Death of a PostHuman

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DEATH OF A POSTHUMAN
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Spring 2019

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“If we reflect on these environmental and sociotechnical changes, and the ways in which these changes affect humans and the world they live in, we can begin to adjust our fundamental understanding of the human and non-human ways of being in the world (living and dying) and in turn develop corresponding design methods, frameworks, and practices that can address the challenges these changes pose to us.”

-Laura Forlano
CONTENTION

Some of the first marks humans left on the planet were the architectures of death and remembrance. From the pyramids of Ancient Egypt to the burial landscapes of the 20th century, today’s architecture of death manifests itself mainly as cemeteries and crematoria. However, we contend the culture of death in the 21st century has evolved to demand an architecture that acknowledges changes in its culture and its impact on the natural and technological environment.

Humans are no longer just human. Our recent evolution has presented two realities, to which the discipline of architecture needs to respond. First, the split presence of the digital and physical identity. Second, the advancements in science and biotechnology that facilitate augmented humanity. From the well established medical devices of today, such as insulin pumps and artificial organs, to more speculative designs such as smart prosthetics and identity microchips. We define this merging of human and technology, of physical and mental, as posthuman. So, when a person dies, the technological parts of them will remain alive through the digital extension of the self, thus making it more plausible to memorialize and perhaps mourn the human, in the absence of the body. Architecture can narrate and recycle our posthuman bodies, creating new types of burial and memorial rituals that can also respond to increasing spatial and environmental challenges presented by traditional burial and cremation.
The juxtaposition of different events in the world allows us to compare the social attitudes around death, technology, and the environment at different moments in time. The posthuman understands itself to be technological, therefore a glimpse of the history of biomedical advancements and the emergence of digital technologies starts to suggest how the physical merging has occurred and what contributed to this reality.

By also understanding how the field of architecture has designed or speculated on death, it becomes clear that it has and continues to be approached from a humanist perspective. On the other hand, posthumanist approaches have been taken as architects grapple with what it means to design in the Anthropocene, either as a critique or a real preocupation with the Earth and non-human species.
“As the world becomes increasingly populated, so the removal of human remains becomes a fundamental environmental issue with regards land use, material and resource consumption, waste and emissions”

-Andrea Fontana
Traditional methods of burial and cremation are very wasteful, specially in the United States. Every year, the country uses in burial:

- 4 Pentagons worth of reinforced concrete
- 8 Olympic pools worth of formaldehyde
- 12 Eiffel Towers worth of metal
- 1,900 Single-family homes worth of wood

Cremation is cheaper and uses less material, but still releases yearly:

- 70,000 Car Emissions worth of CO2

The amount of e-waste produced from technological devices is also wasteful and plentiful. Every year the United States exports:

- 20,000 shipping containers of E-waste to China

and can build:

- 1075 Eiffel Towers
- 22 Empire State Buildings

The average American lives 78 years, producing an estimate of the following e-waste related products in his/her lifetime:

- 10 Batteries / year = 77 batteries
- 1 Phone charger / year = 70 phone chargers
- 2 Earphones / year = 96 earphones
- 1 USB Cable / 5 years = 12 USB cables
- 1 Hardrive / 5 years = 12 hardrives
- 1 Phone / 2 years = 42 phones
- 2 Computer chargers / 5 years = 24 computer chargers
- 1 Computer / 5 years = 12 computers
- 1 TV / 10 years = 4 TVs
“In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals”

-Katherine Hayles
We begin by understanding the main concepts that serve as the driving forces of our project, the cyborg, a human who has extensions of the self both in the digital and physical realm.

According to Rosi Braidotti in *Posthuman Glossary*, flat ontology is the “principle that everything that can be taken to exist should be taken to exist, that everything exists in the same sense, and that no objects should be granted special ontological status.”
The concept of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), which mandates that everything is an object and that all objects are to be seen as equal in value and importance, further allows us to understand the human as existing on an equal plane field with the rest of the non-human world.

The Anthropocene, the era defined as the period in time during which humans have had the largest impact on changes to the environment, reveals the negative repercussions of previous humanist approaches.
Lastly, the posthuman becomes an embodiment of these concepts by taking the human form and understanding it as a part of a larger network. Through the posthuman lens, the environment, the human, and the non-human are interconnected and exist in non-hierarchical way.
“Death obviates materiality, liberating freedom from bodies that give flesh to responsibility, family, and above all, remembrance.”

-Russ Castronovo

“Life is given over to death and death continues to articulate life and exchange with life by infusing it with meaning.”

-Andrea Fontana
A taxonomy of traditional and contemporary ways of body disposal speak to our preoccupation with what happens to our physical remains post-mortem and ways to rethink burial.

The cataloguing of narratives around human life and death showcases how the digital persona’s curated digital legacy changes what is remembered after death.
The cyborg's digital presence is not only concerned with major milestones in its life, but with the banal events and objects that occur daily. *ABC*’s “20 most-liked celeb Instagram posts of 2017” showcases this change in narrative through what the online persona shares, and eventually memorializes.
“Not only have we begun to accept technology, we have begun to identify with it. So deeply has technology embedded itself within our modern psyche that it has become part of our definition of ourselves.” -Neil Leach

“The great dream and promise of information is that it can be free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world.”

-Kathrine Hayles
As the digital persona solidifies its presence, technology constantly dies in the process. Obsolete technology and disposed objects become a contradiction between the attachment these objects and the American culture surrounding waste.
The further breaking down of e-waste begins to speak about the physical ramification of the cyborg. The posthuman imprint becomes large amounts of hazardous waste that will find its way to either being recycled, shredded, or left in a landfill.

Technology plays a role in our physical environment through the use of natural resources that are used for its making. Aluminium, gold, and copper become highly valuable to recycle, while others, such as lead, become toxic to the environment and the bodies improperly handling it.
“New York is unique among American cities in the way it disposes of the dead it considers unclaimed: interment on a lonely island, off-limits to the public, by a crew of inmates. Buried by the score in wide, deep pits, the Hart Island dead seem to vanish — and so does any explanation for how they came to be there.”

-Nina Bernstein
We have chosen New York City as the testing ground for our research because not only does it have the largest human density in the country (9 million and expected to grow), but it also has a culture of exportation embedded within its human disposal procedures and its waste management system, making it a node in a larger network of the handling of waste.

Currently, the city’s waste exportation system relies on transfer stations along the river that transport waste to New Jersey.
SITE CONDITIONS

Piers 54 and 55, which once stood at the site, represented the great machine that was the ocean liner, an invention that is now obsolete as a mode of transportation. A symbol of dead technology, the piers also allow us to participate in existing transportation infrastructures along the Hudson River.

HISTORY

Barges are an important mode of transportation for NYC, where roads and highways are very congested. The Hudson River has allowed for barges to transport products in and out of the city.
The famous Mobro 4000 was a barge that left Long Island in search for a state that would be willing to accept the waste it carried. The trip was highly documented and revealed NYC's larger infrastructural issue of handling waste. It travelled for several weeks and was declined by seven states and three countries, eventually making its way back to New York and its waste got incinerated in Brooklyn.
“Death has been torn out of the city, and a significant part of the city has died as a result.”

- Edwin Heathcote
By zooming out to a metropolitan scale, the mapping of New York City’s cemeteries reveals that there is no space in the city center for the human dead. Most of the few open spaces in the city become the landscaped green spaces where the living and dead must coexist.
Because of its density, the city has had to relocate graveyards to accommodate for more infrastructure, as has been the case for the Waldorf Astoria, Washington Square, and the New York Public Library.
New York City also exports human bodies that are unclaimed in city morgues for several weeks or when families cannot afford to pay for a funeral. Bodies are transported from the morgue and sent by ferry to Hart Island, where inmates place the coffins in burial plots meant to fit 150. The island currently houses over 1 million bodies in a process that treats death in a quantitative and industrial manner.
The bodies are brought by vans to City Island, where a ferry transports the bodies and inmates to Hart Island, going unnoticed by city dwellers.
“In different ways according to local economic and social contexts, young bodies are being configured by digital technologies through the channels of privilege and oppression.”

“The posthuman potentialities of the Global North’s immaterial fetish objects become recast as material ruins for the Global South.”

-Rosi Braidotti
New York City dwellers have three options when disposing electronics. Several companies, such as Apple and BestBuy, will receive the products and recycle them. Other businesses try to reuse and refurbish the products. However, most of the e-waste gets handled by the city, which sorts it in waste management sites.

Currently, NYC's system relies on waste transfer stations along the river that transport waste to New Jersey, where it gets redistributed and sent again to other states such as Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Ohio.
Hazardous e-waste gets shipped to countries with poor regulations and cheap labor, such as Vietnam and Thailand, to recycle these materials at a profitable cost. 80% of these exports would have been sent to China, but after it banned waste imports in 2018, e-waste is being sent to poorer countries and piling up at the few recycling facilities in the nation.

Handling waste is not a new issue for the city, as Manhattan’s waterfront is built on waste that got dumped into the ocean during the 18th century.
These insights surrounding the physical handling of waste and bodies also bring us to question how the augmentation of the body will impact the culture surrounding death. As of now, the main spaces allocated in cities that directly handle deceased bodies for memorial are funeral homes, whose services include preservation, disposal, and memorial events. As there is growing concern with how humans are affecting the environment, the current methods have become problematic due to their heavy use of toxic substances, and energy use.
The body’s narrative within a funeral home reveals the processes that occur in order to get a body ready for the burial, including washing, embalming, and dressing.

Funeral homes currently operate as industrial businesses with conventional front and back of house conditions that either reveal or conceal the services being provided, especially the parts that deal with vast amounts of formaldehyde and superglue.
“A rather complex relationship to death has emerged in the technologically mediated universe we inhabit: one in which the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore establishes a bond of mutual dependence.”

-Rosi Braidotti
“All materiality is inherently lively, exerting agency regardless of human alliance or intention. This omnipresent but often unobserved vitality invites a disanthropocentric ecology and a more complicated worldedness, one in which matter cannot be reduced to resource.” - Rosi Braidotti

“Mattering is a kind of posthumanist performativity that emphasizes matter’s capacity to matter, to achieve significance in its being as doing. Matter here is not ground or essence, but agentive, ‘produced and productive, generated and generative.’”

-Rosi Braidotti

“We are not just in the world, but of it.”

- Jonathan Hale
COCOON

“We speculate on alternative ways to bury, rethinking what it means to preserve, reveal, and conceal. Burial becomes cocooning, encapsulating, encoding, and shrouding, actions that attempt to memorialize the digital and physical imprints of the posthuman. These verbs become the basis of how architecture mediates the thresholds of different processes and their levels of exposure.” - Kari Driscoll

“Labyrinth’s preservation efforts are a reaction to the suddenly real possibility of a posthuman future and the question of what will remain of us when we are gone. These are the very concerns which animate the current discourse on the Anthropocene. In the 1950s, the existential threat was nuclear war; today it is climate change. Both evoke the image of a ‘world without us’, where life goes on in our absence” - Kari Driscoll
FOSSILIZE

“It’s likely that the archaeologists of future centuries will uncover peculiar objects in the graves of the millennial dead: silicone bags, plastic teeth and sculpted metal bones.”

- Frank Swain

“Digital rubbish then suggests… new material explorations and material practices that address the splintering and complex inputs, outputs and posthuman transformations that accompany our technoeological digital lives.”

- Rosi Braidotti

DECOMPOSE

“While ‘mattering’ is often approached as a process of things coming into being, mattering also occurs through the dissolution of things and the residue and fallout left behind, as well as the new fossils that are formed. From these remainders, new material conditions, human and non-human entities, as well as environments and techno-geographies form.”

- Rosi Braidotti
**ENCODE**

“The world itself, then, is a storehouse for memories. Unlike the cyborg living in a controlled lab, the posthuman subject lives within historical time within an enculturated world”

- Travis Collins

**ENCAPSULATE**

“New materialism challenges such anthropocentrism and recognizes that objects themselves have agency. They capture earlier moments and promise us stories by outliving the time in which they first came into being. Crucially for memory studies, their materiality often secretes more meaning than that which was consciously inscribed in them, making them into what I have elsewhere called ‘accidental archives’.”

- Ann Rigney
SHROUD

“Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body.”

- Jonathan Hale

WRAP

“To become is not to attain a form but to find a zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule - neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.”

- Neil Leach
We are proposing a new architecture for the physical disposal and memorialization of dead bodies and their digital counterparts, where the separation of memorial from the corporeal can be achieved. We see architecture as the medium through which this new death ritual is created; it is the space that narrates, memorializes, and recycles our post-human bodies. Our proposed funeral home will recycle and export organs, e-waste, and compost from the decedent, seeking to memorialize the disposal process of the digital and physical, human and non-human facets of the 21st century identity. The project is understood as creating a new type of burial and memorial ritual that can respond to increasing spatial and environmental issues challenging traditional methods of burial and cremation and the ongoing cultural shift.
AGENTS

New programmatic needs demand an assortment of human and non-human occupants and a range of timeframes.
We choreograph new programs necessary for the processing of the posthuman, such as organ removal, donation, e-waste recycling, data cleaning, composting, and memorial services.
The points of intersection become the moments where we encapsulate, encode, cocoon, shroud, or wrap as different narratives collide and interact with each other.
We zoom out in order to understand how the inputs and outputs flowing through the project are made more visible and accessible. This is achieved by implementing already used infrastructure such as barges, waterways, and street networks at the Chelsea piers in Manhattan. The building is a space frame structure that gets wrapped in its own skin-bag, a panel system which at times is pierced in order to reveal processes, allow for transportation, or grow to contain accumulation.
A body arrives in an ambulance, and after going through surgical removal of organs and metals, is stored in the morgue until a memorial service is held. An event space exists in the center, allowing mourners to host multiple types of ceremonies and celebrations as they give their social farewell the body. The space hovers above the veiled recycling floor, where objects such as phones, laptops, chips, and prosthetics are cleansed, recycled, and exported. The body is then transported to the tower where composting occurs for 30 days. A viewing area provides a space for witnessing the departure of the organic and inorganic matter of the posthuman. Ongoing memorial takes place as pods built from data encoded bricks, in an attempt to materialize the digital and give relatives access to the curated legacies of the decedent and the ability to mourn without having the body physically present.
DECOMPOSITION

DEPARTURE
According to 19th century French sociologist Emile Durkheim, “The way in which we bury our dead and mourn them is a reflection of the way we live”, thus, it is time that the architecture we use to bury, mourn, and remember our dead reflects our preoccupations on mortality and the places we accord to memorial and mourning in our urban environments. We argue that the architecture of death in the emerging posthuman society can achieve a reconciliation between our changed bodies, our ever densifying urban conditions, and the legacy of our digital identities. By removing the human-centered approach to death and combining existing narratives, we level the importance of human and non-human and better understand the ways in which our practices affect the world around us. In doing so, our argument critiques the current processes that we accord to human death and come to realize that the environment can no longer afford for humans to treat themselves with greater value.
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Spring 2019