

archi|DOCT

*The e-journal for the
dissemination of doctoral
research in architecture.*

Supported by the ENHSA Network | *Fueled by the* ENHSA Observatory

July 2015
www.enhsa.net/archidoct
ISSN 2309-0103
DIVERSITY

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Shifting matters of mortality: Neo-medievalism and re-contextualisa- tion of macabre

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Abstract

Death arises a whole new era in design, which is subject to thought, cultural responsiveness and emergent materiality. This paper aspires to dip into diversity of speculative projects exploring fictional scenarios on transcultural funerary conditions. This variety is aliquoted into imaginative interplays and cynical approaches on the confinement between the 'seen' and the 'unseen'. Based upon extended doctoral research, this paper attempts comparatives between re-contextualization of macabre concepts and precedents of the past. The notion of neo-medievalism refers to emerging mechanisms of re-speculating one's own death, beyond localities. Contemporary design cultures often reveal multi-layered references to the 'darkness of death' and present interesting cases and transformations of the 'horrific'. These cases refer to a fragile balance between a profound fascination and simultaneous transcending of death's obscurity and grotesque. It is within this paper's goals to trace this fragile balance.

Keywords

Materiality, speculative cemetery design, death, neo-medievalism

Introducing argumental comparatives: Emergent matter correlated with medieval references

Based upon mature doctoral research, this paper attempts to address a multiplicity of matters expressing mediated re-personification of mortality. The notion of multiplicity reflects variable dimensions correlated to certain diverse expressions of familiarity and matters of human decay. Within such concepts, a handful of indicative speculations trace thresholds of matter as memory and thresholds of matter as process.

A series of reasonable questions may occur to the sound of such a topic. How can materiality and materialism associate with mortality, in the rich and multifaceted context of contemporary computational architecture? How would it be possible to associate current responses to death with medieval concepts? What may possibly be the asset of computational tools to such an era? Originating from a remote relation to the general themes of computation, this paper attempts certain thematic delegations relating to emerging matters of death.

During medieval times, synthetic process had been evidently different compared to present days. Every edifice had to be identical to another and innovation did not matter at all. Gombrich states that 'our contemporary notion that an architect or an artist has to be original wouldn't be shared by artists of the past. A medieval artist of the West would have never understood why he should invent new ways when the old ones served their purpose well' (1950). For the long and blurred period of Dark ages, it is interesting to scale upon notions of 'synthetic process' and 'edifice'. Regarding western art, as following the decay of classic ancient world, Gombrich renders a continuous melting pot of different genres. These genres may often appear conflicting, both in relation to each other, as well as in relation to the so called savageness of that age. Through variable conflicts, there are certain thresholds of subtleness emerging.

Regarding medieval funerary edifice, the most important issue would be the calling to mind of the deceased person's identity and not the remembrance of the precise place where the body had been placed. Funerary edifice and religious art of the time would reflect great skill, subtle expertise and inspiring complexity. Philippe Aries traces the same general attitude towards death from Homer to Tolstoy. Though, he comments on variations of funerary objects evolving during the long medieval ages. By taming death, unprecedented familiarity with the living is celebrated, attaching almost no importance to the place of burial (1977). This variable expression transforms into sensibility currencies of the age up until medieval fascination with the macabre and beyond.

Within this introduction, a shift from vulgate of death to matters of altered attitude may be traced. Today, death arises a whole new era in design, which is subject to thought, responsiveness and unexplored materiality. This paper aspires to dip into the great variety of speculative projects exploring fictional scenarios on funerary conditions. The notion of neo-medievalism refers to emerging mechanisms of re-speculating one's own death. Therefore, it refers to shifting balance between contemporary funerary edifices and mediated emerging rituals.

Based upon extended research on evolving topological awareness of contemporary places of burial, this paper delegates to thematic comparatives between unexplored materiality of human decay and re-contextualization of past funerary concepts. Most of the cases mentioned refer to fragile balances between profound fascination and simultaneous transcending of death's obscurity. It is until the age of scientific progress, no matter how that may be defined, that human beings greatly accepted an idea of continuation, in good grace. That idea allotted a coherent response to mortality, featuring a commonplace throughout classic antiquity. Commensurability between classic ancient coherence and medieval changefulness may

arise as a correlation and potential origin for contemporary imagery.

It is tempting to correlate a 16th century pendant, featuring the double profile of a monk's head, with contemporary edifice. This piece of art is indicative of funerary objects of its time, featuring part of the monk's head with all elements of its living condition and the other part of it featuring its partly decomposed equivalent. In present days, Ulric Colette's work series on genetic portraits form an attempt of assembling similarities between relatives of different age. He is featuring common people heads, half of them featuring facial elements of their young living condition and the other half featuring their aged condition. This correlation of imagery reveals similarities in currents of mortality and established husbandry with death.

In the age of computation, a life-sized, nude self-portrait, rendered from the artist's own bodily fluid, which is fed intravenously to a CNC machine is possible. The question arising is what triggers a contemporary artist to experiment with synthetic processing, using his own blood? Ted Lawson's 'Ghost in the machine' is using technology to achieve organicness into drawing. The artist himself claims that this use of ever-expanding technology is something deeply variable, profoundly diverse and real, instated in the centerness of his work.

Distinct modes: Forming and per-forming matters of death

Extending thoughts on distinct modes of fictional agility on funerary cultures and processes, what is discussed here is emerging versions of designed and fabricated matter as well as the physical substances revealed through a new era of speculative design. A great variety of concepts and ideas are currently bringing forward two cases. These could be divided into a dual aspect of:

- non-organic matter
- organic matter

Within this paper, inorganic matters of death relate to multiple issues and expressions of memory. The second aspect would relate to variable thresholds of matter and mediative processes of interrelation to living entities. The distinction between these two aspects may be far from absolute. Such modes of transition from matter to dematerialisation reflect processes of commutation to essential elements.

Through current urge for death re-contextualisation, precedents and concrete disciplines are being transformed into eco-green care and inventive wrappings of mortality. There are numerous features relating to emerging matters of death. There is wide range of edifice featuring ashes as medium for personification of the descendants' identity. Inventive cadavers are being designed, such as artificial trees, cocoons and capsules. In most of these cases there is provocative breaking of frontiers and unprecedented expanding to a whole new field. There is also revelation of stimulating modes of interaction between postmortem care and natural processes. What we may experience in the near future is unprecedented emergence of rituals featuring vital matters related to death and its venter. Emerging matter involves mourning textiles, which are dissolving while passing time heals, transformation of digital heritage into physical and habitable surfaces, CNC mills transposing generative forms into casting moulds or visions for cadavers slowly going to light with the use of light algae or glow fungi. Someone may also observe conventional places of burial replaced by nebulas of air-travelling capsules causing rain. Such cases trigger a whole new sequence of speculative design, great potential for burial displacement and re-contextualisation of funerary edifice.

Where can the limits of 'synthetic process', in this design era, be traced? What is the meaning of 'edifice', in the age of computation? These are reasonable questions arising through a handful of examples mentioned within this paper. The distinction between matter as memory and matter as process may relate to variant thresholds of essence and layers of compound. This distinction may establish either static or performative re-personification of death and its potential for morphogenetic agency.

Fifty years after Panofsky's *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, there are still researchers quoting that 'tomb sculpture will remain... among the basic works which determine turning points in the history of our discipline'. Both distinctive matters relate to triggering shifts in funerary edifice and cultures. In the case of Janice Wu and Gloria Ng there is a statement about ashes as 'relic of the dead' finding place in the familiarity of every contemporary home. Their visualization of an hour-glass dripping the ashes of the descendant relates to variant layers of memory. Ida Hammarlund and Alyse Sedlock suggest a new type of burial procedure, by taking on distinct earth forms different from that of the pre-existing mausoleum type. 'Fantastic repose' is their project, under professor Hernan Diaz Alonzo, for an urban burial park evoking new understanding of the experience intended for worship and mourning. Burial repetitive space initiates deformations and transforms into new forms of edifice.

In terms of the second distinctive mode, organic matter relates to variable and differentiated processes associated with natural matter. The imagery presented by Edna Reuveni, is the product of design research on salt. The biodegradable cocoons are designed to contain human bodies and they are made from a combination of kosher salt, rice flour and water. Edna Reuveni has worked on this combination of materials, capable of being moulded for variable shaping, and aiming at certain characteristics promoting eco-design conceptions. In dry environments this cocoon acts as preservative container and in humid environments it starts decomposing together with its content. Luminescent algae memorial sarcophagi and glow fungi memorial chests are evident of emergent behavior towards death and performative rituals of mourning relating to natural matters. Mirjam van Overbeek Eindhoven states that oxygen supplying algae funeral algae can be used variously in funerals. Hollow mold pressed forms can be made of different materials, mixed with human ashes and float for several hours, or slowly wreck in a garden. A special gel with luminous algae (for the case of water environments) or natural glow fungi (for the case of ground environments) can create luminous effect for about a week, in certain environments. Infinity burial project, composed by visual artist Jae Rhim Lee, is a prototype for a body suit, embroidered with thread infused with mushroom spores. This embroidery pattern is a decomposing mechanism. Combination of two parts, one with dried mushroom spores and second with liquid culture medium, potentially activates development and growth of mushroom pattern aiming at engagement with process of decomposition. The team of studio PSK have visualized the project 'I wish to be rain', which is an evolution from conventional funerary edifice into types of natural spectacle. Following funeral and cremation, this project literally suggests that a vessel containing human remains and a dormant aerostat may cause rain through cloud seeding.

The nature of death: Mortality in the melting pot

Apparent shifts in expressions of mortality, through emerging concepts for deathcare, embrace advanced tools, modifications and procedures applying certain qualities to eternal edifice and natural matters, as well as engagement with process of decomposition. Michel Pacault, among others, has argued that a very important historical mutation occurred between eleventh and thirteenth century. The manner in which men applied their thoughts to their surroundings and concerns underwent a profound transformation, while mental processes evolved radically (1972). Philippe Aries grasps this important change in the *speculum mortis* (1976). Today, someone may observe computational tools emerging as medium for calling to mind the memory of the descendant, in a variety of unprec-



edented manners. Today, a triggering shift in the way humans express their mortality is becoming widely evident. This shift is both poetic and pragmatic, manifesting an emerging changing of attitudes.

Medieval macabre as correlated to the contemporary expressions of mortality, reveals a precedent for a new familiarity with death. This familiarity is expressed through both distinctive modes.

Conclusions on Dirty Futures: Beyond death ecologies and synthetic thresholds of matter

This paper argued for unprecedented matters of re-invention related to death and human decay. Such a case emerged through diverse highlights of unexplored thresholds of materiality. If our 'microbiome' extends to our environment, leaving traces in the air and on surfaces evident of our inhabitation, the distinction between matter of decay and its relation to living entities reflects certain cultural and fictional thresholds. In terms of organic matter of death it is interesting to quote Geoff Ward and its points on biomes as reflected to eras of human mortality, blurring the boundaries of what is 'us' and what is 'other' (2013).

The diversity of correlations that emerges between human decay and natural processes reflects general and specific focus on differentiated qualities and assets.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws up delegations on certain aspects related to mature doctoral research and has been composed in the case of International Conference 'What's the Matter. Materiality and Materialism at the Age of Computation'.

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