

ARCH A4441_FALL 2026_v.260805

Professor: **Karla Rothstein**, kmr16@columbia.edu

Sequence: **Design Seminar / Architecture Elective**, Full Semester, 3 points

Note: Students in MArch + most programs at GSAPP may enroll in design seminars as a free elective.

AAD students may enroll in design seminars as a Visual Technology elective or a GSAPP elective.

Tuesdays 11am - 1pm 200 Buell North

Interlaced Existence: Death, Life, Liminality

"It is not so easy to decipher where exactly life begins and ends. Our official taxonomies are attempts to impose structure on a continuum that is in truth full of ambiguities."

- Meghan O'Gieblyn, in *God, Human, Animal, Machine*, 2021

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION

This seminar investigates the material and temporal aspects of mortality, scrutinizing intricate connections across all scales of life, death, and design. We posit that mortality is a form of agency, and that life and death are elegantly intertwined. Through close reading, precise writing, critical conversation, and independent research, you will unpack and re-frame diverse conventions, rituals, and priorities: those both culturally valued and under siege.

The future is relational. And moral deliberations begin with noticing.

Life-Death¹: beyond all binaries and dualities, a delicate web connects and characterizes inextricable simultaneities across multi-scalar cycles of life and death.² While seemingly discernible, the constituents of life and death are inseparable, each defining the other in a shifting gradient of presence and absence. We will attend to these liminal interdependencies and the generative reciprocity of imagination and care, throughout the term.

Early in the semester, students will identify independent research interests to facilitate rigorous, discursive interaction among the seminar participants and the subjects of your study, simultaneously elevating and focusing our weekly conversations. Selected topics may be analytical, conceptual, metaphysical, existential, historical, propositional, projective... Meticulous research will include

¹ In Japanese Buddhism the term Shōji translates as Life-Death. "Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching," composed in the thirteenth century by Zen master Eihei Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō Zen school.

² Ostaseski, Frank. *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*, 2017

in-determinacy, analysis, making, writing, gradients, positions and poetry; likely generating as many questions as answers.

Collectively we will search for aliveness and even shreds of optimism amidst the realities of the world's mounting griefs and pains, losses and reconfigurations.

SELECT STUDENT PROJECTS from the Fall 2023, '24, and '25 Interlaced Existence Seminars may be viewed [HERE](#)

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12_n9KlXoAjcSqGiBmUrAUkcsUF4YM32E?usp=sharing



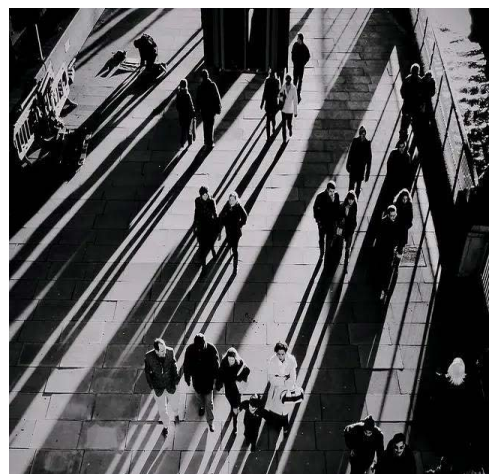
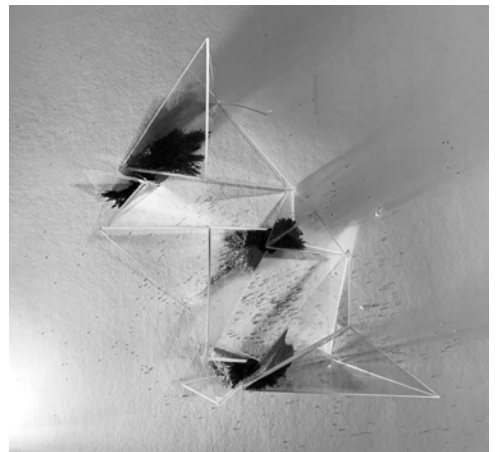
SEMINAR STRUCTURE

The structure of this design seminar is **highly participatory**. Substantive in-class dialogue and debate will constitute a significant measure of your thoughts and your grade. Critical thought and imagination are responsive, shaped by what we read, write, see, hear, discuss, and debate. **Engaged conversations cultivate robust ideological exploration.** Through dialogue we expand what is imaginable—and with it, the space to meet urgent needs.

The semester will begin with a series of **conversations** instigated by readings, your written responses, and short illustrated presentations by Rothstein on **mortality's scales, temporality, and matter**. Each class will also include a brief in-class writing exercise. Topics will include the *Civic-Sacred*, the *Presence of Absence*, the *Matter of the Corpse*, *Dispositions on Disposition*, and the *Necropolis Interlaced with the Metropolis*, **re-centering death back into urban and everyday life**.

By midnight Sunday, prior to each Tuesday seminar, students will upload a brief response to the week's topic and readings, and submit two potential discussion questions to our Canvas *Discussions* platform. Occasionally, brief in-class writing prompts will offer you additional opportunity to express your critical and philosophical thinking.

By week 4 or 5 seminar participants will formulate and share hypotheses on their independent research projects. Outcomes may be meticulous conceptual material investigations, analytical video/written presentations, or other formats relevant to your objectives, and may be produced individually or in productive pairs. In all cases research will rigorously explore the **critical edges of sociocultural, visual, technological, conceptual, material and/or political aspects of mortality**.



Before the first working-presentation of research in October, each student or team will upload their project's Statement of Purpose and a resonant reading.

Developing comfort with exploring discomfort, wonder, nuance, and uncertainty is encouraged. Support of your peers' inquiries is expected. As occupants of and contributors to the built environment, **design, space, and consequence will frame our dialogue**. Students are expected to take informed critical positions and should anticipate that respectful intersections across politics, spirituality, ecosystems, trans-species co-habitation, performance, technology, emotion, social justice, personal experience, history, and more will regularly surface in seminar conversations. Motivation, curiosity, reflection, and critically optimistic dialogue are imperative.

Columbia University DeathLAB:

Reconceiving How We Live with Death in the City

Founded and directed by Rothstein, DeathLAB is a coalition of designers, researchers, and critical thinkers examining the social, environmental, and logistical dimensions of death and remembrance in our society. Our group, initiated at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP), has since 2010 explored the topic of death, the environmental and social implications of funerary methods, and the spatial and experiential dimensions of bereavement through literary and laboratory research, published books and articles, colloquia, international museum exhibitions, public and academic fora and lecture series, and instruction of graduate advanced architectural design studios and seminars at GSAPP. This course will build upon that body of work. DeathLAB is cultivating society's relationships with death to make mortuary practices sustainable and land-efficient in dense urban contexts. Our work is collaboratively cross-disciplinary, engaging the science of decomposition with a focus on real-world potentials, re-imagining how the spaces of death, grief, and memorialization can better support living urban communities, including the ability to honor the deceased, respectfully grieve, and meet the social and economic needs of NYC's diverse residents. Projects support intergenerational connections to nature, to one another, and to the more-than-human world.

see: <https://deathlab.org/>,
<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/research/labs/3-death-lab>,
<https://death.universityseminars.columbia.edu/content/about>

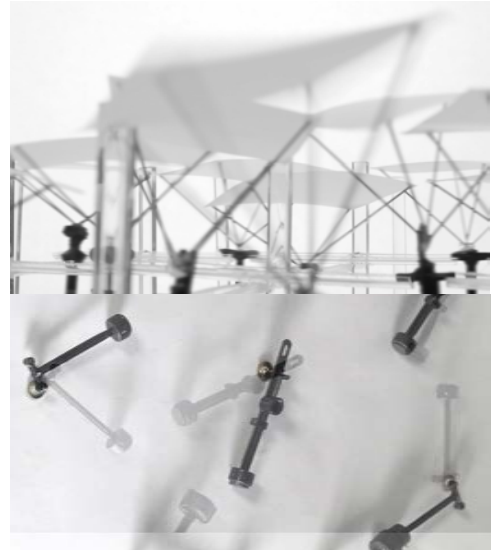


POSSIBLE RESEARCH TOPICS (in formation)

In research, as in most things, it is important to remember that sample biases favor the monumental and comparatively privileged over the unmarked, erased, or anonymous. Your work in this seminar should consciously correct for this.

The list below is not exhaustive, but represents themes and trajectories that students may elect to explore in greater depth. Above all, you are encouraged to engage critically with the readings and seminar discussions to formulate your own **original research questions and methodologies**.

- Impermanence, ephemerality, evanescence, disappearance, afterimages, erasure
- Decomposition, decay, weathering, erosion, oxidation, patina, composting, bio-conversion
- Material agency and performance: disappearance<>reappearance; entropy<>regeneration; resilience<>fragility
- Memory<>forgetting; presence<>absence; permanence<>transience; monument<>process
- Liminality, thresholds, transition, ambiguity, rites of passage, transformation
- Time: deep time, geological time, ritual time, succession, duration, seasonality
- Dust, ash, bone, soil, microbes, fungi, carbon, nutrient cycles
- Ecologies of death, multi-species reciprocity, more-than-human worlds, the Symbiocene
- Disposition: burial, cremation, embalming, alkaline hydrolysis, natural organic reduction, composting
- Civic-sacred space; sacred landscapes; memorial landscapes; architecture of care
- Adaptive reuse of cemeteries, churches, crematoria, hospitals, prisons, industrial ruins, and other threshold landscapes
- Brownfields, golf courses, potter's fields, municipal cemeteries, landfills, other landscapes of transformation
- Death infrastructures: logistics, public health, governance, policy, and equity
- Mapping, operative drawing, counter-mapping, narrative cartography, temporal representation
- Metaphysical persistence, identity, and material continuity. *See Katherine Hawley, How Things Persist.*
- Environmental justice, environmental racism, displacement, exclusion, and cemetery segregation. *See The Descendants Project, advocating for descendants of people once enslaved; plantation gravesites and other erasures*
- Landscape as archive: ruins, soils, trees, sediments, ecological memory
- Death care: morticians, funeral directors, death doulas, caregivers, ritual practitioners
- Hart Island: NYC's municipal cemetery; from Prisons to Parks
- Artificial intelligence, digital remains, grief technologies, algorithmic memory, synthetic afterlives, and the ethics of representation



day 6



day 9



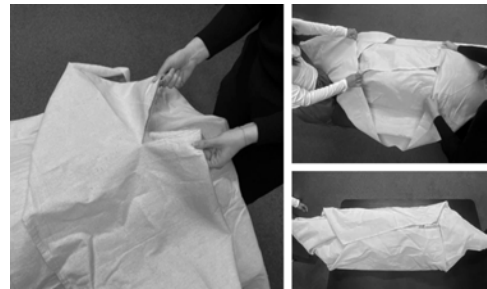
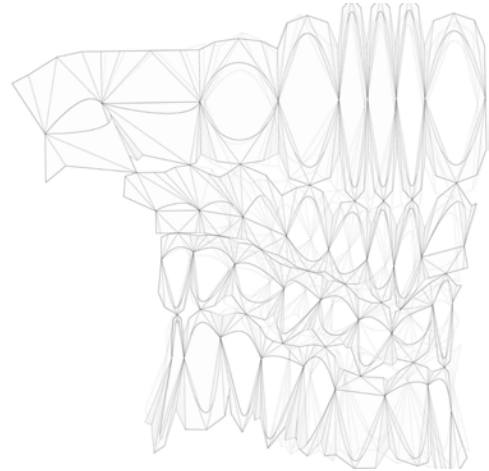
day 11



day 13



- Adaptive reuse of sacred real estate as civic infrastructure
- the future of 70 million square feet of NYC Religious facilities. See <https://www.bricksandmortals.org/a-grassroots-membership-organization-of-faith-based-institutions-and-real-estate-experts>
- Cultural rituals, rites, symbolism, elegies, epitaphs, memento mori, ancestor veneration, witnessing, contemporary memorial practices
- Counter-monuments, anti-monuments, living memorials, spontaneous memorials, public memory, Memento Mori
- Haunting, ghosts, storytelling, communal trauma, repair, joy, and collective healing (*while being wary of nostalgia*)
- Scalar mapping of urban cemeteries: e.g. *Cairo's City of the Dead*, *Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery*, *Aman's Sahab cemetery*, *Hong Kong's Pok Fu Lam cemetery*...
- Greenwashing<>sustainability: post-mortem products, funeral consumerism, ecological claims. See *Parting Stones*, *Aril Urns*, *Loop coffin*, *Mushroom Burial Suit*...
- Representation, authorship, ethics, accountability, and the politics of visibility



INTEGRITY

Citing Work: Students must cite all sources (texts, images, data sets, and AI tools) throughout the semester.

AI—including ChatGPT, Perplexity, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and similar tools—must be used with transparency and criticality. We will discuss appropriate disclosure and citation practices. AI is both compelling and contentious: powerful when employed thoughtfully as a tool, yet energy-intensive, often trained on unsanctioned or poorly attributed content, and harmful when used as a substitute for independent thought.



This is a graduate-level seminar. You are expected to read deeply, think critically, follow your curiosity, and develop and articulate your own informed perspectives. We have two precious hours together each week. The care, creativity, and courage you invest in the readings, discussions, written responses, and your independent research are investments in your own intellectual formation and in the collective generosity that makes meaningful scholarship possible. The uncritical use of LLMs and other forms of AI can come at a cognitive cost.³



³ *Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt when Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task*, MIT Media Lab Cambridge, MA. "Participants who exclusively used the AI to help write essays showed weaker brain connectivity, lower memory retention and a fading sense of ownership over their work. Basically, their brains got lazy. And even when they stopped using AI tools later on, the effects lingered"

GSAPP's Plagiarism Policy:

<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/plagiarism-policy>

GSAPP's Honor System: <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/honor-system>

GSAPP Grades: <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/grades>

GSAPP Academic Progress:

<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/satisfactory-academic-progress>

University Resources:

<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/university-resources>

SCHEDULE + READINGS (See Courseworks Files for PDFs of all Readings)

WEEK 01 08.Sept. Introduction. Life<>Death Entanglements

Introduction to The Future of the Corpse: Changing Ecologies of Death and Disposition.

What is the measure of nothingness?

On care / Living death

WEEK 02 15.Sept. Civic-Sacred Space: Prologue for the Future

The Dialectics of Death in the Civilian Era

An Urban System of Death

The New Civic–Sacred: Designing for Life and Death in the Modern Metropolis

The Answer to almost everything: Death

WEEK 03 22.Sept. Urban Palimpsest: The Presence of Absence + (Un)covering Black Cemeteries

Building on burial ground: Notes on the functional and cultural significance of American cemeteries

How the US's Black cemeteries are being made visible once more

Burial Rights

The Black divers excavating the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Cemetery for enslaved people rediscovered at Andrew Jackson's Tennessee plantation

WEEK 04 29.Sept. Mortal Covenants: The Matter of the Corpse

On dying ecologically in the Anthropocene

A covenant among generations: Keeping trust in the republic and the law

New mortuary technologies and memorial designs

Heading for extinction: How the climate and ecological emergency reframes mortality

WEEK 05 06.Oct. Memento Mori + Present Independent Research Priorities and Outline - All

Destroying Confederate monuments isn't erasing history—it's learning from it

Interview: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities

Do Disappearing Monuments Simply Disappear?: The Counter-Monument in Revision

Survival and Self in Audre Lorde (On her birthday)

WEEK 06 13.Oct. Liminal Interdependencies: Necropolis Interlaced with the Metropolis

The Archipelago Conversations, an excerpt — Interview with Édouard Glissant

Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events

WEEK 07 20.Oct. Design Research Workshop A + Discussion (also Midterm Reviews)

Preface and Lessons and Legacies. In The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen
Baldwin, Walker, Rian excerpts
Hirshfield, J. select poems from After
The Grave. Object Lessons series

WEEK 08 27.Oct. Design Research Workshop B + Discussion (also Midterm Reviews)

Excerpts from Bright Dead Things and The Hurting Kind
Shimmer_in Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet
The Creative Process

WEEK 09 03.Nov NO CLASS / Election Day Holiday

WEEK 10 10.Nov. Field Research: Bronx ferry to Hart Island with NYC Park Rangers (tent.)

Extensive shared drive folder with historic and contemporary readings, news, maps, timeline, FAQs, photos, FEMA info, NYC Parks Dept. documents, and more.

WEEK 11 17.Nov. DeathLAB + Interlaced Existence research by GSAPP grads

WEEK 12 24.Nov. Developed Research Presentations A + Critique

WEEK 13 01.Dec. Developed Research Presentations B + Critique

WEEK 14/15 08.+ 15.Dec. NO CLASS - Final Reviews

WEEK 16 18.Dec. Final Project Submissions formatted per seminar-wide protocols

OUTSIDE GUESTS

In Week 3 (tent.) we will be joined by Allison C. Meier, a guide at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn and author of the 2023 book: *Grave (Object Lessons)*, a ground-level view of how burial sites have transformed over time and how they continue to change. Allison will present "*How Preservation and Activism Are Bringing Visibility to Overlooked Black Cemeteries.*"

In Week 10 (tent.) we will travel off the coast of The Bronx to Hart Island to experience NYC's 100+ acre municipal burial ground, guided through the landscape and history by NYC Park Rangers. Guests will also be invited to the in-class discussion of your independent research projects.

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Required weekly readings and written responses will intersect with unfolding seminar discussions and may include excerpts from the following sources:

Albers, Annie. *On Designing*. Wesleyan University Press, 1943

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. W.W.Norton & Co., 2010

Armada, Bernard J. "Memory's Execution: (Dis)placing the Dissident Body" in *Memory's Execution*, 2010

Barad, Karen. "What is the Measure of Nothingness" in *dOCUMENTA 13 / No.099*, 2012

- Barnett, Joshua T. "On Dying Ecologically in the Anthropocene" in *The Ecological Citizen 2*: 23–9, 2018
- deBotton, Alain. *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, Vintage International, 2012
- Dickinson, Greg, et al. eds. *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*. University of Alabama Press, 2010
- Eggner, Keith. "Building on Burial Ground," in *PLACES Journal*, 2010.
- Engle, Jayne et. al. *Sacred Civics: Building Seven Generation Cities*, Routledge, 2022
- Holloway, Karla FC. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, Duke University Press, 2002
- Jarzombek, Mark. "The Dialectics of Death in the Civilian Era: Hans van Houwelingen's Sluipweg." *Future Anterior*. 8. pp12-19, 2011
- Jennings, Bruce, & Hammack-Aviran, C. M. (2021). A covenant among generations: Keeping trust in the republic and the law. In C. Staudt & K. Rothstein (Eds.), *The Future of the Corpse: Changing Ecologies of Death and Disposition* (pp. 198–225). Praeger.
- Kester, Eric. "Making Light of Death: At Columbia's DeathLab, the search for a cleaner, smarter alternative to burial is a deeply serious matter," in *Columbia Magazine*, Spring 2015
- Limón, Ada. *Bright Dead Things*, Milkweed, 2015 and *The Hurting Kind*, Milkweed, 2022
- Laqueur, Thomas W. *The Work of the Dead*. Princeton University Press, 2015
- Meier, Allison C. *Grave (Object Lessons)*, Bloomberg, 2023
- Meier, Allison C. "An Urban System of Death," in *Urban Omnibus*, 2019
- Ostaseski, Frank. *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*, 2017
- Rothstein, Karla and Christina Staudt, eds. *The Future of the Corpse*, ABC-Clio Praeger, 2021
- Rothstein, Karla. "The New Civic–Sacred: Designing for Life and Death in the Modern Metropolis" in MIT Design Issues, vol.34 (1): 29–41, Jan 2018
- Rothstein, Karla and Christina Staudt, "Living death: confronting mortality and associated practices of care," in *The Architectural Review*, March 2021
- Sloan, David Charles. *Is the Cemetery Dead?* University of Chicago Press, 2018
- Stubblefield, T.,. Do Disappearing Monuments Simply Disappear?: The Counter-Monument in Revision. *Future Anterior*, 8(2), 1–11, 2011
- Turner, Nancy J., et al. "Living on the Edge: Ecological and Cultural Edges as Sources of Diversity for Social-Ecological Resilience" in *Human Ecology*, Vol.31, No.3, 2003

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Monument Lab's [National Monument Audit](#) assesses the current monument landscape across the U.S.

The Descendents Project

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/descendants-project-v-st-john-baptist-parish-1>

Slaves Wrecks Project <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/slave-wrecks-project>

<https://atmos.earth/for-black-archaeologists-the-atlantic-ocean-is-an-ancestral-graveyard/>

grief. group. healing. un-drown-yourself

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/poetry-unbound/id1492928827?i=1000615669617>

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm>

Racism in US cemeteries:

<http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/grave-matters-segregation-and-racism-in-u-s-cemeteries>

<https://placesjournal.org/article/building-on-burial-ground/?cn-reloaded=1>

<https://urbanomnibus.net/2021/11/burial-rights/>

Forensic Architecture. Ground Truth <https://forensic-architecture.org/methodology/ground-truth>

Radical Death Studies. A collective of Scholars, Funeral Directors, Death Work Practitioners, Activists, and Students of Death Studies who view death work as synonymous with anti-racism work, synonymous with actively dismantling oppression, and as a way to validate cultural and social life among marginalized groups. <https://www.radicaldeathstudies.com/our-mission>

The Arc of Oblivion explores a quirk of humankind: in a universe that erases its tracks, we humans are hellbent on leaving a trace; 2023, Documentary, 1h 38m.

Green-Wood Cemetery. *The Perimeter Path*, in the Historic Chapel in 2023, examined how race and class influence memorialization.

Art inspiration: Tara Donovan, Motoi Yamamoto, El Anatsui, Ryoji Ikeda, Ann Hamilton, Étienne Krähenbühl

<https://atmos.earth/> Atmos is an exploration of climate and culture, a nonprofit biannual magazine and digital platform curated by a global ecosystem of artists, activists, and writers devoted to ecological and social justice, creative storytelling, and re-enchantment with the natural world.

On Being w Krista Tippett, and Poetry Unbound. podcasts <https://onbeing.org/series/poetry-unbound/>

The Cemetery Research Group aims to expand an understanding of current and past funeral culture in the UK and around the world. <https://www.cemeteryresearch.org/>

Phoenix House Summer Happening. Hart Island, New York City. Aug 1970

Office Hours: By appointment kmr16@columbia.edu

IMAGE CREDITS:

P.2 GSAPP Student work: Nicole Biewenga, Joud Al Shdaifat, Nick Shannon; The Sound of the Crowd_121Clicks

P.4 Ian Callendar, *Rationalities Situated and Unsited*. 2023; Justin Frank Hager, *Unsettling Uncanny*. 2023; Tasha Akemah, *Tradition, Ritual, and Meditative Processes: Qingming festival a mode of preserving tradition for the diaspora*, 2023; Anastasia Sytenko *Pliant systems*

P.5 Maya Yildirim, *Ritual Folds*. 2023; Rebecca Siqueiros, *Embalmed Entangled Expired Ritual*, 2023, Didier Luceus, *DeathDossier*. 2024

Select GSAPP student projects from prior *Interlaced Existence* seminars may be viewed [HERE](#) (The link can be viewed through Lionmail)

"The wound is the place where the light enters." - Rumi, Sufi teacher-philosopher-poet