after life

Landscape Architecture Graduate Core Studio Fall 2019
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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

Last May, shortly after the end of classes, I sat down to enjoy a cup of coffee and read *The New York Times*, (yes, this is an old-fashioned pleasure) and as I leisurely flipped the pages of the newspaper an article concerning a new law that will go into effect in May of 2020 in Washington State that will allow human remains to be composted above ground captured my attention. Intrigued, and I will admit, morbidly fascinated, I continued to read.

The natural decomposition of bodies above ground, I discovered, is an ancient alternative to burial but it is seldom practiced in the United States. Most bodies are instead buried, which takes up scarce land, particularly in cities, or cremated, which uses appreciable amounts of energy and produces significant amounts of green house gases. Washington State, and the new entrepreneurs of alternative burial practices want a come back of the old ways, but they have inflected this practice with a new high-tech, factory-efficient hygiene.

Advocates of the process, including Katrina Spade, the founder of the company, “Recompose” and a proponent of the new law who became interested in alternative practices while writing a masters thesis on urban burial in architecture school, tout the process as economical and sustainable. “Washington is a progressive state when it comes to the environment and death care,” she stated. The total cost is $5,000. Currently, Recompose is looking for a warehouse facility to begin operation. The rendering of the scheme that appears in the *New York Times* article makes suggests the company wants to situate operations in an old industrial warehouse, on a brownfield site.

The process of body composting above ground is simple. As conceived by “Recompose,” the body is wrapped in organic material, such as alfalfa — to encourage decomposition — before placing it in a rotating drum container, and then bathing it in air warmed by microbes. The drums are located at the top of a vertical facility, and during the decomposition process the remains move down through the levels of the facility toward the earth. In four to six weeks (based upon the time of decomposition of animal carcasses in livestock decomposition), the bodies are decomposed, and they produce about one cubic yard of soil per person. The remains can then be returned to the soil, spread on a garden, or used to plant a tree. There is no coffin, no chemicals, and no use of fossil fuels; and, in a cost-saving alternative to either traditional or Green Cemeteries, a cemetery plot does not have to be purchased. Another version of the facility, described in *Wired* magazine, allows families to walk up a long curving ramp and place the body of the deceased in a bed of hay, straw and alfalfa at the top of

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a multi-story vertical facility. As the decomposition process proceeds the remains fall down through the levels of the facility toward the earth. The layers of bodies are separated by straw, hay, and alfalfa. Here, there is no guarantee that the soil families receive after death is strictly that of a loved one. In response, Spade notes: “If what we are trying to do is reconnect to the fact that we’re all part of this grand natural world, let’s say, ok, we really are part of a system that is greater than ourselves.” The anticipated benefits of a “death positive” philosophy, they argue, transforms the discussion of death from the realm of the memento mori, to an act engagement that celebrates life. The Catholic Church is opposed to the bill, saying that composting is contrary to church doctrine, as it fails to show enough respect for the body of the deceased.

The “Green Cemetery,” which allows for burial without embalming — the art of treating human bodies with chemicals to forestall decomposition — or caskets and headstones, is contemporary forerunner of body composting. In Green Cemeteries bodies are buried in “natural” landscapes, often meadows full of wildflowers. Another alternative, which the Washington State 2020 burial law will also allow, is a process known as alkaline hydrolysis, or liquid cremation, which uses heat, pressure, water and chemicals, such as lye, to reduce the amount of human remains for burial. In this process, the liquid remains are sterilized prior to burial to destroy all viruses and bacteria.

Each of the above mentioned burial practices are considered environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional burial in which a body is placed in a casket and buried in a cemetery. Most caskets are made of steel, bronze, copper, and hardwoods, and they include soft padding, often made of synthetic material, to cushion the body. Embalming chemicals, as well as clothing, and in some cases jewelry, pictures, and other personal and family mementos are buried with the body.

In addition to claiming that it is less disruptive to the planet’s ecosystem and it returns the body’s nutrients to the earth, proponents of body composting also call attention to the fact that death practices in modern societies go to great lengths to shield mourners from decay. But there are also several drawbacks that they fail to mention. For example, the composting of the body uses heat, and it kills pathogens such as viruses and bacteria, but not prions. It also does not remove heavy metals or toxic chemicals – lead, fluorine, mercury, cadmium, arsenic, and pesticides – that are accumulated in bodies from a lifetime of exposure to the toxins of modern agriculture, animal feed, medicine, and toxic building materials. In other words, the composting bodies may actually concentrate these materials in specific locations and, inadvertently create brownfield sites.

An important part of death practices, is memorialization of the individual after death, as normally seen in cemetery headstones. This is still possible with body composting. Proponents often call for the planting of memorial trees in environmentally friendly memorial gardens, which acts as both a marker of remembrance and a means to sequester carbon.

New Jersey is a densely populated, multicultural state, represented by numerous religions and burial practices, and thus an intriguing venue to explore the future of burial practices in the 21st century. Accordingly, this studio will explore the history of burial in different cultures, countries, and religions, and document the historical change in these practices over time. This work will document traditional practices, modern medical practices for the preparation and transport of bodies, as well as high-tech alternatives, and the information will subsequently be used to create a proposal for a cemetery burial ground, green cemetery landscape, body decomposition facility, or crematorium. The choice of the type of burial and burial facility, or combination of burial practices and facilities will be left up to each student. A chapel or place of remembrance for the families will also be included in the design.

**PROJECT EXERCISES:**
In addition to the study of historical burial practices, exercises will explore the notion of death through word, image, and form, and it will relate these actions to the conceptualization of the landscape as an imaginary “place” that generates/reflects both personal experience and cultural meaning; a constructed “space” composed of buildings, roads, and pathways; and a situated “environment” impacted by climate, topography, hydrology, soils, plants and animals. Exercises will be distributed in class. Readings associated with the exercises will be distributed in class and discussed.

**THE SITE:**
Divine Word Missionaries, Bordentown, NJ. The site, which was formerly the estate of Joseph Bonaparte, the elder brother of Napoleon Bonaparte and the disposed King of Naples and Spain, is situated at the confluence of the Delaware River and Crosswicks Creek adjacent to Abbott Marsh. Abbott Marsh is considered one of the most important wetlands in New Jersey, and prior to European settlement it was an important center for the Leni Lenape Native Americans.

**STUDIO LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**
**Conceptual:**
Learn to understand the site as palimpsest.
Learn to understand the relationship between data collection, critical thinking and representation.
Learn to understand the importance of on-site observation.
Learn to research the multiple ramifications of design decision-making.

Social:
Recognize the value of teamwork, and how to seamlessly move between individual and group efforts.
Recognize design as an inclusive process that encompasses a diverse group of people with different, and often conflicting needs and interests.

Technical:
Visualize physical and social relationships through mapping, section, model, perspective, and collage.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Grading Procedures and Academic Integrity Policies:
Course grades will be given as letters. When an assignment is given a number out of 100 it corresponds to:

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<th>Grade</th>
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Grades and feedback for assignments will be provided to the student on a timely basis. Students should be aware of their current course average. It is up to you to speak with the Instructor if there are any discrepancies or concerns about your course performance.

If any personal circumstances inhibit your ability to fulfill the requirements of this course, immediately contact the instructor. Any student with a special need, circumstance, or disability, should make an appointment to see the instructor during the first week of classes. The syllabus and course schedule are subject to change. Any changes to the syllabus or schedule will be announced in the scheduled lecture periods. It is your responsibility to stay informed!

Violations of the University Academic Integrity Policy:
Plagiarism is the representation of the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic work.

Note: Proper paper citations are required to avoid plagiarism. For further information on the Academic Integrity Policies of Rutgers: http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml.