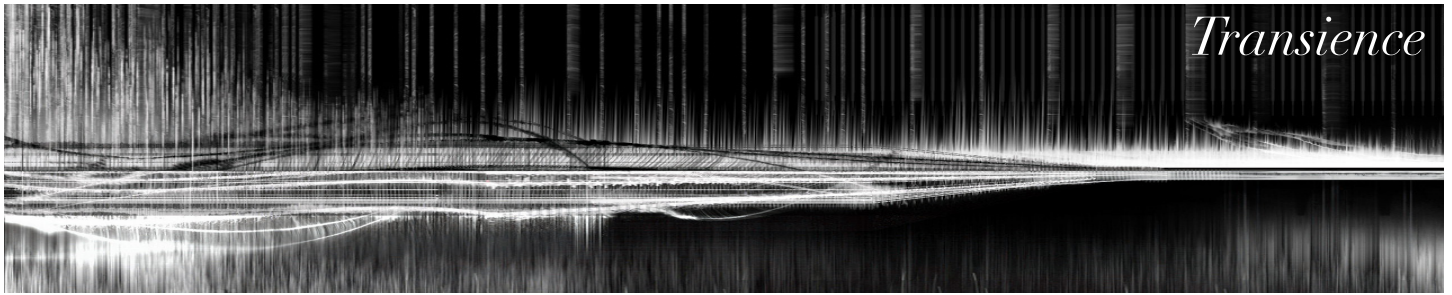


Karla Maria Rothstein

TA-Aya Maceda | Parametrics-David Zhai



Intensities of sound, light, movement, duration, and space: over time. – Eletto + Nguyen, 2012

In the dislocated contexts of our increasingly placeless-timeless-mediated existence—life is both profoundly ethereal and palpably real. As architects we are committed to both the theoretical and the possible. Indeed, their sometimes startling intermingling, rather than separation, is our aspiration. As such, our work this semester will explore the precise moments where design meets life, where the manifestation of our intellectual position shapes space and material, reframing phenomena and human relations.

Design operates as an agent of change. If our desire is to catalyze change on a massive scale, we must be willing to contend with issues that are vast and important. This is the territory of our work – defining agile boundaries and intersections of life, death, transience, finitude, and urbanity.

The metropolis embodies a mortal palimpsest—accumulations and traces of humanity and temporality. This studio is about revolutionizing how we live with death in the city, and how progressive architecture may couple with urban infrastructure to *radically re-qualify public space*. We no longer live in an epoch of solidity with a steady belief in the eternal, and yet the architectures of our post-mortem circumstances have yet to respond to the fluidity of contemporary life. Traditional funerary procedures and their associated structures are fraught with logistic, spatial and environmental burdens, no longer commensurate with the social actualities of our urban existence. Studio projects will engage emergent forms of corpse disposition – looking beyond earthen burial and cremation to alternatives which more sensibly accelerate natural biological decomposition, enabling innovative models of civic space and new modalities of intimate remembrance, while questioning the need for permanent repositories and markers of our dead.

Migrations of socio-spatial concentrations across our increasingly global cities produce intensely diverse cultural environments and diminish both physical and emotional attachments to a 'homeland.' This co-existence of customs both amplifies and flattens the evolution of belief. In 2012 the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life published a research paper indicating that a full third of the US population under age thirty consider themselves "religiously unaffiliated," including 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics. Thirty-three million Americans (14% of the U.S. public) say they have no particular religious attachment, and are not looking for one. ¹

Unconstrained by scriptures of all definitions, we are dedicated to necessary, innovative, and plausible possibility.

BODIES + RITUALS

The living body has long been the site of cultural, political, and principled debate. The dead body amplifies these and other contested positions related to identity, dignity, strategic re-use, and commemoration.

No longer a taboo topic, science and technology have provoked an evolved ethical discourse related to the authorship of the body and the inevitable disposition of the human corpse. The benefits of genomics, stem cell research, organ harvesting, and cross-species transplants challenge entrenched positions on “appropriate uses” of the body. Still, the issues surrounding death and dying are unsettled, with the architectures and practices of burial, cremation and mourning remaining marginalized and ripe for change. The disposition of corpses is, however, not the unique goal of our work, but rather *a catalyst to larger social advancement within possible urban futures.*

Architects share an innate desire to craft the experiential contexts of our lives. *We are motivated by a belief that design informs the context of culture, and influences human experience.* Our imagination, informed by research and critical strategy, enables us to see possibility beyond entrenched social protocols and in-grained aesthetic expectations. We believe that human ritual deserves to be honored with critical and innovative vision, rather than remain trapped in obsolete socio-spatial convention.

TRANS-DISCIPLINARY CONTEXT

This advanced studio will dovetail with the inauguration of GSAPP-based DeathLab, which has emerged from over a decade of engagement with urban spaces of death and memory, and aims to radically confront the crisis of mortality in the metropolis. DeathLab is a trans-disciplinary research and design space. Our GSAPP members are joined by Dr. Kartik Chandran, an environmental engineer studying microbial communities and biological fermentation, decomposition and water cycles, in the conversion of waste into energy. Kartik will be working with the studio and the Lab to explore accelerated biotransformation related to the disposition of human remains and the future of urban ecology.

Also part of our team are Dr. Christina Staudt, whose research and scholarly interests center on the interplay of death and community, and Dr. Mark C Taylor, philosopher, cultural critic, and Chair of Columbia University's Department of Religion. The diversity of our team will challenge your projects and positions to engage in sometimes contentious but always constructive critical discourse, *building arguments from multiple perspectives simultaneously.*

SITES

Over 57,000 people die in NYC each year. The magnitude of this reality requires infrastructural, social and spatial innovation, yet for the past one hundred sixty years the creation of new cemeteries has been prohibited, and new earthen burials remain forbidden south of 86th Street in Manhattan.² Currently, cemeteries exist largely isolated and remote from the lives of the bereft. *The largest concentrations of the living have little contact with contemporary spaces of the dead.*

Addressing society's systemic issues with informed and substantive design strategies, projects will intersect New York City's urban infrastructural networks and nodes. Proposals will operate in dialog with one another, instigating transformation in urban public policy, zoning, energy, transportation, waste, and civic space. *Highly resolved architectural constructs will be tested and deployed to re-qualify metropolitan public space.*

RESEARCH

Design synthesizes research to illuminate potential and facilitate change.

We are committed to exploring critical concepts which productively constrain and liberate possibility. We insist on articulating and refining an argument, and *aggressively pursuing an agenda to advance our ideas and spatial propositions*. Clear critical analyses feed our motivation, direct the navigation of the gravity and fluidity of human mortality, and reinforce both the resilience and robustness of urbanity, and the ephemerality of memory.

The metrics of the funerary industry, New York City's infrastructure, and durations and yields of biological decomposition will be analyzed and mapped. Additionally, an 'away-team' of a few students will travel to Jordan to conduct research related to contemporary funerary practices, especially related to transient cultural and civic ritual evolution.

Together with Columbia Global Centers | Middle East, Nora Akawi of the AmmanLab will consult with and coordinate the reconnaissance team in Jordan, most likely 31 October – 5 November. During this period, equally intensive precedent research and site visits will occur in and around NYC. Vibrant dialog among students and across projects will be maintained on the studio's blog.

Enduring values will be challenged and reframed by a new generation of vision and priorities, enabled by your active and provocative inquiry.

EXPECTATIONS

Engaged participation is a critical aspect of growth and sophistication. *This advanced studio will intensively traverse broad issues and deep investigations*. Students are strongly encouraged to work in the studio, and must arrive ready to engage multiple media, formats and tools. Processes will be infected by new critical instruments—no single tool, scale or method will suffice. An ability to convey space, system and section, physically and in 4-dimensions is required.

Students must be willing to actively struggle, precisely responding to layers of thought, exploring consequences and outcomes, and making volitional commitments to test strategies which enable the necessity of innovation. While possessing a willingness to be uncertain, we are also confident—unafraid of recognizing poetry in a silent snowfall, the passionate depth of intellectual exploration, and grappling with vast existential and highly pragmatic questions.

Collaborative work, which brings out the latent strengths in each individual, will be encouraged. *Debate is an indication of engaged exploration and risk taking, and requires agile response to the unexpected and the sincerity of being completely present in your work.*

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Passages from the following books will be required reading:

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- Taylor, Mark C., *After God* (University of Chicago, 2007)
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KARLA MARIA ROTHSTEIN, critic

Karla Rothstein has taught design studios at all levels in the GSAPP for the past 16 years ([academic studios](#)) and also the director of GSAPP's transdisciplinary [deathLab](#). She is a registered architect and the Design Director at Latent Productions, an architectural practice operating at the nexus of design, real estate, and research ([Latent capacities](#)). In 2011, based on her professional and academic work related to spaces of death and memory, Karla was appointed as a member of the Columbia University Seminar on Death. Content she presented at the seminar's 2012 Conference, addressing the contentious and evolving environment of death studies in the 21st century served as the basis for her chapter in [Our Changing Journey to the End: Reshaping Death, Dying, and Grief in America](#), an anthology of academic writings which will be released by Praeger later this Fall. In addition to a bakery-bar-restaurant and apartments in Gowanus, and a second carwash on Long Island, her architecture firm is currently completing a 10,000 SF techno dance music venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and exploring the feasibility of building a 21st century monastery in RedHook. Rothstein's first single-family house is included in Kenneth Frampton's [American Masterworks 2nd edition](#), Rizzoli 2008. ([Latent projects](#))

AYA MACEDA, ta

Aya is an architect with extensive professional experience from Australia and South East Asia specializing in residential architecture and projects dedicated to the enhancement of the public domain. An MS AAD graduate from GSAPP and a former student of Karla Rothstein, Aya was the recipient of the Percival and Naomi Goodman Fellowship, Award for Excellence in Design and the Lucille Smyser Lowenfish Memorial Prize. Aya is currently focused on two design-research projects -- a school in the Philippines using a flexible active classroom system (to be built end 2013), and a communal housing model for NYC, while continuing to design single houses and contributing to Australian publication *Habitus*.

¹ "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation; The PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life; POLL October 9, 2012
² St. Philip's Episcopal Church Cemetery Intensive Documentary Study. Chrystie Street NY, NY. Areas of Potential Effect identified in the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Study + Archaeological Assessment for the Second Avenue Subway. Nancy Dickinson and Faline Schneiderman-Fox, 2003