Future Dead

*Designing Disposal for Both Dead Bodies and Digital Data*

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Abstract for Futures of the End of Life, 2016

Title: Future Dead: Designing Disposal for Both Dead Bodies and Digital Data.

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Today the dying and the bereaved attend memorialization both online and offline. Cemeteries, urns, coffins, graves, memorials, monuments, websites, social network sites, applications and software services, form technologies that are influenced by discourse, culture, public, professional and economic power. They constitute parts of an intricately weaved and interrelated network of practices and designs dealing with death, mourning, memorialization and remembrance (Graham et al. 2015; Gibbs et al. 2015; Graham et al. 2013).

The paper presents findings from two research projects; the 2015 exhibition Death: The Human Experience at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (bristolmuseums.org.uk) and the Future Cemetery Design Competition 2016 held by the Centre for Death and Society and Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol (futurecemetery.org).

Grounded in sociological theory on death and memorialization technologies (Moncur et al. 2012; Jefferies 2013; Walter 2008), ethnographic fieldwork and survey results (n=348), this paper examines and discuss subjective and collective attitudes and approaches towards death and memorialization technologies, mobilities of death and disposal and the perspectives offered by new digital online solutions and services for memory and legacy.

Based on the research findings the author questions how death and disposal is perceived by a British (urban) public and if death has been liberated from social and individual emotional regulation or is (still) constrained by subjective and/or collective regulation. The design proposals from the Future Cemetery Design Competition 2016 are used to argue the above and reveal insights from the field of practice (art, technology and design) by discussing some of the creative solutions, ideas, scenarios, fictions and concrete examples of how to deal with dead bodies, digital identities and legacy construction in a hyper-connected and digitally mediated society.


