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Being Towards Death

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Within the San Francisco Bay limits, the dead have an unusual history of marginalization. This project focuses on the ritual of mourning and burial from a new perspective of urban consciousness.

Typically, the embalming process begins with replacement of the fluids in the body with a formaldehyde-based solution. Due to the objectionable odor of the solution, it is typically mixed with a cocktail of fragrances and colors to emulate the life-color of the living body. The mortician prepares the recently deceased, closing wounds, securing the mouth and eyes shut, and eventually having the hair cut and styled and applying makeup to the face and neck. The dressed corpse is placed in an upholstered box and displayed, usually to the public, for several days. The body is then buried and discarded into its final resting place outside the city limits, where it slowly rots and leaches into the ground.

This process of embalming wastefully attaches the identity of the deceased to a corpse, a connection which makes necessary the archival of deceased bodies; Within conversations of Western attitudes towards death-related practices, Sociologists and anthropologists argue that these have led to it becoming taboo, denied or sequestered. Our discomfort with death leads us to marginalize it, place it underneath a veil of ignorance. We ignore the reality of our relationship with death and our irreverence towards it, which we see manifested in our collective history of removing graves from within the city of San Francisco and re-burying the bodies in the city of Colma.

In a documentary titled “A Second Final Rest,” Ena Mendle recounts a conversation with her father, “He told me ‘oh, your great grandmother and great grandfather are buried there. I didn’t get around to it until one day I went over there and they had already started digging up the coffins and destroying the graves. I still to this day don’t know where my great grandmother and grandfather were moved to.” These bodies along with many others, have been displaced to the city of Colma, located 2 miles south of the San Francisco city limits. Colma is known by its excessive ratio of dead to living, approximately 1,500 bodies per capita. This left only two burial places within the city; the Columbarium and the San Francisco National Cemetery.

At the beginning of the 20th century the development of the city, as a result of the gold rush, was expanding exponentially. Real estate values skyrocketed, and the attitudes of the residents surrounding existing cemeteries deemed these spaces less important than the possibilities of future land development.

During the construction of the addition to the fine arts museums of San Francisco, it became evident that the site was the location of an informal burial ground within the city. Archeologists knew this, but nobody quite knew the extent of it; around 800 burials were excavated and many many more were left in place. While digging trenches, workers would come across a burial that was halfway inside the trench and halfway out. As the number of excavations began slowing down the project, workers were told at the end that “in order to speed things up you need to take half the burial and leave the other half in the trench, or in the wall of the trench because it’s taking too long.”
“...what became interesting was the building, the skeleton of the building...and the skeletons that were actually there... and the fact that while one was being exhumed, the other was being deconstructed and put back together. ...you began to see the care that was being taken of the artwork...and the care in terms of the crating and the padding that was going on and then what was happening on the outside was these burials being thrown into cardboard boxes.”

It’s evident through this example that a new way of archiving and transitioning the living to the dead is needed within the urban fabric. Natural burial exists and is practiced today, involving some of the same aspects of a traditional funeral, minus the public viewing of the body. The remains are buried unaltered with a sapling of a tree. As the body decomposes, the tree absorbs the reconstituted matter of the individual to make a new kind of living monument.

As a middle ground between traditional and natural burial practices, we propose processing the large number of deaths in San Francisco with the technique called Promession. This involves granulating the body by crystallizing it in liquid nitrogen, vibrating via sound waves, and then freeze-drying to remove excess moisture. The result is not unlike cremated remains, but does not contribute to the pollution of the air or ground. This saves space, makes room for a new architecture and brings the memory of our ancestors back into the fabric of the city. It provides a space to grieve within San Francisco; grieving that is not marginalized but centralized.

Leland De La Durantaye in his Cabinet article entitled ‘Mode of Death’ states, “(the character)Fashion begins with the bright side of Death, that it ‘continually renews the world,’ and argues that this renewal is a part of their shared calling. Seeing death as an unhappy ending is to see only one half of the story—and is to leave out the fresh beginning which is, ultimately, a question of perspective.” Our project celebrates the anti-perspective to death as an ‘unhappy’ end and brings this phenomenon back into the city fabric. This is our goal; to once again make room to memorialize the dead within the city of San Francisco, and give it an honored placement at the center of the city.

1 Cabinet Issue 49, Spring 2013, Durantaye Quoting Giocomo Leopardi’s “Dialogue Between Fashion and Death”