

Life's cycle

A growing number of designers are providing contemporary, secular ways to remember the dead, **Matthew Hague** reports, including sustainable options

In 2010, after Vancouver architect Dragne Smyth lost his grandmother, he sought to make sense of his loss in a way only an architect could. "Design has the power to stir emotions, make people feel things," he says. "I was interested in finding a project that would allow me to explore that."

At the same time, Edmonton, the city in which Smyth's grandmother had lived for 60 years, was looking for an architect to build a new Centre for Remembrance at the South Haven Cemetery. They wanted a permanent, inviting facility where families could meet and plan funerals, something more gracious than the existing trailer beside a chain-link fence on the grounds.

The resulting \$4.4-million facility, completed in 2018 by Smyth's studio, Shape, doesn't look like a typical cemetery chapel. There are zero religious artifacts or references. Although the exterior is somewhat sombre - it has a crystalline black tower emerging tombstone-like from the prairie landscape - the interiors are airy and peaceful.

"The design focused on non-denominational symbolism that speaks to everyone," Smyth says. After passing through heavy, dark doors, visitors enter a gathering space lined in bright white birch. The shade connotes both mourning and hope in many cultures. "We looked at different colour options but decided to go with an achromatic palette to avoid unintentional offence. We didn't use red, for example, because it's inappropriate for Chinese funerals."

Inside, the tower, which appears austere walking by, shifts into something affirming, tunnelling light that sweeps through the space during the day. The roving glow is a subtle reminder that all things change and pass in time, even grief - an important message during the stressful, and, for many, devastating, COVID era. "The last year has profoundly impacted people in many different ways," Smyth says. "I believe that through this shared collective experience, people are in search of resonance and harmony."

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Capsula Mundi, conceived of by Italian designers Anna Citelli and Raoul Bretzel, replaces stone or concrete tombstones by anchoring a tree's roots around a biodegradable, egg-shaped pod that contains human remains. FRANCESCO D'ANGELO

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The South Haven Centre for Remembrance, which won a 2020 Governor-General’s Medal, one of Canada’s most coveted architecture prizes, comes amid a massive revolution in the way society is conceptualizing death. These days, our deaths no longer look or feel like those of our forbears. Gone are the times when friends and families draped themselves in black, parading to a grim cemetery to say goodbye, chanting prayers and incantations in the process.

Instead of funerals, many now attend celebrations of life organized by bereavement planners, sometimes in spaces that look more like hip boutiques than funeral parlours. And instead of capping off the process with a heavy tombstone or with sprinkling ashes from a metal urn, burials are going green, with human remains being turned into compost.

One of the biggest changes in how we think about dying is that “our ideas around death used to be inspired mainly by religion,” says Wouter van Dillen, co-curator of a show called (Re)Design Death, organized through the Cube – a national design museum in the Netherlands – and available to tour free online from Canada. “Religion also defined the rules for the way we pay our last respects to the deceased, the way we commemorate them and with what objects.”

Now, secular solutions are necessary for the growing population of non-denominational mourners. According to census data, between 1971 and 2011, the percentage of secular Canadians jumped from less than 1 per cent to nearly a quarter of the population. By 2019, the Pew Research Centre reported 29 per cent of Canadians had no religious affiliation.

That’s why a place such as the South Haven Centre is careful to avoid allusions to crosses or rose windows. Likewise, Exit Here, a contemporary take on a funeral parlour in London has no spiritual undertones. At first glance, it has the casual air of a nice shop or café – giant windows in cobalt frames, snow-white interiors with the odd teal accent wall, plinths displaying cremation urns that are as minimalist as something designed by Apple.

The similarity isn’t incidental. Exit Here is the concept of Oliver Peyton, a long-time Irish restaurateur and host on the BBC’s Great British Menu (alongside Prue Leith, until she went to the Great British Bake Off). He got the idea after his father died suddenly six years ago and he realized that “It’s not a massive leap from restaurants to funeral [homes],” he says. “Funeral [homes] haven’t changed since Victorian times. Dark, mysterious, all these little rooms, always called Something and Sons. I wanted to bring funerals into the 21st century, provide a choice that felt more celebratory of people’s lives.”

Part of Peyton’s process was reconceiving funereal accoutrement. Along with the design team at London’s Transit Studio, Peyton started reimagining cremation urns and caskets, bringing in more colours and patterns and simplifying the shapes. One casket is all white and sleek, another looks to be woven like a basket. “Urn are often very frilly and

fussy,” he says. “And with the rising costs of burial, more people are keeping the urns in their own homes. So why not make them an object people want to display?”

His cheekily named Bitter Pill is a pod-shaped capsule. Available in multiple hues, it could be mistaken for a smart home device. It’s a similar concept to the Dome urn by Dutch designer Maria Tyakina, a rounded, ombré-hued work of art that would blend gracefully into any modern mantle. “It was designed to clear away our predictions that a cremation urn can only bring a sense of gloom and despondency into the environment,” Tyakina says.

Pretty soon, though, urns and caskets might become obsolete, replaced with something more sustainable. Currently, there is almost nothing green about the ways we dispose of the dead. The average burial involves pumping a body with toxic embalming fluids, enshrining it in a shiny lacquered casket no one will see again, then laying it into a plot of land that could meet more immediate needs – housing, say, or agriculture. Cremation, the choice of more than 70 per cent of Canadians because it’s less expensive than burials, is not much better. It requires less space, but according to an article in *The Atlantic* monthly, the fuel required to burn a corpse is the equivalent of two SUVs worth of gas, or enough to drive 800 kilometres.

Recently, jurisdictions across North America have been legalizing a new, low-impact alternative: corporeal composting. Washington was the first state to permit the practice and, in December, 2020, a Seattle facility called the Recompose Greenhouse was among the first facilities in the world dedicated to converting people into organic planting soil. In an unassuming factory, 10 cells, each large enough for a body, are neatly arrayed on a white wall, styled like honeycombs in a beehive.

In each cell, the heat, moisture and air are controlled to optimize the production of microbes and bacteria to naturally breakdown human remains. The process requires an eighth of the energy of cremation, takes about a month and produces one cubic yard of soil that can be scattered on any garden.

“Though I might avoid a vegetable garden,” says Anna Swenson, communications manager for Recompose.

Since the opening, 25 bodies have gone through the decomposition process (with burial services taking place over Zoom, because of the pandemic). More than 600 people have prepaid for the service in the event of their passing. Recompose costs US\$5,500, but can be paid in instalments starting at US\$25 a month.

An expansion of 10 more cells is set to open in April, 2021, with facilities in other states hoped for in the coming years. “We’ve had a lot of interest from Canadians,” says Swenson, who adds there’s a green funeral home in Victoria called Earth’s Option that can arrange corporeal transportation across the border.

Green burials are also a focus at the Cube museum’s (Re)Design Death show in the Netherlands. Italian designers Anna Citelli and Raoul Bretzel have conceived of a way of replacing stone or concrete tombstones with trees, anchoring the roots around biodegradable, egg-shaped pods that contain human remains. New York designer Shaina Garfield’s Leaves casket is made of compostable materials that break down in the earth.

Part of (Re)Design Death looks at one of the most distinctly contemporary facets of death: whether our technology will make it obsolete. Some scientists and technocrats are working on methods to extend our lives indefinitely, uploading our brains into machines, like RoboCop, or reversing the degeneration of our cells, a bit like Benjamin Button. One cheeky designer has proposed fusing people with toasters, allowing the departed to communicate with their loved ones by singeing messages into bread.

Visitors to (Re)Design Death are being asked if immortality is desirable. Their responses, which reflect society’s changing attitudes to mortality, are recorded on a giant message board. “Most of the people say no,” curator Van Dillen says. “But about 25 per cent [write] things like: ‘Yes, why not? I can always choose to end my life one day.’ ”