

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING AND PRESERVATION

## Library of Liminality

A 21<sup>st</sup> century archive of life and death

[Karla Rothstein](#)

Certain places within cities are havens for thought and exploration—vibrant spaces of unfettered civic life, environments where exceptional ideas are synthesized with complex human realities, and locations where contemplation coexists with a truly public domain of social communion.

The library is one of these realms; an enriching public building that shapes social conscience and consequence while negotiating organizational and cultural complexity. The spatial situation of the library is that of an intimate body located within implicit collectives; yet the impacts of the institution are at the scale of the city and more meaningful than any single individual. A library is understood as a part of the city's distributed infrastructure and operates as a civic amenity to the communities with which it is interlaced. Our increasingly dense cities in these rapidly changing times require innovative thinking in critical dialogue with ecological cycles to reimagine public space within the future metropolis.

Considered through lenses of public engagement and legacy, projects in this studio will define new civic places that reside in and between the universal and the individual, the built and the natural, the past, the present and the future, and the associated spatial, social and political delineations that accompany our shared mortality. Explorations will intersect with the trans-disciplinary initiative of Columbia University's [DeathLAB](#) (Links to an external site.), where we grapple with the spatial and cultural potentials of life and death. Human mortality is often referred to as the "Great Equalizer." The libraries that you design will engage all New Yorkers – organizing and democratizing death while celebrating life.

The program is a *Library of Liminality*. A limen is a threshold; it is the minimum amount by which one stimulus has to differ from another for the distinction to be perceptible. It is subtle and precise beyond measure, calibrated simultaneously by the metrics of physics and the subjectivity of perception. The nuance and temporal nature of liminality shapes both materiality and judgment. Liminal space modulates boundaries and relationships between the tangibility of the known and the unfamiliarity of the Other. In the design of these libraries, the tectonics that support liminal states of cognizance will be explored, revealing unexpected beauty in the prosaic of the everyday, and in the subconscious space of memory.

The *Library of Liminality* is a socio-cultural institution, a temporal repository and exhibition of individual and collective human vitality. It is a new, integrated multi-functional "cemetery" building and landscape for the living that serves as both legacy and catalyst for the future. Each student will define the content and agenda of the building's archive. As civic amenities these libraries are places of inspiration and introspection, spaces of immersive and catalytic experience. Bodies, space, water, light, legacy, and memories will be sorted, aggregated, edited, sheltered and shared. Like all libraries and good architecture in general, your projects will create bridges between the physical and the experiential.

## ETHOS

Studio culture is immeasurable. The design studio is a space of curiosity, creativity, ingenuity and generosity. The context in which we think affects what we think. The character of the studio, therefore, frames our relationship to opportunity, reflects what we value, and influences how passionately we learn and grow.

Architecture is about choice and consequence. Design requires focus and experimentation, analysis and calibration, imagination and vision. Spatial and material innovation develop in dialogue with the political, environmental, and shared complexities of our time.

The library you design will engage an intricate and multi-scalar world, a diverse urban community, and the intimacy of the solitary individual.

## **PROCESS**

Design, as a practice, requires discipline and grace, curiosity and tenacity. Our studio is an intellectual space of intensely iterative exploration and inquiry. You will think, make and draw in equal measure, ideally simultaneously, and with open-ended determination.

Individual projects will assert clear conceptual positions that facilitate nonlinear evolution through rigorous exploration, analyses, proposition, and consequence. Indeterminate and liminal conditions of both memory mechanisms and quotidian rituals will be mined for spatial provocation and potential social adjustment. Projects will convey the metamorphic and operational potential of theoretical architectural propositions, revealing new sequences of simultaneity in civic and intimate territory.

Constraints facilitate productivity. We will explore matrices of catalytic variables, iteratively negotiating ideas, aspirations, material, craft, structure, and cultural relevance – producing sometimes meandering, but always-useful work. We will explore how systems of relationships inform structures of space and social interaction, how complex phenomena emerge out of precise organizations, and how strategic rules function to promote exploration and surpass perceived limits.

Conceptual and spatial relationships will be mapped and scrutinized to inform your design. Projects will resolve parameters of boundaries, thresholds, and spatial and temporal organizations, while engaging public space and framing extraordinary experiences. The semester will include overlapping exercises—analytical, abstract, theoretical, and spatial – rapid, episodic searches delineated by a conceptual scaffold that you define, and toward the development of exceptional, and viscerally compelling space.

## **DISCOURSE**

We take critical dialogue seriously. Our studio is a crucible of intense exploration and exchange. You will serve as both supporter and critic of your colleagues: broadening your mind with curiosity and productive contamination by the best of your peers, building more intelligence and conviction into your ideas.

We will question dogma and embrace strong, sometimes conflicting arguments. We will assess and provoke cultural fetishes and stubborn nostalgic residues, while stretching the limits of what may be considered socially acceptable structures of organization, adjacency, and access. Projects and conversations will push past prefabricated or maudlin socio-emotive preconception, interweaving propositions into the New York City fabric and instigating transformative reverberations into the evolution of the everyday.

Pin-ups will be frequent and lively, start on time, free of distracting devices, and be exuberantly engaged by all. Desk-crits will focus on tangible drawings and models produced. The character of the Studio is courageous, self-motivated, productive, and enjoys the challenge and satisfaction of the sometimes-difficult work that cultivates excellent design.

## **EXPECTATION**

Architecture is precise. Our studio presumes a level of expertise—the possession, within each individual, of both technical capacities and unique abilities that can be exploited to awaken architectural innovation. Here, ‘freedom’ is understood as careful engagement with the contexts that inform your work, commitment to risk-taking, critical experimentation, and rising to the highest fulfillment of potential. Students are expected to work with rigor, dedication, productivity and respect: respect for radical ideas, innovative substance, prolific collaboration, and exquisite creation.

We will work exactly with number, scale and measure. How many lives may be recorded here? How much space does each life occupy? and for how long? How are stories shared? Transformed? Forgotten? How does the architecture facilitate an engagement with the scale and complexity of human lives and the city?

Emergent logics will guide diagnostic explorations. Assertions will be supported by tangible evidence within your work. Effective proof will take compelling and relevant forms and may require methods we have never before seen. Relationships between concept, theory and idea, and the physical exploration, production and performance of a project will be meticulously crafted. Arguments will be lucid. And like all decisions, color should be used with intention.

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## **DATES**

We will meet on Friday 19.January at 2pm in 408 Avery. Bring something physical – made prior to this term - that is the result of your effort and makes you proud, with a backstory that you'd like to share with the group.

Your first pin up will be on Monday 22.January in 409 Avery. The room is available to you at 1:30. Please be prepared to begin at 2pm. Subsequent pin ups before the Midterm are scheduled for Friday 26.January (408), Friday 02.February (504), Friday 16 February (TBD), Wednesday 21.February (505).

The Mid-Review for our studio will occur Friday 02.March (Ware Lounge). Please be prepared to begin at 1pm.

Post-Midterm pin ups will be on Monday 19.March (115), Wednesday 28.March (Ware), Wednesday 04.April (TBD), and you will have a juried First Final Review on Friday 13.April (115).

The Final Review will occur on Monday 23.April (Avery 504 and 505). Be prepared to begin at 1pm.

After the final review you will work as a team to prepare a collaborative exhibit of our studio's work at the End of Year Show. EOYS will open on Saturday 12. May. All students should plan to be in NYC through this always exciting event.

Please refer to Core II Schedule for all other dates and requirements.

## TECTONICS

Pat Arnett, PE, Principal at Robert Silman Associates Structural Engineers will be joining us for three working sessions: one before the Midterm and two in the second half of the semester. Students must have physical models and printed, dimensioned drawings to instigate constructive dialogue and advance conceptual and tectonic aspirations. No straight line can be struck between inspiration and proposition. Work will be iteratively imbued with the essence of intent, yet must undergo significant metamorphosis toward maturation. Codes and structures are embedded in conceptual and theoretical purpose, but must be precisely translated toward proposition.

## REFERENCES

In addition to the studio-wide Bibliography, the following suggested References / Resources may be useful to your research and the critical positioning of your work.

**Allen, Stan.** *Notations and diagrams: Mapping the Intangible in Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, 2009

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**Appiah, Kwame Anthony.** *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, 2010

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**Cadwell, Michael.** *Strange Details*, 2007

**Colomina, Beatrice.** *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, 1996

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**Holl, Steven.** *Parallax*, 2000

**Johnson, Steven.** *Emergence: the Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, 2001

**Kahn, Louis.** *Monumentality*, 1944

**Kubler, George.** *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 1962

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**Rothstein, Karla.** *The New Civic–Sacred: Designing for Life and Death in the Modern Metropolis*, *Design Issues*

Volume 34, Issue 1, p.29-41, 2018

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**Suzuki, Hisao.** *A+U: 522 Supermodels*, 2014

**Tanizaki, Jun'ichiro.** *In Praise of Shadows*, 1977

**Vidler, Anthony.** *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, 1994

**Karla Rothstein** is a practicing architect and adjunct Associate Professor teaching design studios at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. She is the founder and director of Columbia's trans-disciplinary DeathLAB and a member of the Columbia University *Seminar on Death*. Rothstein's areas of inquiry weave intimate spaces of urban life, death and memory with intersections of social justice, the environment, and civic infrastructure. She is also Design Director at LATENT Productions, the architecture, research, and development firm she co-founded with Salvatore Perry. In this role, she utilizes a deep understanding of the political and practical aspects of realizing built work, and the importance of the societal and cultural levers to promote positive change within communities. In 2016, LATENT Productions and DeathLAB were awarded first place in the international "Future Cemetery" competition and DeathLAB's initiative was recognized as one of *New York Magazine's* 47 'Reasons to Love New York.' Among other international publications, Rothstein's first single-family house is included in Kenneth Frampton's *American Masterworks* 2nd edition, Rizzoli 2008. LATENT is currently re-vivifying a 240,000 SF / 9-acre former cotton spinning mill campus in the Berkshires - @GreylockWORKS, building 25 units of affordable housing for home ownership in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and a meandering private urban oasis behind a translucent faceted façade in Carroll Gardens. Rothstein is known to write in the margins of her books – sometimes profusely and almost always in ink.

<http://www.deathlab.org> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. @studioRothstein <http://www.latentnyc.com> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. @gsappdeathlab <http://www.greylockworks.com> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. @greylockworks <http://magazine.columbia.edu/features/spring-2016/making-light-death>, <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/13/370446879/avant-garde-afterlife-space-shortage-inspires-new-burial-ideas> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site., <http://inhabitat.com/heres-what-the-environmentally-friendly-cemetery-of-the-future-could-look-like/> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site., <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/12/reasons-to-love-new-york-2016.html#forty-three> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.