive proposals of civic sanctuary and temporal urban remembrance. As a member of the Columbia University Seminar on Death since 2011, she is committed to the radical reshaping of urban public spaces, which enable us to better honor our dead.

Bernd Upmeyer is the editor-in-chief and founder of MONU Magazine. He is also the founder of the Rotterdam-based Bureau of Architecture, Research, and Design (BOARD). He holds a PhD in Urban Studies from the University of Kassel, Germany. He is the author of the book "Binational Urbanism – On the Road to Paradise", in which he creates a theory of binational urbanism, a term coined by him.

Thanks to Jawaad Issoop and Chiara De Mattia for helping to prepare this interview.

"This is why the re-engagement with and coexistence between life and death is central to our work."