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Death in Design in the 21st Century

Potentials and Problems with Designs for Coping, Mourning and Remembrance.

Sabra, Jakob Borrits

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sabra, J. B. (2015). Death in Design in the 21st Century: Potentials and Problems with Designs for Coping, Mourning and Remembrance.. Abstract from Death, Dying and Disposal, Alba Iulia, Romania.

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Abstract for Death, Dying and Disposal 12, 2015

Title: Death-in-Design in the 21st century: Potentials and Problems with designs for coping, mourning and remembrance.

*PhD Fellow SABRA, J. B. & Prof ANDERSEN, H. J.
Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Aalborg University*

The digital spheres of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Social Network Services (SNS) are influencing 21st. century death. Today the dying and the bereaved attend mourning and remembrance both online and offline, and combined, cemeteries, web memorials and social network sites each constitute parts of an intricately weaved and interrelated network of practices dealing with death, grief and memorialization [1]–[3].

Design pioneering company IDEO'S recent failed attempt to 'redesign death' is an example of how delicate and difficult it is to work with material and symbolic 'death design' [4]. Urns, coffins, graves, cemeteries, memorials, monuments, websites and services, whether cut in stone or made of bits, are all influenced by the discourses of economics, power, technology and culture. Furthermore many end-users do not recognize the need or potential of a certain death service or product since there is little comfort in contemplating about ones own death while being alive and well. This complexity cannot be dealt with by just relying on best-practice, team member's 'designerly way of knowing', or usual design methods. This paper proposes an overview of the unattended and highly diffuse field of 'death-in-design', highlighting the potentiality and problematics concerning the specific designs for a contemporary western death culture.

The findings in this paper are contextualized through an qualitative ethnographic study of Danish designers, architects and cemetery users and different attitudes towards new online grief, mourning and remembrance designs, platforms, services and initiatives.

By studying the spatial, material, and emotional practices of mourning, guidelines for death-in-design, as both practice and research are formed. Following this we argue that designers must seek to comprehend individual, social, technical and cultural emotional factors, switch between spheres of rationale and sentiment, and integrate death as an active instead of a passive partner in the different design processes.

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