

casual death in contemporary cities

Kennard K. Taylor

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Kennard Kyle Taylor

May 10, 2022

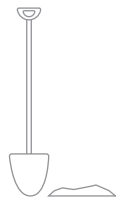
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Paul Kelsch

Susan Piedmont-Palladino

Marcia F. Feuerstein



thesis abstract

Thesis Abstract

Casual Death in Contemporary Cities

Kennard Kyle Taylor

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The importance of a cemetery is indisputable as a place to recognize death. These powerful places contain memory, emotion, and even time, but their sacred natures mean that cemeteries are often left out of daily life and instead become isolated scars in the landscape. This isolation is even more evident considering these sacred spaces have been expelled from cities. Contemporary cities are failing to acknowledge death, causing grief and memory to be internalized. For this reason, it is necessary to reintegrate grief and introduce the natural process of death as a casual and cyclical interaction within cities.

keywords: death, cemetery, funeral, emotion, landscape

general audience abstract

Conversations on the topic of death are often avoided due to the layers of sensitivity and discomfort. As a natural part of our existence, this topic forces self-reflection and awareness. Throughout history representation in public forms have celebrated and memorialized death, one of the most common being cemeteries. Conceived from the fears of health and concerns for space, the place for the deceased to rest shifted from within cities to picturesque and landscaped grounds just outside. Admired, this model influenced many of the cemeteries we still see today in the United States. However as populations increase, less space has been available to continue this ideology, requiring cemeteries to be pushed out even further and for new alternative methods, such as cremation. While cremation has grown in popularity, it no longer reflects the same value on landscape and its process is even less favorable for the environment. Resultingly, these actions and methods fail to provide a meaningful space that allows for memory, grief and acknowledgement to a natural cycle. This thesis seeks to explore the transformation of a cemetery, reintegrated in a contemporary city, as one that accepts the dead with the living.

dedication

Christine Taylor, my mom, who passed away when I was nineteen. Thank you for endless and unconditional love. Thank you for being my foundation and always providing comfort and advice in every moment. This thesis project stems from my intrigue and fascination with death as a child but more so in your loss and the impact it continues to have on me. Because of this, every decision in this project became real and challenging to accept almost as if I was making these choices for you, although I am unsure if you would have approved. Thank you for all the memories and the family you helped build, we are stronger because of you, but we will always have something missing.

Kennard F. Taylor, my dad, for always supporting and being there even when I couldn't see you. Thank you for motivating me through graduate school and reassuring that this time was valuable and meaningful for my future. I will forever regret all the time we could not grieve together and the moments sacrificed to simply get through after mom's passing, but I am always filled with joy when we are able to share memories together. Thank you for being an incredible role model.

Briana Taylor, my sister, for holding me up in the toughest of times. Thank you for your strength, care and understanding for everything I throw at you. Without you I would not be capable of putting this book together, the skills you have passed on are invaluable in both graphic design and life. And mostly, thank you for putting up with me as a sibling.

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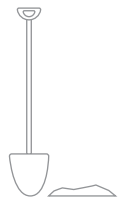
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introduction



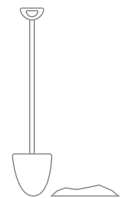
introduction

Death is a sensitive and emotional topic that is unique to cultures, families and individuals. Throughout history, we have chosen to memorialize and dedicate spaces and objects to serve as a memory to those we have lost. Variations in forms of monuments or plaques mark our cities, but in the last century a change in funerary practices has altered the way we acknowledge death in a contemporary city.

Constantly under construction, cities are expanding and growing to meet the demands of growing populations. Sidewalks are covered in scaffolding and streets are blocked by construction vehicles that erect new buildings. While some buildings are dedicated as historic landmarks and intended to be preserved, most of the concentration is on the new. Our experience within a contemporary city lacks a recognition to death and at an urban level, there have been strides to eliminate it altogether. These actions result in an internalization of an experience with death and separate loss from a community. The solution to this lack of recognition relies on the understanding of death as a natural process and as one that should not be hidden.

While there are numerous depictions of how death should be handled and the beliefs that given these practices or rituals, the focus on the cemetery as a use of memory and dedicated space is the primary source of inspiration. As such, the parallel between the landscape terminology of cut and fill with the process of natural organic reduction, human composting, offers an alternative to current preferences. Additionally, this thesis highlights American society and cities through its adaptation of handling death and its influences from Europe.

The term casual, is used to focus on the death that happens in everyday life, separate from tragedies. Simultaneously, casual and casualness are used as a guide of how to reintegrate death back into the city by means of interactions and occurrences.



momento mori

“remember that you will die”

terms

cemetery, n.

- 1.) A place, usually a ground, set apart for the burial of the dead
- 2.) The consecrate enclosure round a church, churchyard
- 3.) A burial-ground generally; now esp. a large public park or ground laid out expressly for the internment of the dead, and not being the 'yard' of any church.

columbarium, n.

- 1.) Roman History. A subterranean sepulcher, having in its walls niches or holes for cinerary urns; also ones of these niches or recesses.
- 2.) A similar structure in a modern crematorium

epitaph, n.

- 1.) An inscription upon a tomb. Hence, occasionally, a brief composition characterizing a deceased person, and expressed as if intended to be inscribed on is tombstone.

crypt, n.

- 1.) A cave, cavern, or grotto. Now rare.
- 2.) An underground cell, chamber, or vault; esp. one used as a burial place and typically lying beneath a church. Also : such a space used as a chapel or oratory.

ossuary, n.

- 1.) A receptacle (as an urn, vault, etc.) for the bones of the dead; a charnel house
- 2.) In extended use. A cave, pit, or similar repository containing a mass of bones.
- 3.) figurative. That in which relics of the dead past are preserved; a mental or spiritual charnel house.

catacomb, n.

- 1.) A subterranean place for the burial of the dead, consisting of galleries or passages with recesses excavated in their sides for tombs.
- 2.) In a wider sense, applied to any subterranean receptacle of dead bodies, as the catacombs of Paris, which are worked-out stone-quarries (see quot.); also figurative place for entombment of former races of animals, etc.

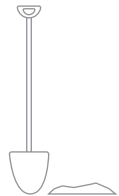
monument, n.

- 1.) A tomb, a sepulcher
- 2.) A statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a famous or notable person or event.
- 3.) A written document or record; (Law) a legal instrument.
- 4.) Something that by its survival commemorates and distinguishes a person, action, period, even, etc.; something that serves as a memorial
- 5.) An indication or token (of a fact, deed, etc.)

memorial, adj. and n.

- 1.) Preserving the memory of a person or thing; often applied to an object set up, or a festival (or the like) instituted, to commemorate and even or a person.
- 2.) Of which the memory is preserved; remembered; (also) worthy to be remembered, memorable.
- 3.) Of or relating to memory; (sometimes) spec. intended to assist the memory, mnemonic, or done from memory.

source: The Oxford Dictionary

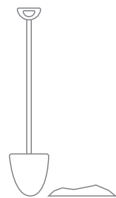


01

background

historical development
of memorials...

- **3rd dynasty of old kingdom**
Imhotep designs and built Step Pyramid of Djoser
- **5th-4th century bc**
tombs and gravestones line Roman roads outside of the city
- **1765**
Parliament of Paris orders all parish cemeteries to be removed from Paris
- **1804**
Pere Lachaise Cemetery opens
- **1831**
Mount Auburn is consecrated and becomes first cemetery in the U.S.
- **1852**
Manhattan bans burials below 86th Street
- **1876**
first American crematorium is built and operated
- **1900**
San Francisco bans burials in the city and removes 150,000 grave sites
- **2003**
Ghost Bikes began popping up to memorialize bicyclists
- **1994**
GriefNet turns digital creating an on-line grief support
- **2004**
social networking site facebook is founded



To fully understand the adaptation of funerary practices and rites, each civilization, culture and religion deserves its own anthropological research. Each one of these whether still existing or changed has impacted the way we memorialize the deceased.

Beyond existing as actions or practices, there is a beginning that marks the transition to physical manifestation and display. Attributed as the first architect in history known by name, Imhotep lived during the 3rd Dynasty of Old Kingdom serving under the pharaoh Djoser. Imhotep is credited with designing and building the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqarah, pyramids that function as a mortuary complex (Figure 01). These stepped pyramids became inspiration to numerous other Egyptian structures and monuments that would symbolize Egyptian connection with the afterlife while also housing graves of pharaohs. As representation towards life and death these monuments became ideas for the internment of bodies.



figure 01

Shifting to Roman civilization, there is a distinct change in scale and places of burial as well as whom was receiving a tomb or grave site. While

1 "Imhotep".
2 Johnston, 315.
3 Ibid. 316-317

cremation became of general use by the Romans, its expense did not favor the poor and so burial remained as a tradition, but only beyond city walls. As depicted in Figure 02, burial places and tombstones lined the roads on either side for miles out of the cities which became known as the "Street of Tombs". Many of the monuments were intended to inter generations of families, while others were for individual use decorated and elaborate to distinguish the wealthy from the poor. Streets, however were not the only location for Roman burials. Esquiline Hill contained



figure 02

uncovered and unlined grave pits for both humans and animals. Eventually, under Augustus fears of health concerns, forced remains to be pushed even further away from the city, and Esquiline Hill received new soil transforming it into a park, known as Horti Maecnatis.³ In comparison, the concept and acceptance of tombs and burials for the general population in Roman cities, as shown in Figure 02, shares significant parallels to what would later be developed in Pere Lachaise Cemetery (figure 03). In the 17th century, Paris was being plagued by a growing population one that resulted in an overflow of graves. The smell of decomposing

flesh caused uproar and in 1763 Louis XV issued a ban on all burials inside the capital.⁴ During this time, efforts were being made to transform and remove corpses and eventually burial in the landscape came to fruition. This new ideology was influenced by the work of Swiss author Salomon Gessner, who promoted memorials in the landscape. Later writings eventually lead to the concept of sentimental visits to the tomb of a loved one.⁵



figure 03

Ushering in this new form, it was not until several decades later that the appropriate land would be found to carry out Paris' desire and need for its new cemeteries. The land exchanged hands numerous times, eventually owned, by Francois d'Aix de la Chaise, Pere Lachaise to whom the site would be named after, and finally acquired by Nicolas-Therese-Benoist Frochot, who would



figure 04

4 Geiling.
5 Etilin, 200.
6 Ibid. 309-310.
7 Sachs 33

dedicated this land as a cemetery.⁶ Carrying out Forochot's intentions, this new site would contain public cemeteries as well as individual graves sitting amongst a picturesque landscape just outside central Paris (figure 04).

These transformative ideas eventually made their way to America. Like Paris many northeastern American cities began experiencing a growth in population requiring decisions to be made about the corpses in church yards and villages. Mount Auburn would become America's first cemetery on September 24th, 1831 in Cambridge Massachusetts. Drawing heavily on Pere Lachaise as a model, Mount Auburn sought to be less monumental with greater attention towards nature's offerings including curved pathways that complimented the natural terrain (figure 05).⁷ It's integration however offered much more than a place for the dead, Mount Auburn would become America's first park, year's before the development of Central Park in New York City.⁸

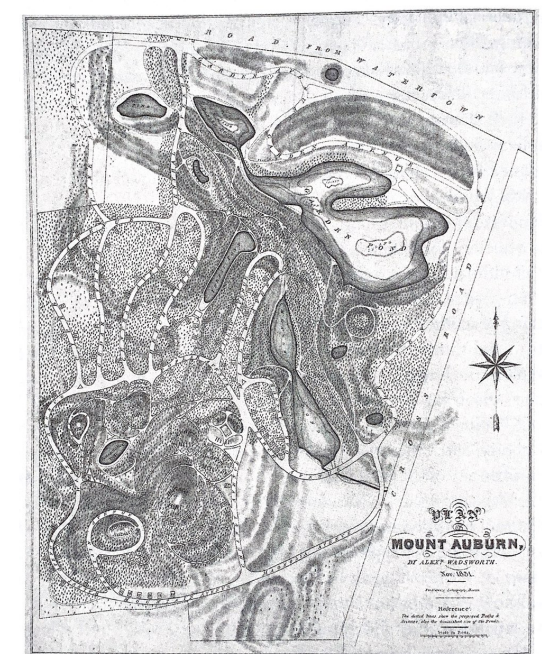


figure 05

Less than a decade later and embodying the traits of Mount Auburn, Green-Wood Cemetery opened in Brooklyn, just miles outside of Manhattan (figure 06). Over the next century more and more American cities adopted Mount Auburn's model for cemetery design, establishing it as the primary means and way of caring for the dead. While traditional burial is still practiced there has been a shift over the past few decades in the way we memorialize the deceased. Although



figure 06

it took time for cremation to be accepted, instances like a roadside memorial or the Ghost Bike Memorial, items and tokens are placed at locations of accidents rather than at a burial site or final resting location of the body (figure 07). These types of memorials introduced a

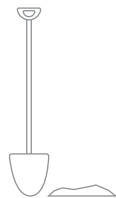


figure 07

8 Charles, 34-35.

new means of a behavior in how the cemetery would be used. Furthering these actions, the development and use of the Internet offered another means of memorializing. Posts about loved ones and friends began existing in a non physical form and would require only a click to visit their memorial, rather than a walk through a cemetery to find a headstone. Other alternative options like cremation that gained popularity, provided an invitation to bring a loved one home. From this perspective, cemeteries have become less admired to what Pere Lachaise and Mount Auburn accomplished. The memorial existing on-line and within private homes no longer engages a community with a cemetery or need to have physical public displays.





“If you turn a cemetery upside down it looks like the middle of a city - like a skyscraper.”

- Dr. Julie Rugg

02

cemeteries and cities

As major cities continue to see growth in population, space is becoming more and more valuable. New construction dominates skylines forcing cities to expand taller and wider. One of the greatest values and challenges for cities is offering green space for leisure and activities. However, that green space coupled with the picturesque and landscaped cemeteries poses a significant challenge. The vast amount of land needed to carry out Mount Auburn's model is not applicable in a contemporary city. According to an article published by The Guardian and written by Ana Naomi de Sousa, "some 55 million people are reckoned to pass away each year (about 0.8% of the planet's total population - equivalent to 100% of England's)."⁹ This led to exploration in mapping cemeteries in some of America's most populated cities.

⁹ de Sousa.

New York City

Based off 2020 Census data, New York City's population is over 8.8 million, which includes the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island.¹⁰ At its center the island of Manhattan has long served as the location for business, tourism, trade and development. Figure 08, shows radial rings at a distance of 5 and 10 miles with blue dots indicating locations of cemeteries, the largest concentration outside of the city center. These cemetery locations are a result of burials banned south of Canal Street in 1823, the state government issuing the Rural Cemetery Act in 1847 and burials banned south of 86th street in 1852. Trying to adopt the new cemetery model, the Rural Cemetery Act allowed entities to purchase tax-exempt land for grave sites in undeveloped areas in hopes of removing the cemetery from the city.¹¹ As more time passed and more people began to settle outside the island of Manhattan, the same issue occurred and remains problematic. Many of New York City's cemeteries contain hundreds of thousands and even millions of people and they are running out of space.

¹⁰ "2020 Census".

¹¹ Williams.

New York City Cemeteries

Manhattan
 - Marble Cemetery
 - First Shearith Israel Graveyard
 - Second Cemetery of Congregation Shearith Isreal
 - Trinity Church Cemetery

Brooklyn
 - The Green-Wood Cemetery
 - Washington Cemetery
 - Holy Cross Cemetery
 - The Evergreens Cemetery

Bronx
 - Woodlawn Cemetery
 - St Raymond Cemetery
 - Hart Island
 - Schelerville Cemetery
 - Fordham University Cemetery
 - Pelham Cemetery

Queens
 - Mt Judah Cemetery
 - Cypress Hills National Cemetery
 - Mount Lebanon Cemetery- All Faiths Cemetery
 - St. Johns Cemetery
 - Mt. Zion Cemetery
 - Calvary Cemetery
 - Mount Olivet Cemetery
 - Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Cemetery
 - Lawrence Cemetery
 - St. Michaels Cemetery
 - Cedar Grove Cemetery
 - Mount Hebron Cemetery
 - Maple Grove Cemetery
 - Flushing Cemetery
 - Montefiore Cemetery

Staten Island
 - Silver Mount Cemetery
 - Woodland Cemetery
 - Moravian Cemetery
 - Mount Richmond Cemetery
 - United Hebrew Cemetery
 - Staten Island Cemetery
 - Asbury Methodist Cemetery
 - Resurrection Cemetery
 - Ocean View The Cemetery Beautiful

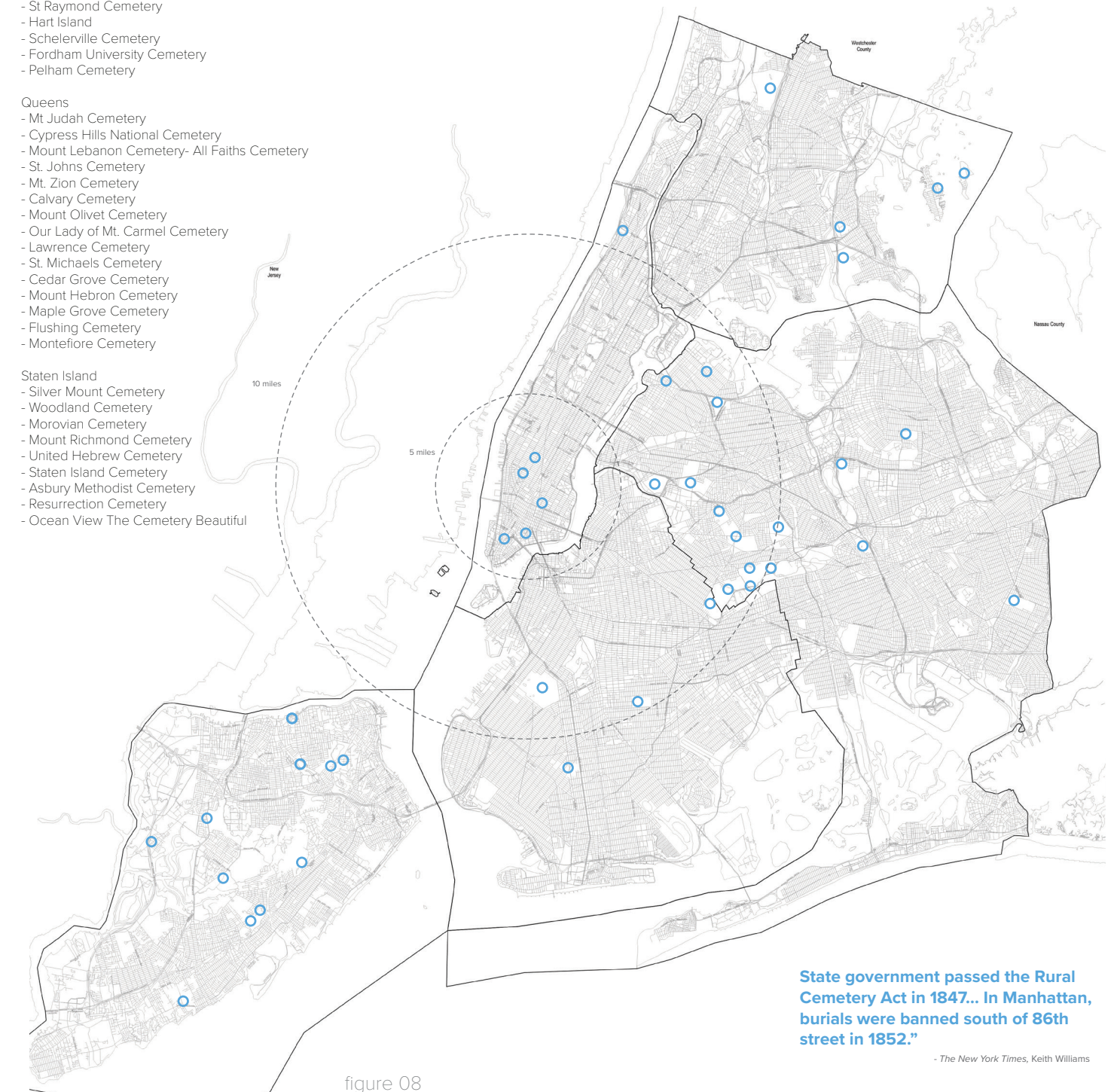


figure 08

Chicago

Similar to New York City, Chicago's growth sought a response to the development and inclusion of cemeteries. The location of cemeteries was heavily dictated by the government of Chicago and was "generally inclined to exclude cemeteries ever since its initial prohibition of 1835." As the city continued to expand and new boundaries were drawn, more and more ordinances were passed, nearly eliminating all cemeteries from the city. While special cases allowed cemeteries to remain, the new development and relocation for the majority of cemeteries began to populate in desirable locations. Due to the proximity to the city center, cemeteries found land adjacent to train tracks for ease of visitation and later as the automobile became the preferred means of transportation cemeteries started to appear alongside highways and major roads. In comparison to New York City, as seen in Image (04) a greater number of Chicago's cemeteries today exist beyond the 10 mile radius, emphasizing the urban relationship the city wanted with its dead.

11 Pattison, 245-257.

Chicago Cemeteries

- Chicago
 - Oak Woods Cemetery
 - Oak Hill Cemetery
 - Beverly Memorial Park
 - Mount Hope Cemetery
 - Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery
 - St. Casimir Catholic Cemetery
 - Irving Park Cemetery
 - Mount Olive Cemetery
 - Graceland Cemetery
 - Wunder's Cemetery
 - Hebrew Benevolent Cemetery
 - Bohemian National Cemetery
 - Montrose Cemetery
 - Ridge Lawn Cemetery
 - Rosehill Cemetery
 - St. Boniface Catholic Cemetery

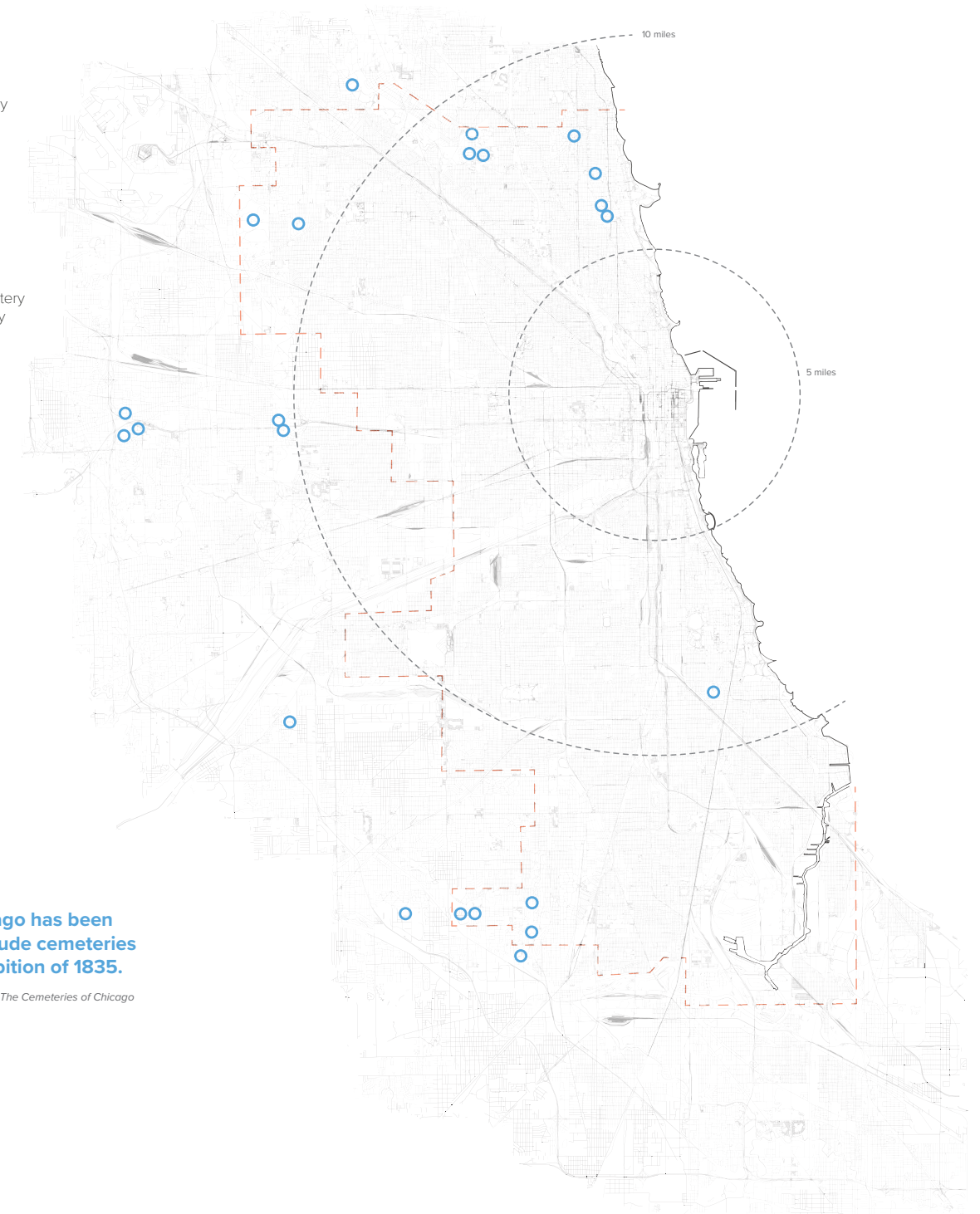
- Alsip
 - Holy Sepulchre Catholic Cemetery

- Blue Island
 - Lincoln Cemetery

- Forest Park
 - Waldheim Cemetery
 - Forest Home Cemetery

- Hillside
 - Archdiocese of Chicago
 - Queen of Heaven Catholic Cemetery
 - Mount Carmel Catholic Cemetery

- Justice
 - Resurrection Catholic Cemetery
- Niles
 - St. Adalbert Catholic Cemetery



The government of Chicago has been generally inclined to exclude cemeteries ever since its initial prohibition of 1835.

- William D. Pattison, *The Cemeteries of Chicago*

figure 09

San Francisco

Again, San Francisco was no different. Concerns for health and value of land took priority, leading the city to ban burials in 1900. Then more than a decade later in 1912, the city decided to do even more by removing over 150,000 bodies outside of San Francisco.¹² This removal and ban created a unique setting, practically developing a true city for the dead. Figure 10 shows this cluster of cemeteries just behind a five mile radius of San Francisco, in the town of Colma. The city of Colma, nicknamed the City of Souls, has a population of 1,600 living residents and nearly 1.5 million dead. Although San Francisco's available land is much smaller than that of New York City and Chicago its unique geographical constraints displays a grand and obvious view that a contemporary city has with its cemeteries.¹

12 Branch.

13 Ibid.

San Francisco Cemeteries

San Francisco
- San Francisco Columbarium & Funeral Home
- San Francisco National Cemetery
- Mission Dolores Cemetery

Colma
- Woodlawn Memorial Park
- Olivet Gardens of Cypress Lawn
- Greenlawn Memorial Park
- Cypress Lawn Memorial Park
- Salem Memorial Park
- The Italian Cemetery
- Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery
- Hoy Sun Memorial Cemetery
- Old Hoy Sun Nig Yung Cemetery
- Golden Hill Memorial Park
- Hills of Eternity Memorial Park
- Home of Peace Cemetery
- Holy Garden Cemetery

Daly City
- Chinese Cemetery

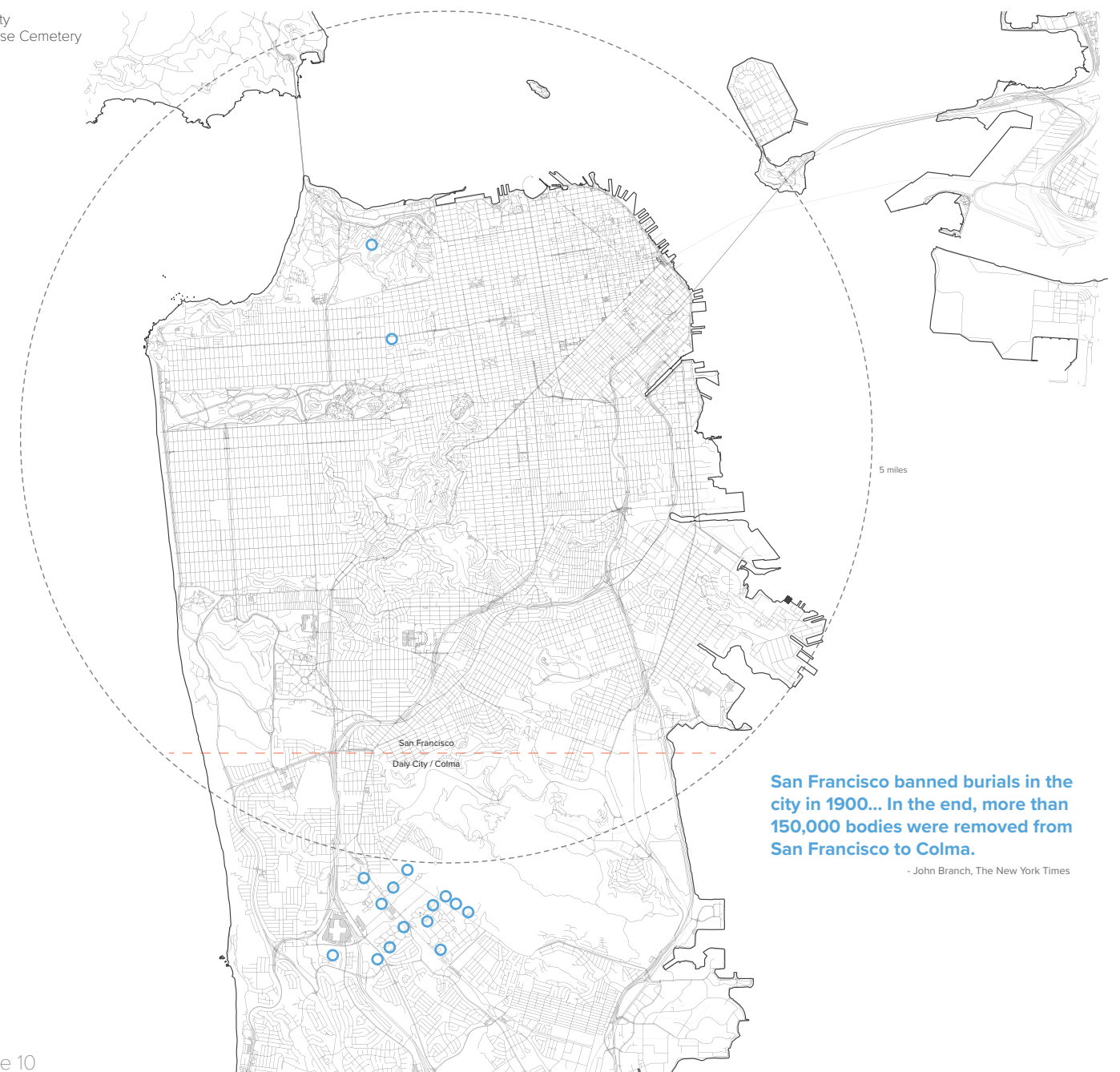
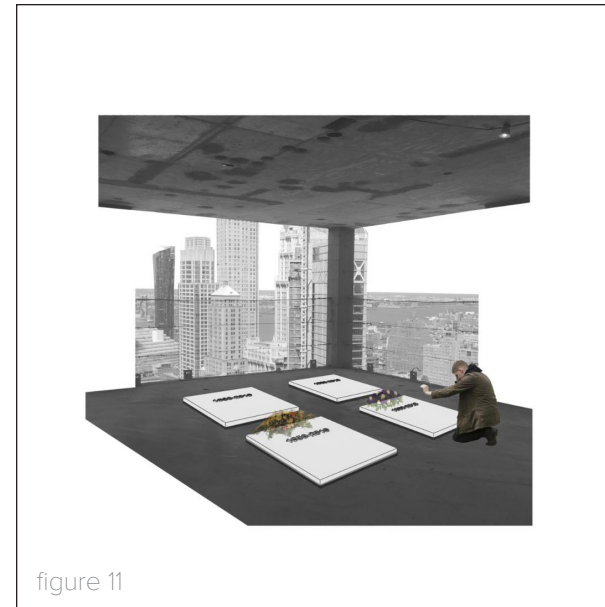


figure 10

integrating death

Aside from historic cemeteries, we are rarely confronted with an active cemetery in our cities. A representation of death or a memorial, separate from tragedy and accidents, rarely occurs. Although seen as means of cleansing and prioritizing the city for the living, this process along with the changing behavior of how we memorialize, eliminates the need for a public display.

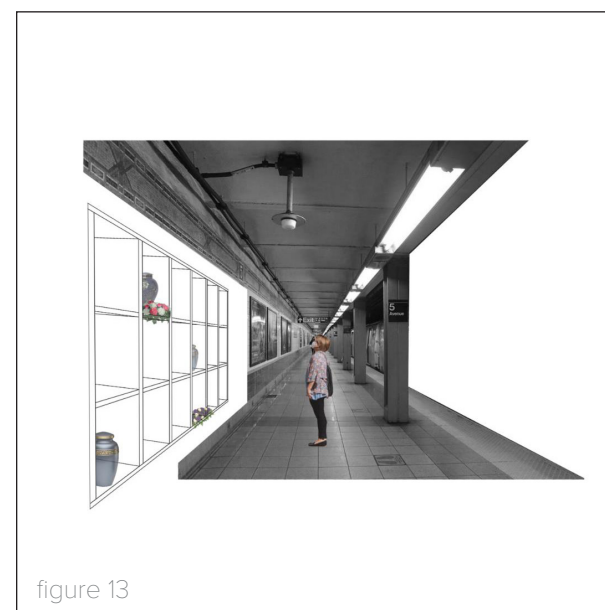
This collection of images seeks to provoke the idea of how this reintegration can occur, while respecting the developments of cities. Consistent with cemeteries there are three representations that offer a starting point, below grade, at grade, and above grade. Using existing infrastructure, the walls lining a subway can begin to define niches, streets can be blocked mimicking old churchyards, and construction of skyscrapers can host plots where land is no longer available. Together, these images outline a section of both how a city is inhabited and moments where memorials can be introduced.



skyscraper



street

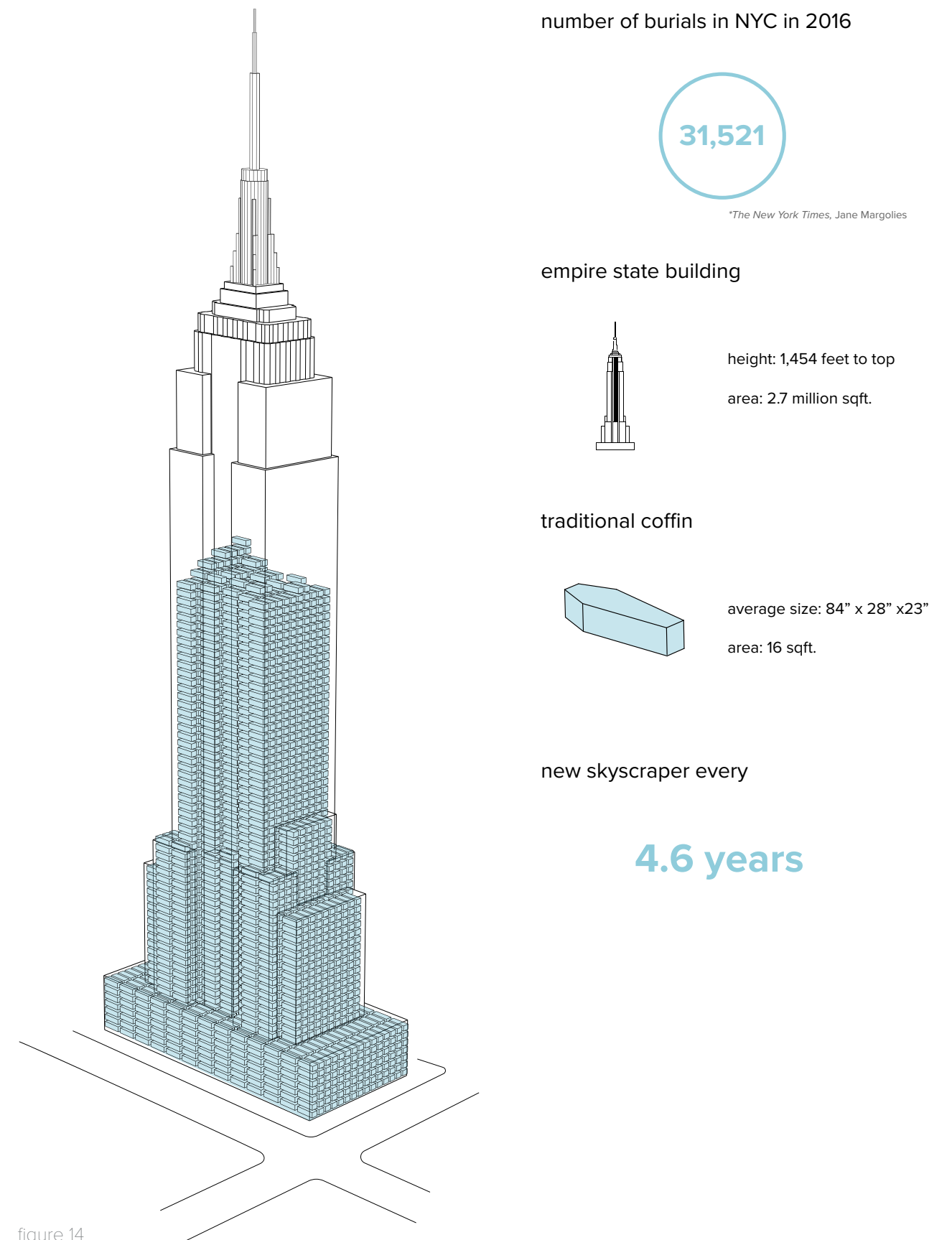


subway

vertical cemeteries

As cemeteries continue to fill up, even those that were moved outside of city centers a new adaptation of a cemetery and resting place would need to be conceived. Although the idea of a vertical cemetery has been proposed before it became a necessary option to explore and understand. Figure 14, depicts coffins stacked on the floor plates in the volume of the Empire State Building, to represent a vertical cemetery with context. In 2016, New York City had 31,521 burials, and given the Empire State buildings area of roughly 2.7 million sq-ft and using an average coffin size, it would take 4.6 years to fill.¹⁴ This means that a new Empire State building would need to be constructed every four and a half years in order to replace burials in New York City.

¹⁴ Margolies



Civilizing Terrains Mountains, Mounds, Mesas

Created as a study and an exploration of site, William Rees Moorish illustrates forty-nine relationships with the sacred mountain. One of the most intriguing sketches, relating to this thesis project, was Drawing 5 Geologic Agents. The drawing depicts the removal and excavation of land for the creation of pyramids in ancient time as well as a contemporary form of current day. Morrish's intentions contemplate the balance of an already perfect element reconstructed in a more correct urban geomorphology, while questioning what happens to excavated sites.¹⁵ In relation to this thesis project, this sketch served as an early inspiration in a means of respect towards the landscape and the elements that are borrowed to construct our cities.

¹⁵ Moorish, 10-11

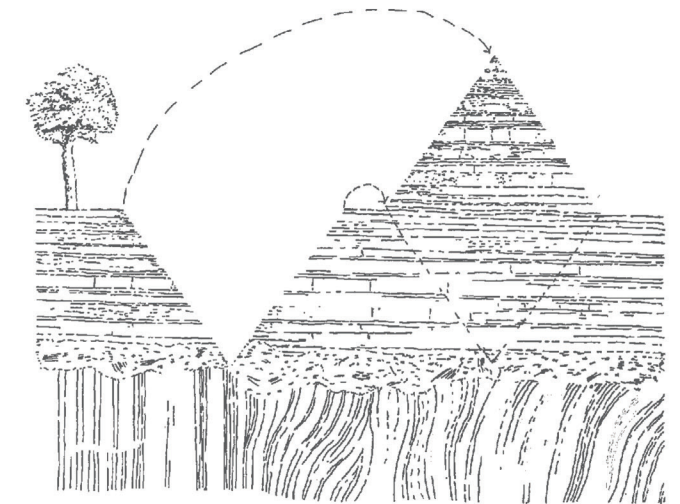
Civilizing Terrains
Mountains, Mounds, Mesas

William Rees Moorish

Drawing 5.
GEOLOGIC AGENTS

The stones for the pyramids of Giza were cut and quarried from cliffs of the eastern side of the Nile River Valley. The stones were cut and hauled across the river to construct a sacred *urban* mountain. Acting as *geomorphic agents* (Clarence J. Glacken) 8 humans continually seek to correct an imperfect found geomorphology. The humble cliffs were gathered and then governed to form a landmark in the proper place to provide the correct background piece to the urban terrain of the Egyptian civilization.

Though the modern highrise is sheathed in stone and framed in steel the origins of the material come from the earth. In the case of the modern terrain the materials come from quarries and cliffs in distant locations. Yet they have evolved from the same ritual, a marshalling of energy to govern the earth's geology into proper *building stones* in order to construct the *correct* urban geomorphology. As we continue to build these grand pinnacles and peaks, one wonders; what is becoming of all the sites of excavation? In the urban terrain the building of each new mountain results in the making of a new geomorphic excavation.



Definitions:
GEO-FACTS

BED:
n. ME & OE -cl E base *bedh-, to dig > Ger *bett*, L *fossa*, ditch, W *bedd*, Bret *bez*, a grave; orig sense "a sleeping hollow in the ground" 1. a thing for sleeping or resting on 2. a plot of soil where plants are raised 3. the bottom of a river, lake, etc. 4. to form in layers; stratify.

BELT:
1. a wide endless strap or band for transferring motion from one wheel or pulley to another or others for carrying 2. an area or zone distinguished from others in some way (corn belt)

BERM:
n. Fr *berme* & p *berme* -clDu *baerm* 1. a ledge or space between the ditch and parapet in a fortification (*berme*) 2. a ledge or shoulder; as along a paved road 3. a wall or mound of earth.

The Alps, Europe
Europeans for centuries, viewed the Alps as the haunt of witches, dragons, ogres, ghosts and evil spirits. Satan himself was believed to reside inside **Mont Blanc**.

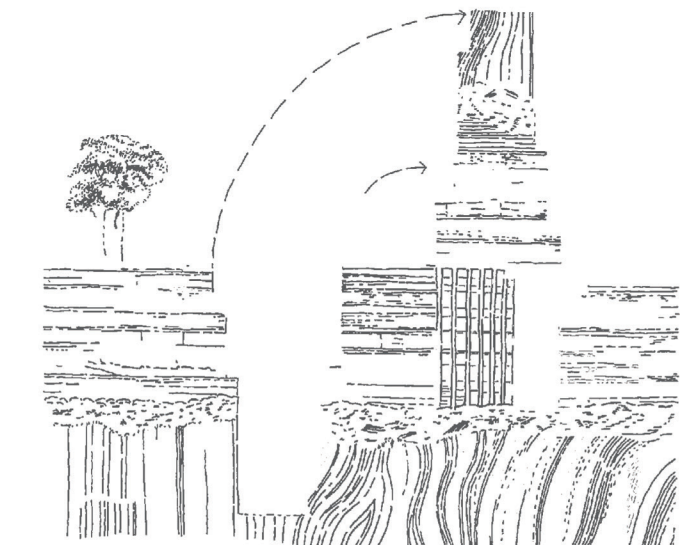
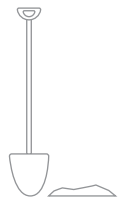


figure 15

Drawing 5.
GEOLOGIC AGENTS

03

emotion and understanding



emotion & understanding

Separate from the urban planning, dictation and limitations of cemeteries, there is a much more dynamic gesture that these spaces offer. Death is layered in emotion, complex and unique to every individual and loved one. As cities continue to push cemeteries and the image of death away, there is a conversation to be had about grief, one that provokes the question of where grief occurs. The best way to describe the effects of these decisions is through the quote of David Charles, “I felt it was exactly how Americans had been taught to meet a death - with the balance of emotion and modesty, showing an appropriate well-mannered public face that hid private sadness.”¹⁶ For the purpose of this thesis, it became necessary to design a space that involved, invited and revealed emotion. The following illustrations are meant describe and expand on emotion and death, highlighting quotes from readings and research.

¹⁶ Sloane

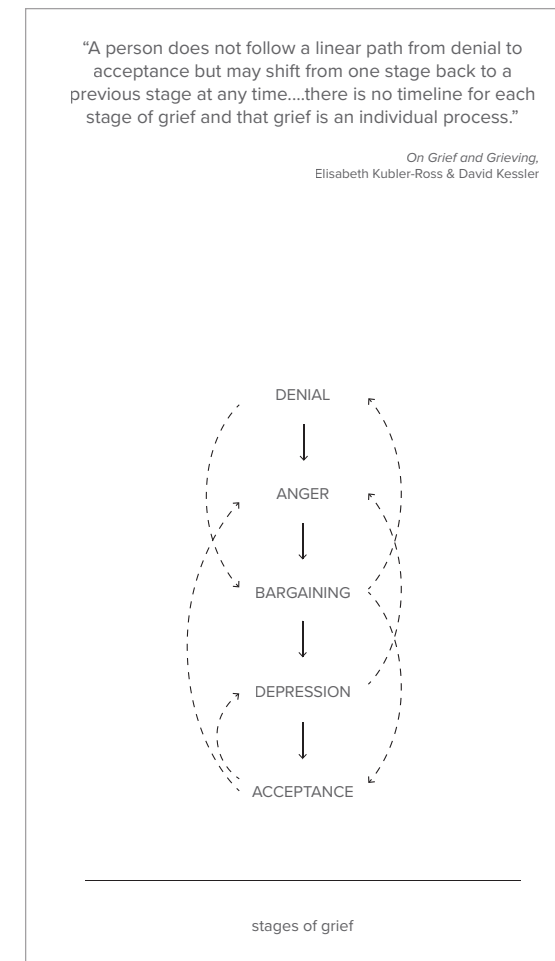


figure 16

formality

There is no right way to memorialize, but removing cemeteries does not invite grief into the everyday life. The formality that grave sites and headstone promote offer recognition to the process of death and its effect on lives.

stages of grief

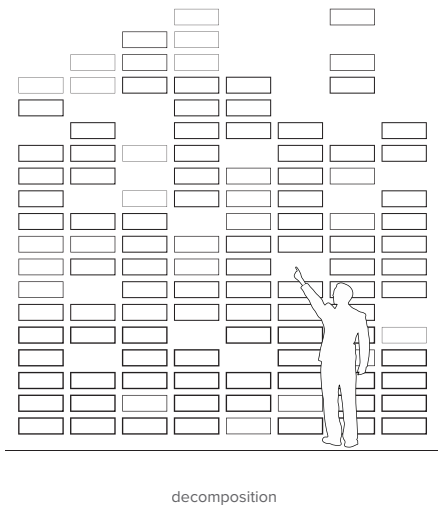
The concept to the stages of grief was coined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in 1970 from her book, “On Death and Dying”. While stages are described in an order not every individual experiences them in order or in a similar way. Figure 16 lists these stages as an order while also showing the complexity of overlapping and relapsing of emotions that take place.

figure 17



"Buildings of this technological era usually deliberately aim at ageless perfection, and they do not incorporate the dimension of time, or the avoidable and mentally significant process of aging."

Eyes of the Skin, Juhani Pallasmaa



decomposition

decomposition

As cities continuously strive to create lasting buildings and materials, the ability to see age and time as natural cycle becomes skewed. Figure 18 shows a wall of fading pieces that allows a viewer to witness decomposition and signify the passing of time.

figure 18

memory of touch

As seen in the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. and the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, the ability to touch and engage with a memorial provides comfort and connection for loved ones.

figure 19

"Mourning relies on memory, on imagination, on the wish that things were different, and as the past comes alive again as something cherished, perhaps the future, in all its uncertainty, with all its potential, will also come alive, as something not to be missed, as something to be witnessed."

Arcadian America, Aaron Sachs



memory of touch

"Her shared 'secular' walks with living Peter are now repeatedly transformed into her 'sacred' walks with dead Peter."

Death, Memory and Material Culture, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey

secular



sacred



secular to sacred

figure 20

public vs private

Enduring grief is personal, but lack of public knowledge or awareness further internalizes traumatic and life changing moments. The reliance on a community to help build should not be removed or hidden when comfort is needed in times of vulnerability.

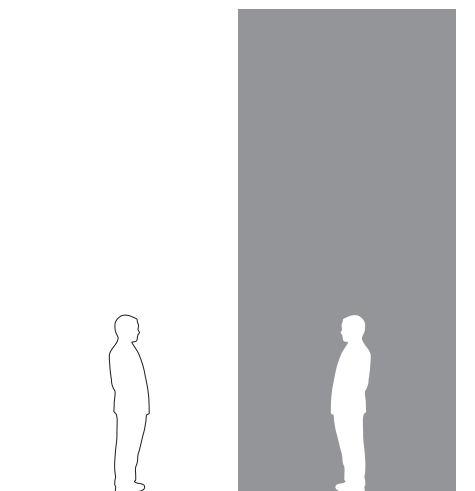
secular to sacred

In the absence of a cemetery to visit on a regular basis, moments that were once casual become etched in our memories transitioning from secular to sacred places.

figure 21

" I felt it was exactly how Americans had been taught to meet a death - with the balance of emotion and modesty, showing an appropriate well-mannered public face that hid private sadness."

Is the Cemetery Dead, David Charles



public vs private

behavior and time

The cover for this thesis book illustrates the digging of a grave, an action that is typically done once for permanent burials, but repeated again and again for every body that is placed in the ground. Often times, these locations are marked with a headstone and inscribed with an epitaph. As an identifiable characteristic of a cemetery, headstones and grave sites reveal an intimate relationship for loved ones. Figure 22 seeks to depict a narrative of these interactions from the digging of a grave, to the ceremony of lowering the body, repeated visits, to the eventual unvisited headstone.



figure 22

forms and spaces

As a whole, a cemetery, fenced off and gated, can be considered one space, but individually headstones create and define individual moments. By using the orientation of a burial and headstone with the relationship to those who interact with them a series of forms and orientations were created. Meant to be abstract and directly related to, Figure 23 shows possible combinations of spaces and connections in the behavior and interaction at a grave site.



figure 23

city of the living and city of the dead

Italo Calvino's, *Invisible Cities*, is a collection of fictional stories, describing adventures and voyages between the main characters. One of the stories imagines two cities, the one of the living and the other of the dead, where they are built as mirrors to one another. The influence from the city of the living is taken from the city of the dead, by individuals who walk between both. Calvino's inspiring and captivating story became a heavy influence and turning point for this thesis project. The relationship and affect provided a new insight that displayed respect and attention by proposing a continual interaction between the living and the dead.

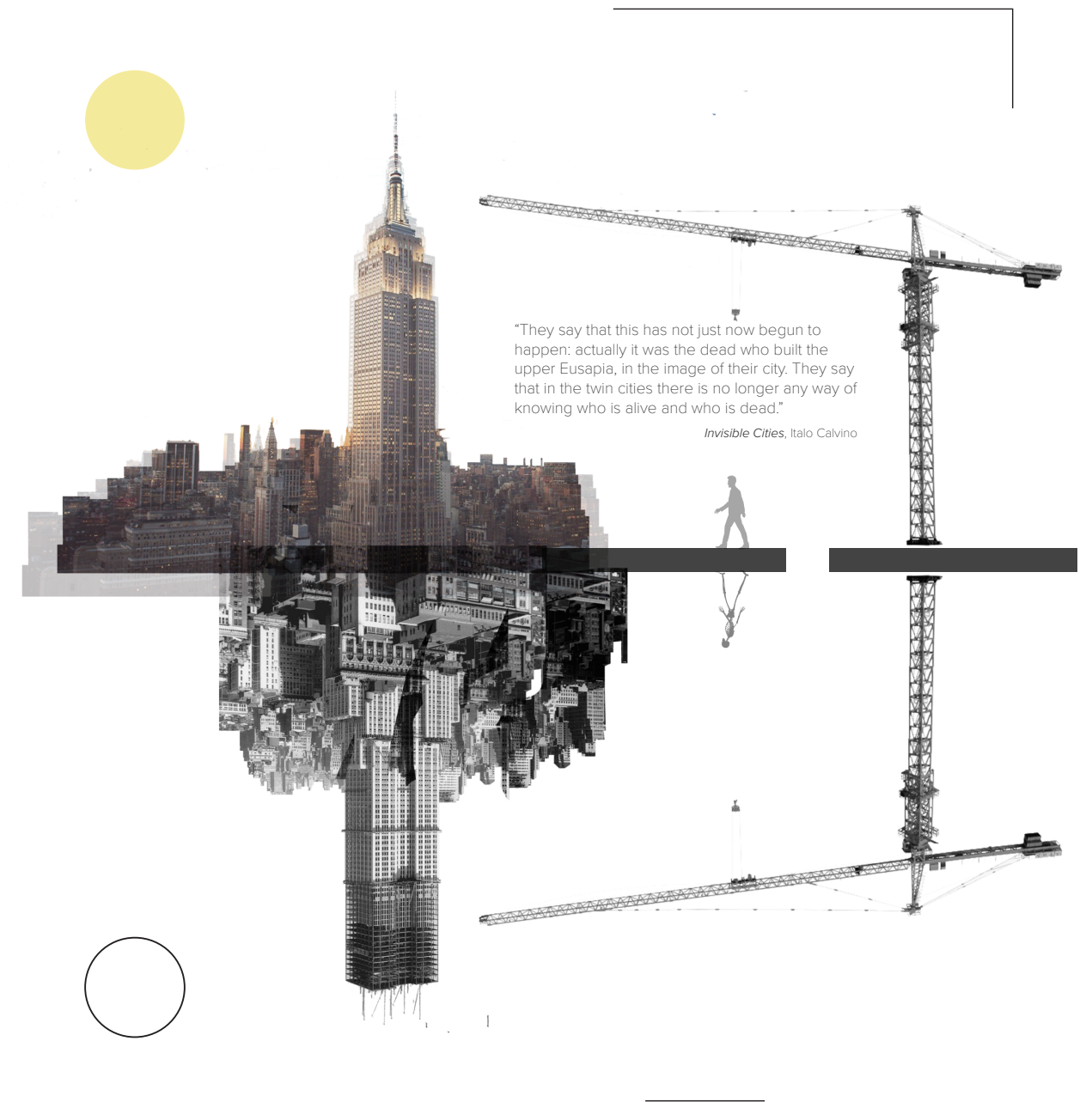
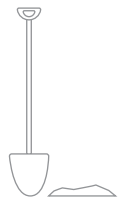


figure 24

04

the acknowledgment



Close the Loop

Delft University of Technology

Bob Hendrixx

2020

summary: Created by Bob Hendrixx, a researcher at Delft University of Technology, the Living Cocoon relies on a natural process to break down bodies. In a similar lens, the goal of his creation is to provide an alternative environmentally friendly way of disposing bodies. Taking inspiration from nature, Hendrixx has studied mycellium, the root structure of fungus, as a means of composting bodies. The mycellium is mixed with an organic substrate and molded to form the shape of a coffin, a process that is entirely passive. After completion, these mycellium coffins are ready to host a body that will be placed inside, covered with a lid of the same material and placed in a forest to begin the decomposition process. The decomposition of the mycellium coffin breaks down in 45 days while simultaneously aiding and breaking down toxins from the body and returning them to the ground in a cleaner form, enriching the soil.



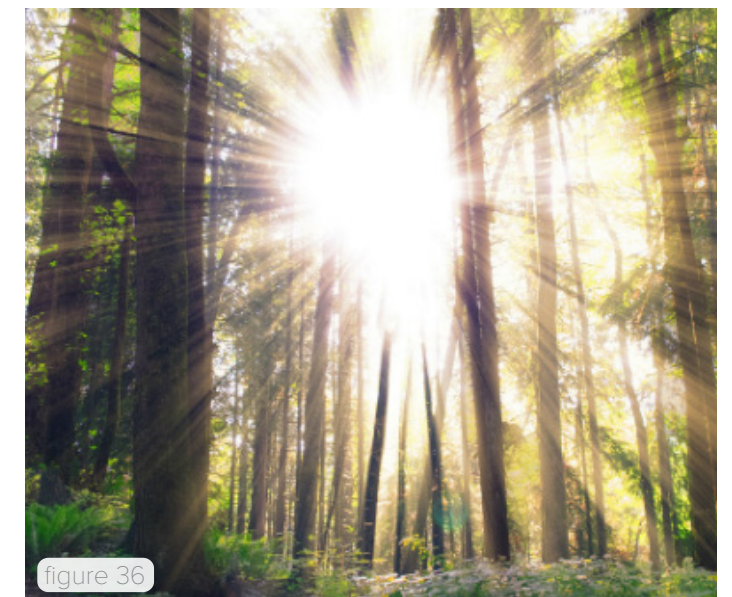
Capsula Mundi

Italy

Anal Citelli & Raoul Bretzel

2003

summary: Capsula Mundi conception was founded through the idea that culture is removed from nature and death is treated as a taboo topic. Creators Anna Citelli and Raoul Bretzel wanted their design to emphasize that humans are part of a natural cycle one that is in constant growth. Envisioned through ecological materials, Capsula Mundi uses a tree and an egg-shape to return the body back to earth. The body is placed in a fetal position within the egg-shaped biodegradable shell and planted in the ground. To mark its location, a tree is chosen by a loved one and planted on top serving as the memorial. The tree would be grown and cared for overtime and as more and more are planted a forest would be created.



Recompose

Seattle, Washington

Katrina Spade

2017

summary: Founder and CEO Katrina Spade, first began to conceptualize natural burial while pursuing her masters degree in architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2011. Through understanding composting techniques already used by farmers Spade continued research after graduating and eventually found the company Recompose in 2017. Since its conception, legalization of natural organic reduction (human composting), has been passed in three states. The process involves the laying of bodies in individual capsules surrounded by wood chips, alfalfa and straw. Over the course of thirty days the body is broken down by microbes resulting in nutrient dense soil. In the state of Washington, this soil is returned to a forest to help replenish the land.



figure 37

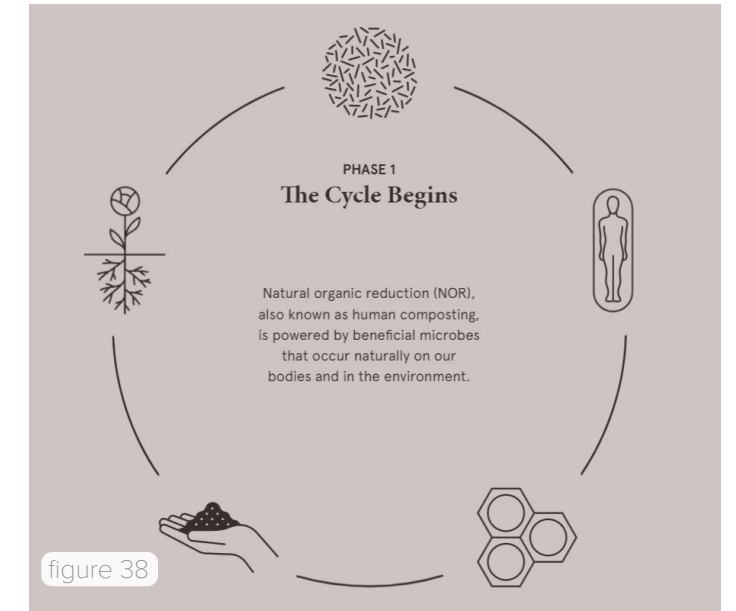


figure 38



figure 39



figure 40



figure 41



figure 42

Columbia Death Lab

Columbia University, New York City

Karla Rothstein

2003

summary: In an effort to reconceive how death is handled, Columbia University (GSAPP) in New York City alongside Latent Productions have been conducting a cross disciplinary program titled DeathLab. Seen as a piece of urban infrastructure the proposal of Constellation Park re-imagines a place of remembrance in the metropolis and how we can begin to live with the dead. Situated in pods, bodies of the deceased are placed in the hanging structure under the Brooklyn Bridge creating a newly envisioned cemetery and elevated park. During the decomposition of the biomass, cells power light creating a glowing and flickering light. Final remains at the end of the cycle are able to be collected by loved ones.

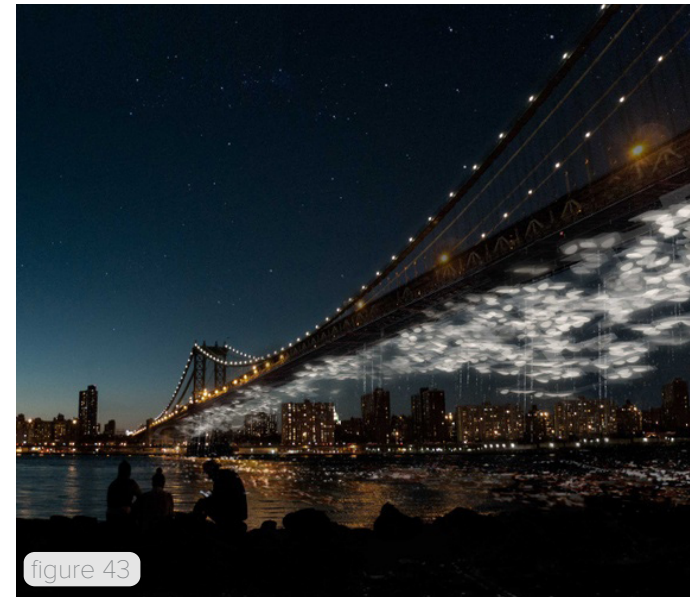


figure 43

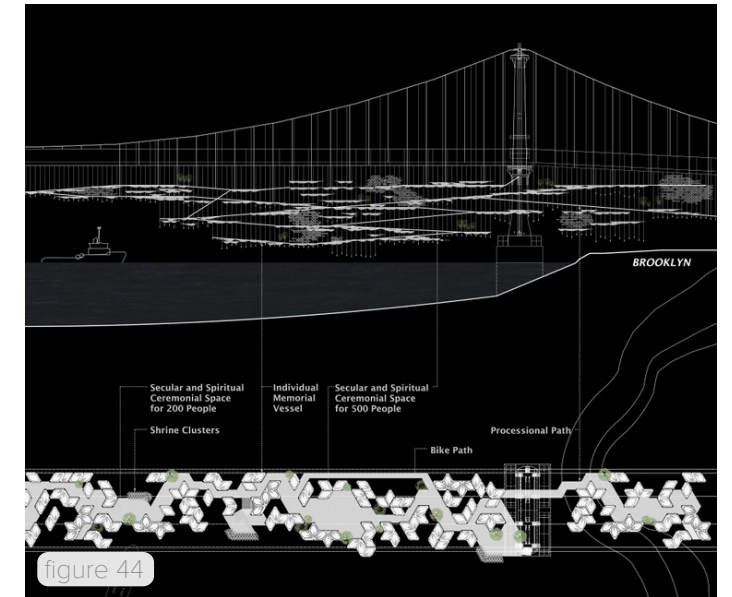


figure 44

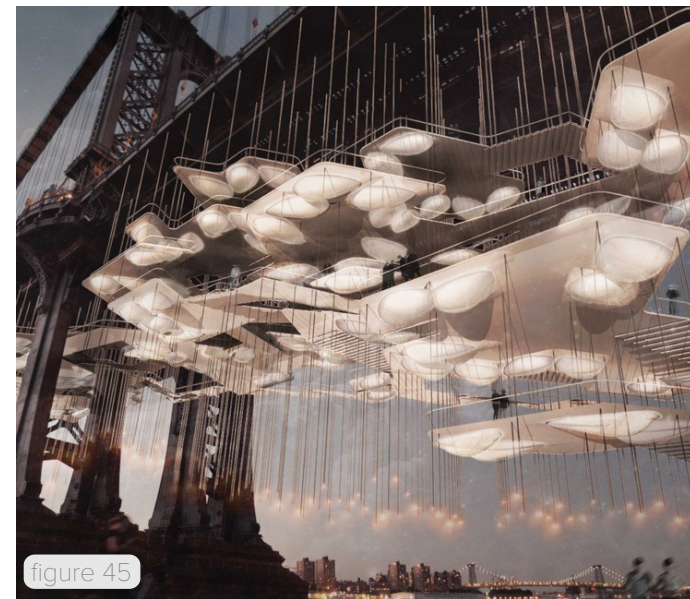


figure 45

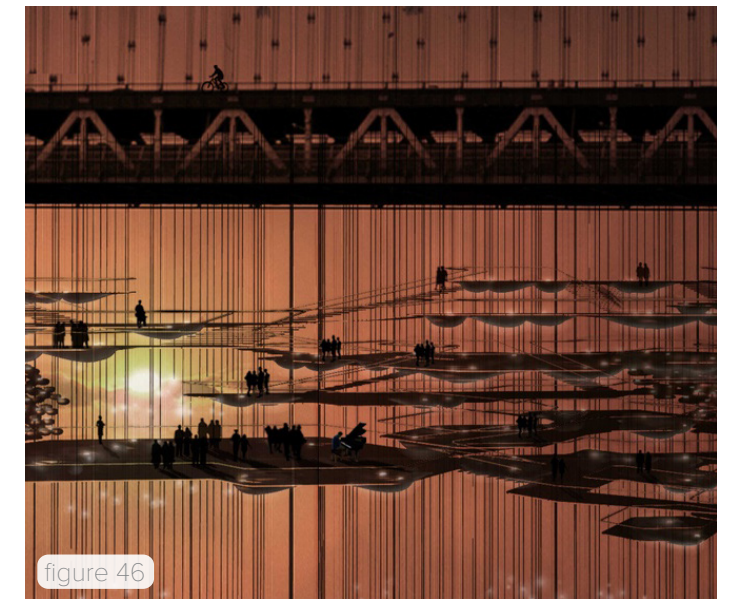


figure 46

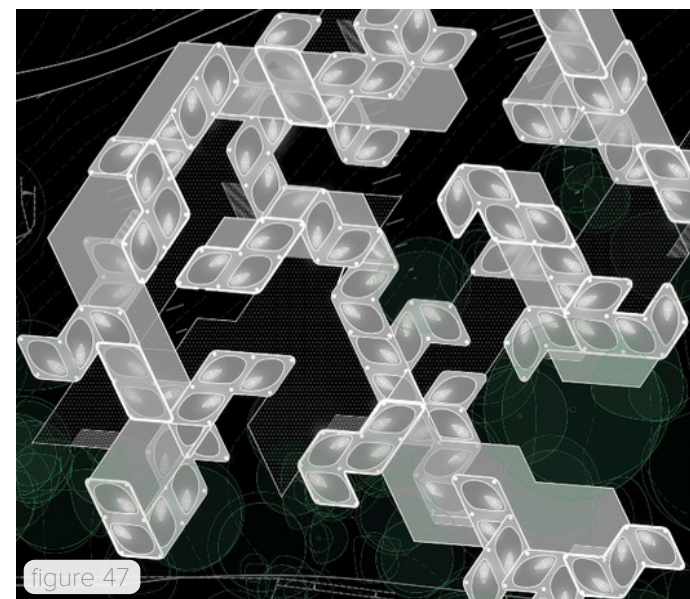


figure 47



figure 48

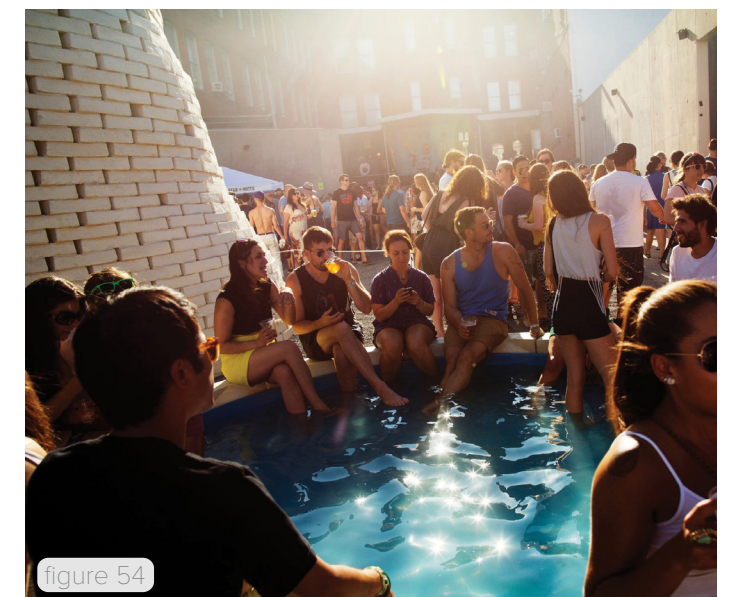
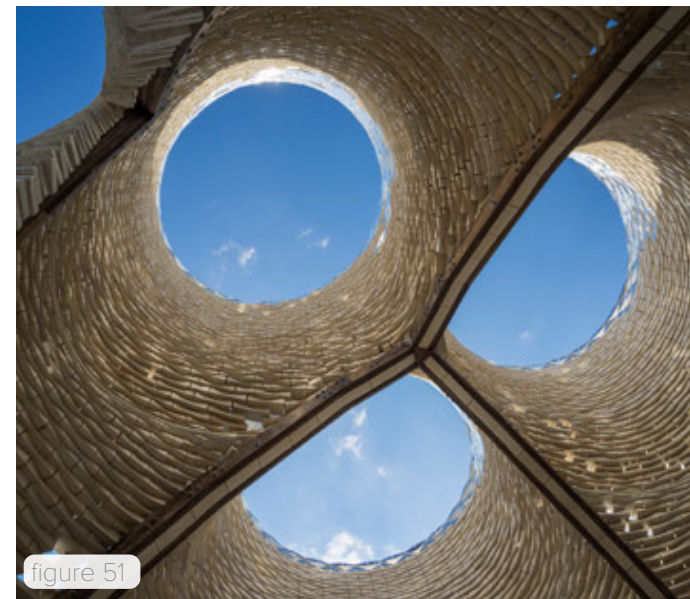
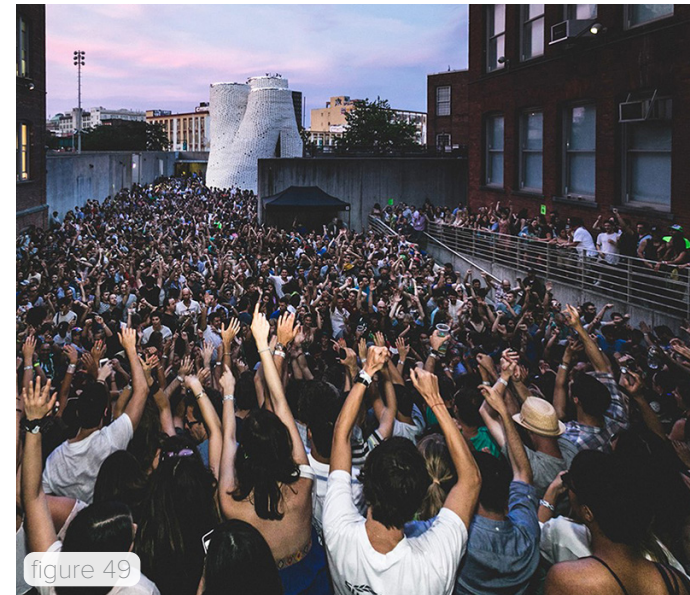
Hy-Fi

New York City

The Living

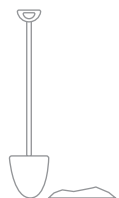
2014

summary: David Benjamin, principal of The Living, designed 'Hy-Fi', which became the winning project in the annual Young Architects Program. The temporary structure was hosted at MoMa PS1's courtyard in the summer of 2014. Introduced as an alternative building material, the circular towers formed from bricks are made of biodegradable materials. Using corn stalks and mycellium, molds in the form of bricks are used to create the bio-bricks. Gaps in the perimeter of the structure allow for natural ventilation while the silver bricks covered in a light-refracting film, developed by 3M, help illuminate the interior space. Once the exhibition ended all the bio-bricks were composted returning the material back to the natural cycle.



05

the site



casual interactions

As previously mentioned, the word casual is used to focus on the death that happens everyday while also being a guide of how to reintegrate death back into the city through means of casual interactions or occurrences. Since grief and death are highly personal experiences, reintegration had to draw upon moments that would typically be viewed or encountered. Figure 55 isolates these moments and features while inserting headstones and grave markers to show and evoke the potential of these moves.

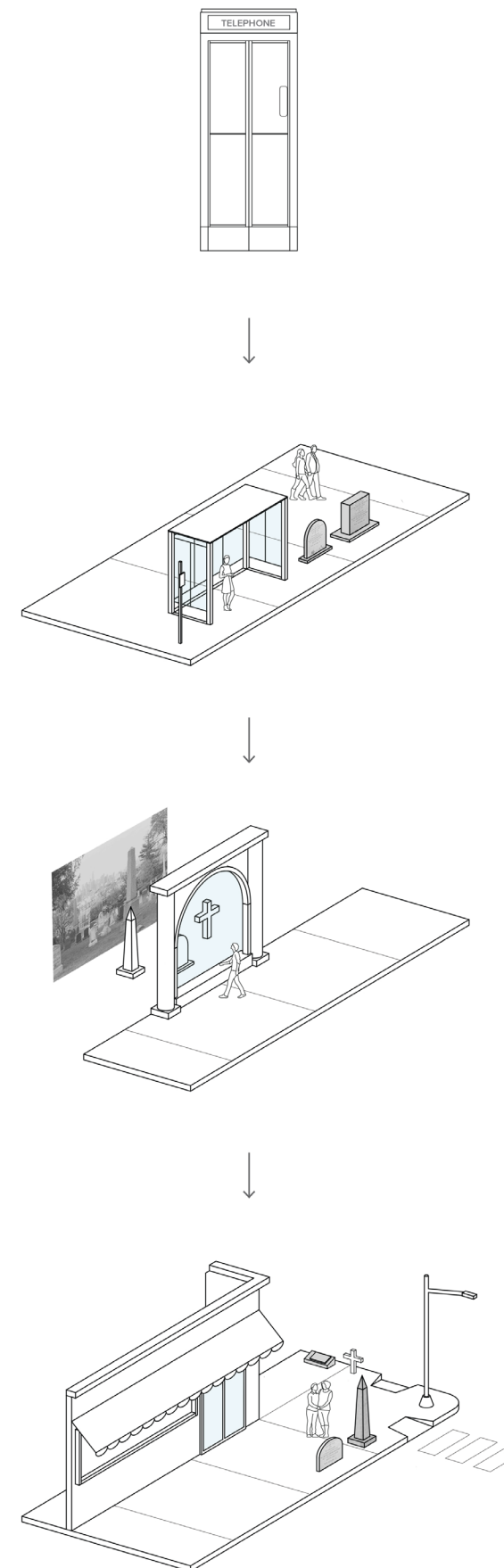


figure 55

phone booth

Used as the starting point, the phone booth, although, hardly used or seen today in this form today, gave insight to personal moments on public display. Enclosed behind a metal frame and glass, users would be able to engage in private conversations audibly separating them anyone passing by.

bus stop

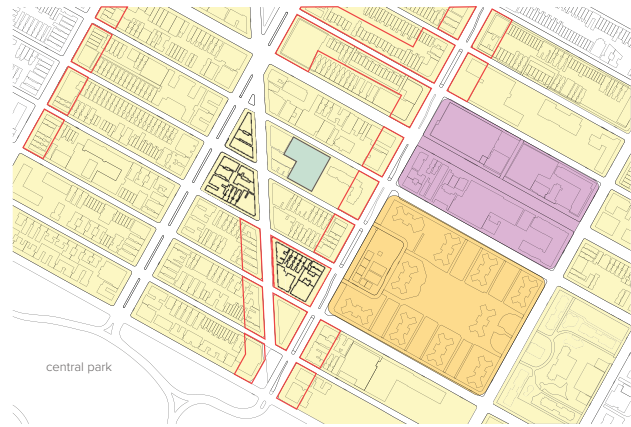
For anyone who uses transit on a repeated schedule, interactions with strangers once new and uncomfortable become commonplace.

window display

The window display used for marketing is replaced with headstone and a back drop of a cemetery, replacing merchandise with attention to

street corner

As an intersection, street corners promote unintended interactions, but are typically populated with newspaper stands



zoning and land use

- site
- R7-2: medium density residential
- NYCHA: public housing
- C1-4: commerical districts
- C4-5X: commerical district

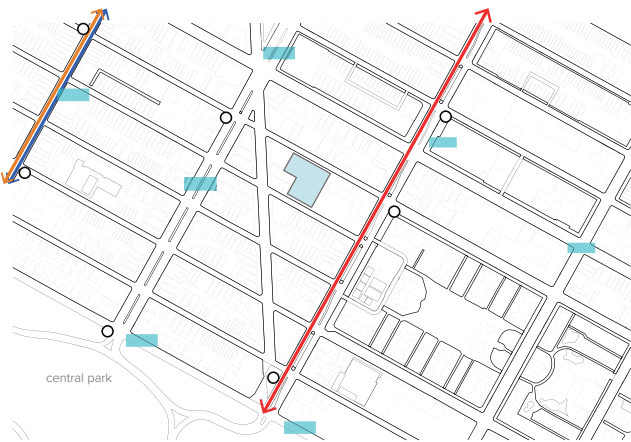
figure 56



program use

- site
- religious centers
- NYCHA: public housing
- local schools
- parks

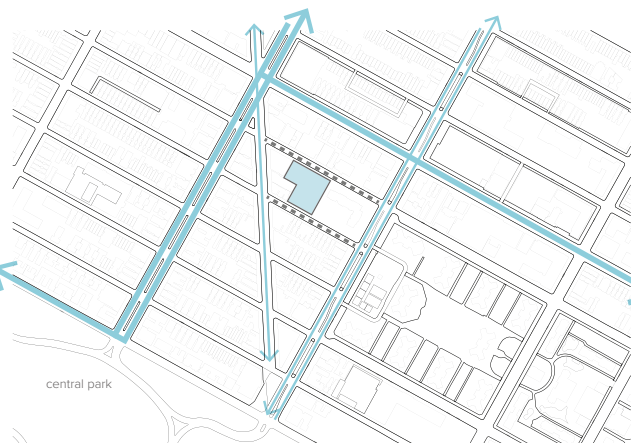
figure 57



local transportation

- 2 3 subway lines
- A C subway lines
- B subway lines
- citi bike locations
- MTA bus stops

figure 58



vehicular transportation

- local truck routes
- secondary corridors
- tertiary corridors

figure 59

site analysis

Major cities are epicenters for tourism, business and trade, but nestled within are the people who live and call these places home. Separate from central business districts and tourist hubs, identifying locations of neighborhoods and communities was crucial. By studying ZoLa (zoning and land use maps) from New York City's Planning department with respect to previous mapping exercises, the island of Manhattan seemed the most fitting to locate a potential site. Without displacing or demolishing any existing structure, undeveloped or underutilized space would provide the best defense for reintegrating death. Eventually a site north of Central Park between 114th and 115th street adjacent to St. Nicholas Avenue embodied all these characteristics. This combination of factors are depicted on the previous page solidifying the site as the ideal location.

cemetery visits

Through previous mapping showing the five boroughs with locations of many New York City cemeteries, the exercise was revisited in context to the selected site and examined further. However, rather than showing all cemeteries within the city, only active cemeteries (accepting burials) with the closest proximity to the selected site are outlined (figure 60). Assuming public transportation and fastest route, subway paths are highlighted with each route requiring a minimum of one transfer to reach any of these cemeteries. The total times displayed only shows one way travel and does not include round-trip. This exploration and mapping emphasizes the accessibility of cemeteries providing further evidence of the cities removal and lack of recognition to death while defending the need for reintegration.

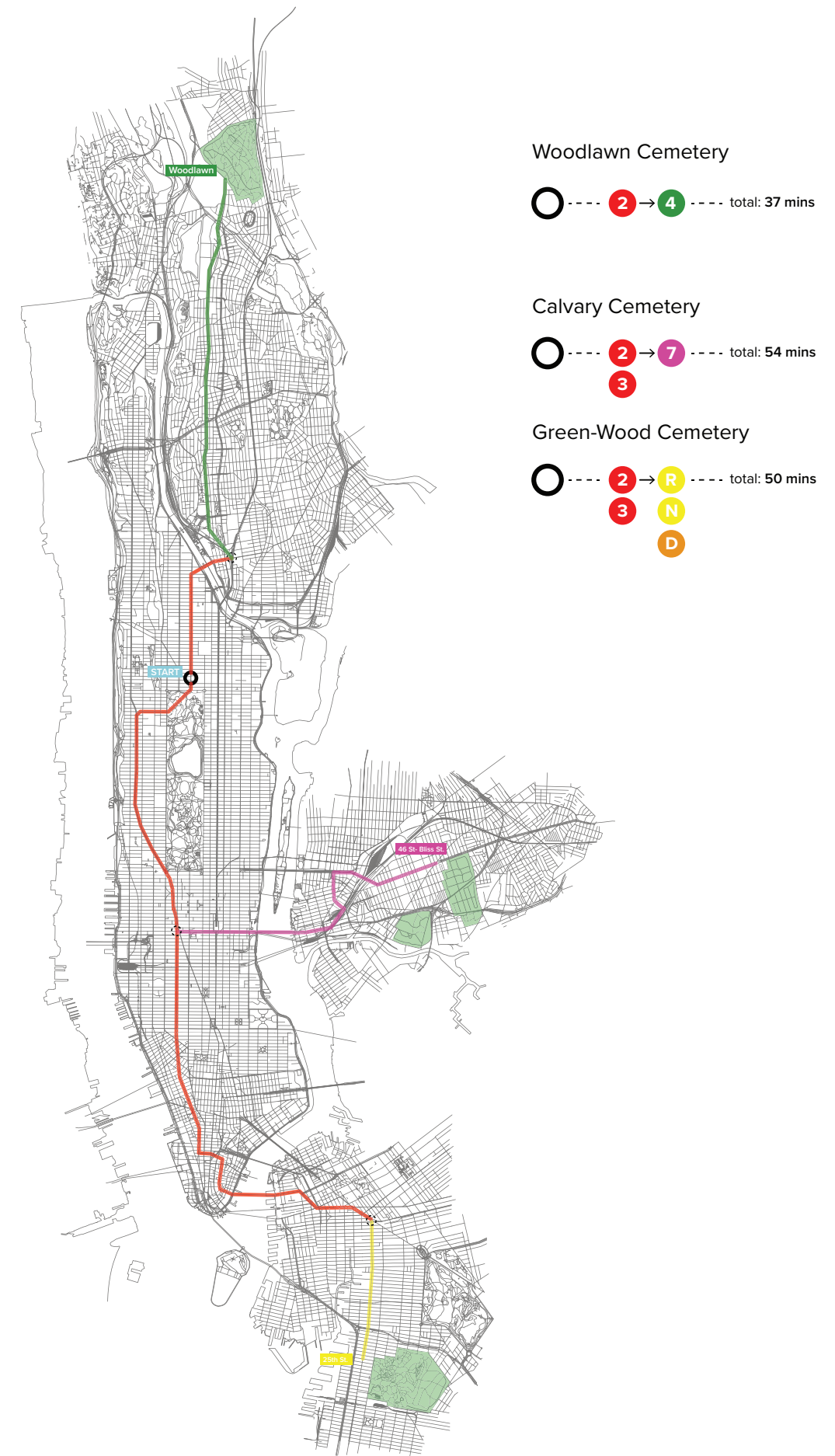


figure 60

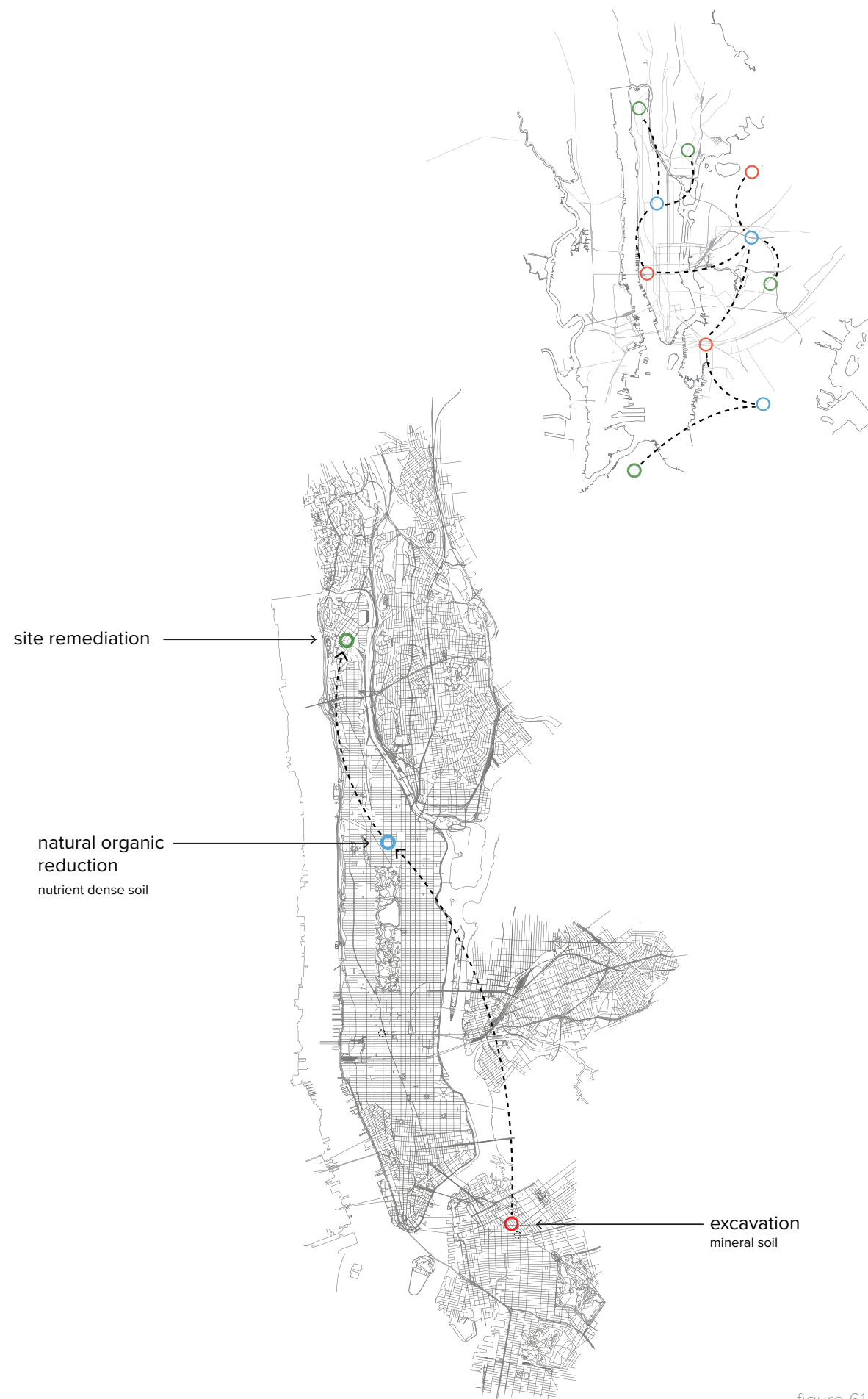


figure 61

cut and fill

Understanding that the approach to this thesis centered predominantly on landscape, the action to reintegrate the cemetery architecturally, that was both sensitive to emotion and responsive to the design development and research, was imperative. As illustrated on the cover and previously mentioned, the digging of the grave was a starting point, but eventually evolved to connect ideas and emphasize the term “cut and fill” and eventually becoming the defining concept for this thesis project.

As a result of traditional burial, small amounts of soil would be displaced, linking this displacement with Morrish’s Geologic Agents, it was realized that the construction of buildings also displaces soil through excavation for foundations. With limited available space in a city to relocate this soil, it was discovered that the New York Office of Environmental Remediation retains this excavated soil in a program called PUREsoil. However, because the soil comes from deep below ground, it lacks natural organic material or plant nutrients and must be combined with a topsoil in order to be used for gardens or site remediation.¹⁷

From research and precedents, the connection was made that the process of natural organic reduction, utilized by Recompose, which produces nutrient rich soil could be combined with the excavated mineral soil from the construction of buildings, contained by the PUREsoil program. The loss of people and the removal of dirt for foundation would be conceptually referred to as cut, while the output of nutrient rich soil as by product combined with mineral soil from construction would be referred to as fill. Coupled together, the soil would be used in site remediation throughout the city in various locations. This process creates cyclical and ecological benefits that helps balance the city of the living and the city of the dead.

¹⁷ “PUREsoil NYC”



figure 62

1924
A row of residential units occupy the site.



figure 63

1951
The site remains unchanged.



figure 64

1996
A parking lot and basketball court occupy the site.



figure 65

2001
The site remains unchanged.

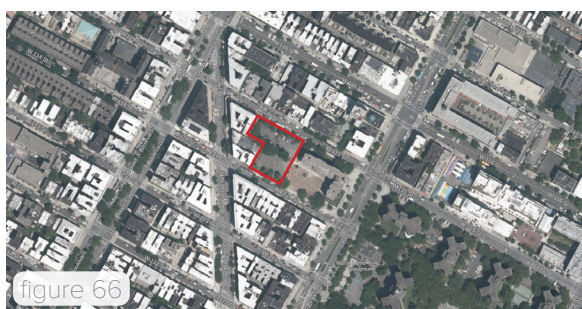


figure 66

2010
The site remains unchanged.



figure 67

2018
The basketball court appears to be no longer used.



figure 68



figure 69

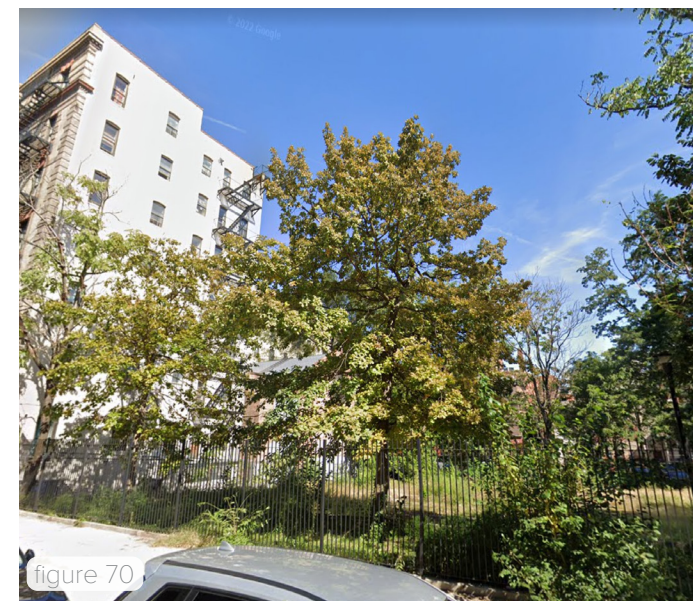


figure 70



figure 71



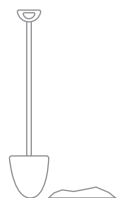
figure 72

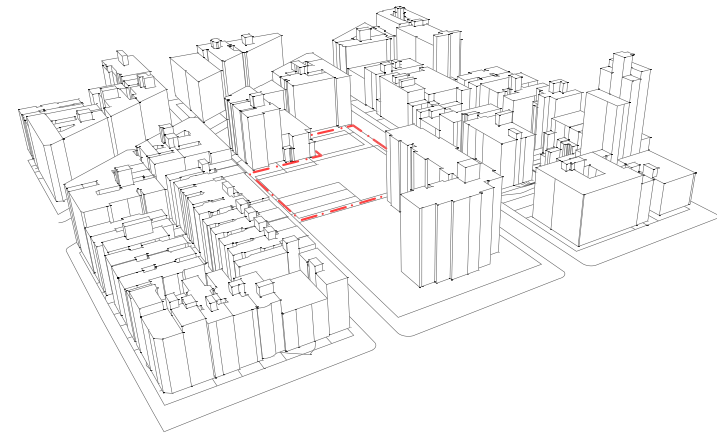


figure 73

06

final defense

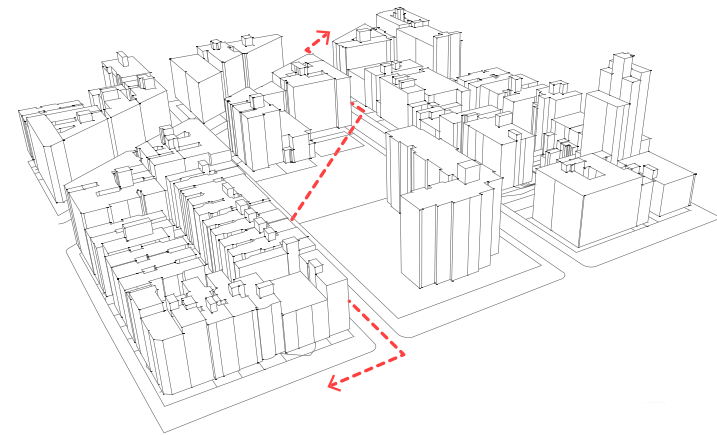




site boundary

Divided by the city as four separate tax lots situated between residential buildings, the site will envelope all lots defining a new boundary.

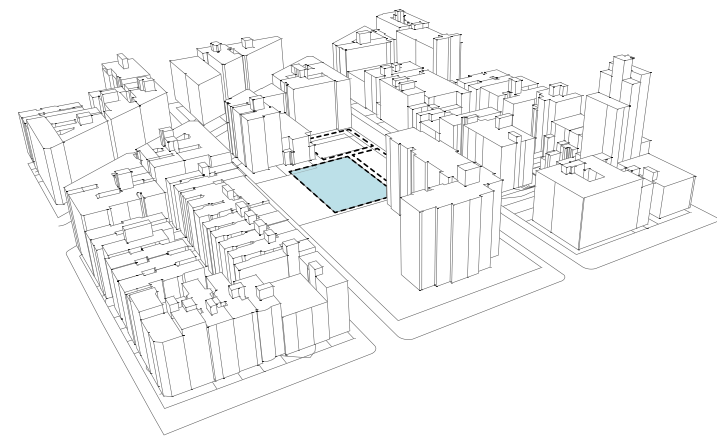
figure 74



meandering

As a unique feature, especially in New York City, the site receives access from both 114th and 115th street, promoting the flow of space through the entire site.

figure 75



footprint ratio

While the site roughly measures 200' deep by 120' wide, not all available spaced needed to be developed.

figure 76

open floor plate

By opening the floor plates at all levels and within the structure, more interactions and internal views would be created as opposed to stacked floors or pancake levels that only creates views outward.

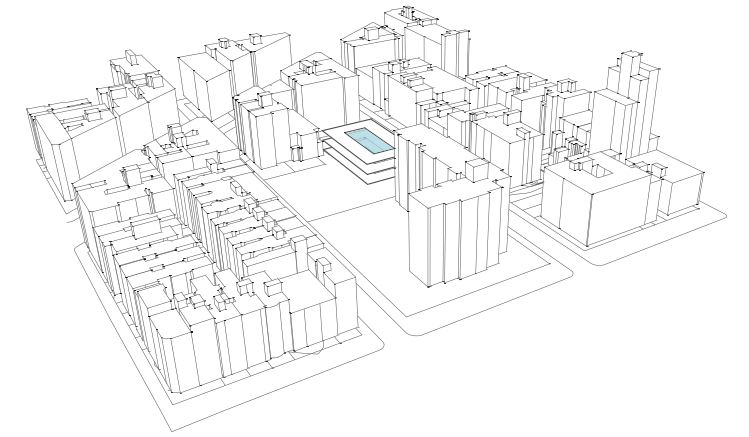


figure 77

reveal structure

The motive and desire to reveal emotion led to the parallel decision of revealing the structure. This concept would be applied a holistic approach by eliminating a curtain wall or facade.

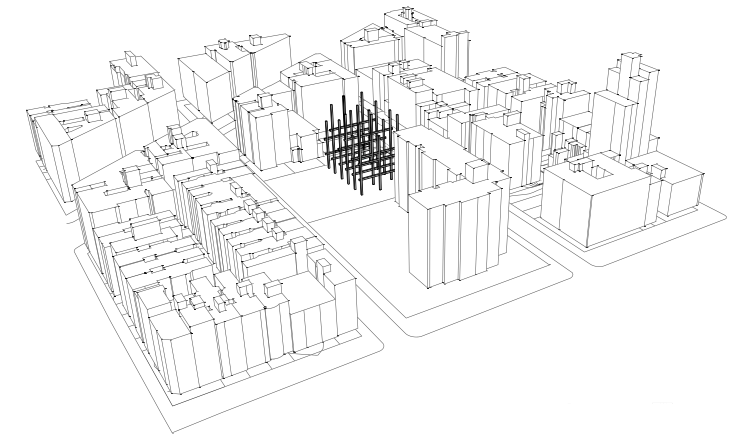


figure 78

landscape

Drawing inspiration from the development of cemeteries and respect towards nature, it became important to recognize landscape and vegetation as a crucial role element on the site.

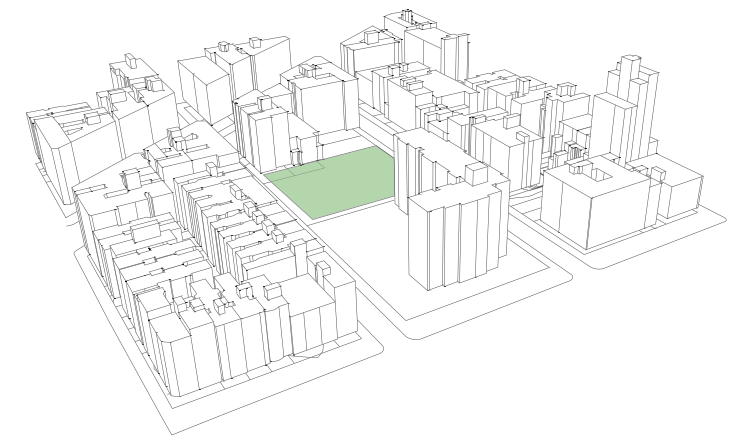


figure 79

approach

Whether passing by, attending a funeral ceremony or visiting a loved one during decomposition this proposal seeks to accept emotion, grief and life. While no longer absent within the fabric of a city, this site encourages an interaction with death that has long been removed from our cities.



figure 80

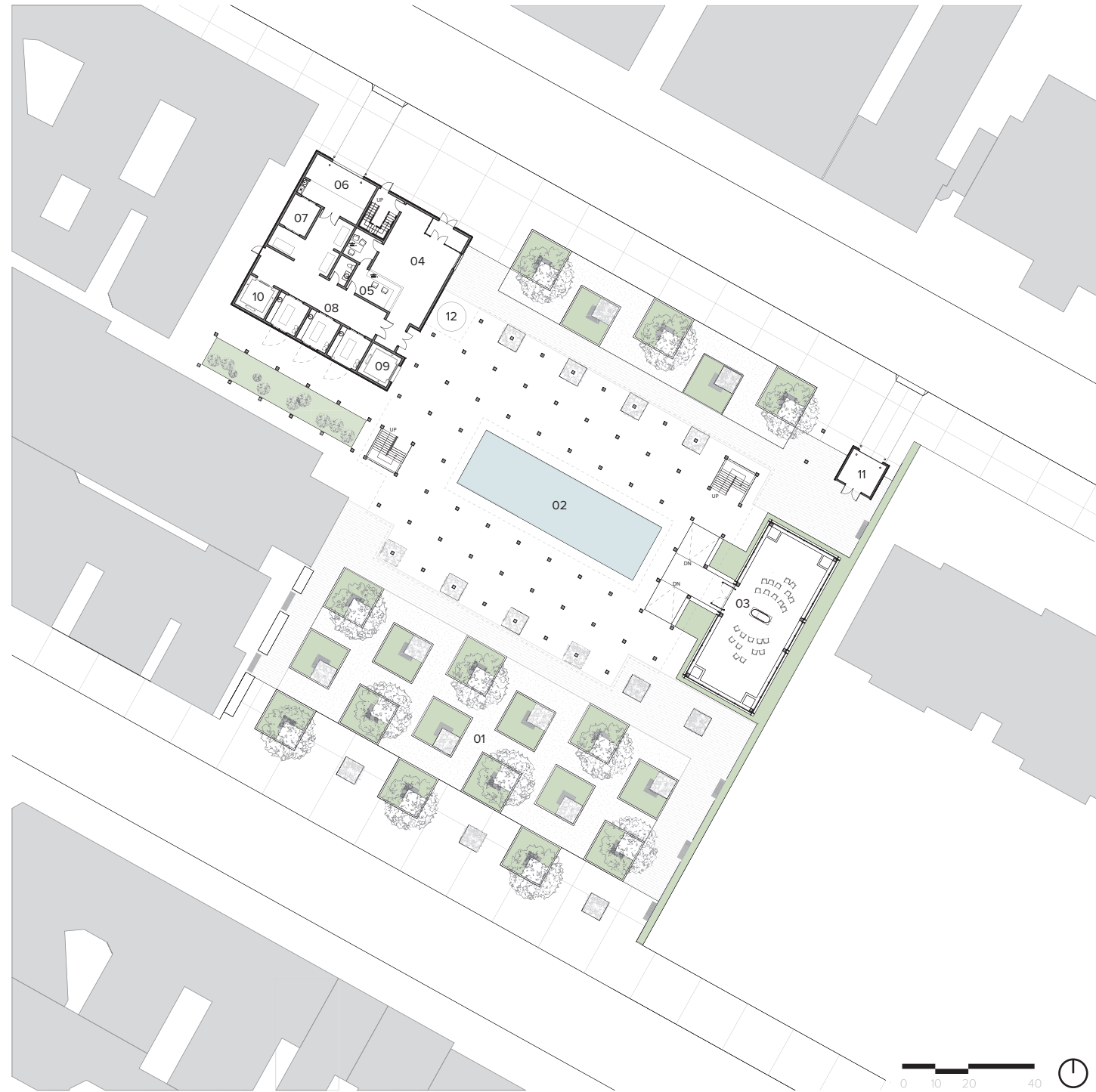


figure 81

Level 1

- 01 grounds
- 02 interior courtyard
- 03 ceremonial room
- 04 lobby
- 05 administration
- 06 loading dock
- 07 soil holding rooms
- 08 prep rooms
- 09 passenger elevator
- 10 back of house elevator
- 11 soil storage
- 12 water tank

interaction

Walking upon the site, visitors are first greeted by rows of planters alternating between honey locust trees and grasses. The sidewalk is pulled into the site, blurring the boundary in an effort to extend an invitation and incite exploration. At eye level the trees and structure create a colonnade and guiding path from one side of the site to the other.

grounds

Meandering further, a threshold of pea rock stones texturally and audibly forces an acknowledgment of a new space. Sunken voids and raised corten steel planters balance the cut and fill, alluding to the greater concept and at a more comprehensible scale. Selected for their characteristics, the honey locust trees create a canopy, shading during the summer and losing leaves during winter, noting the passing of time and growth.

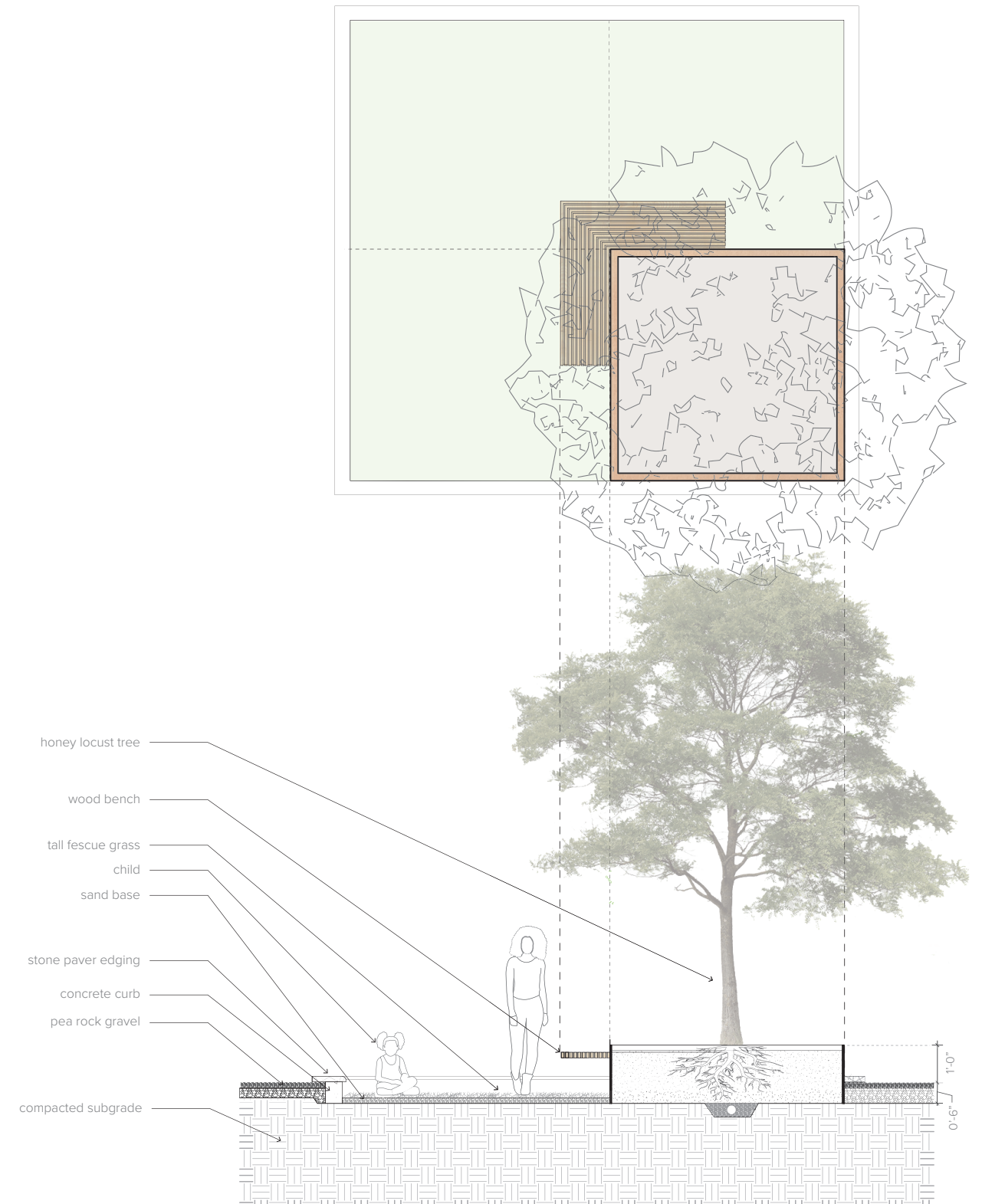


figure 82

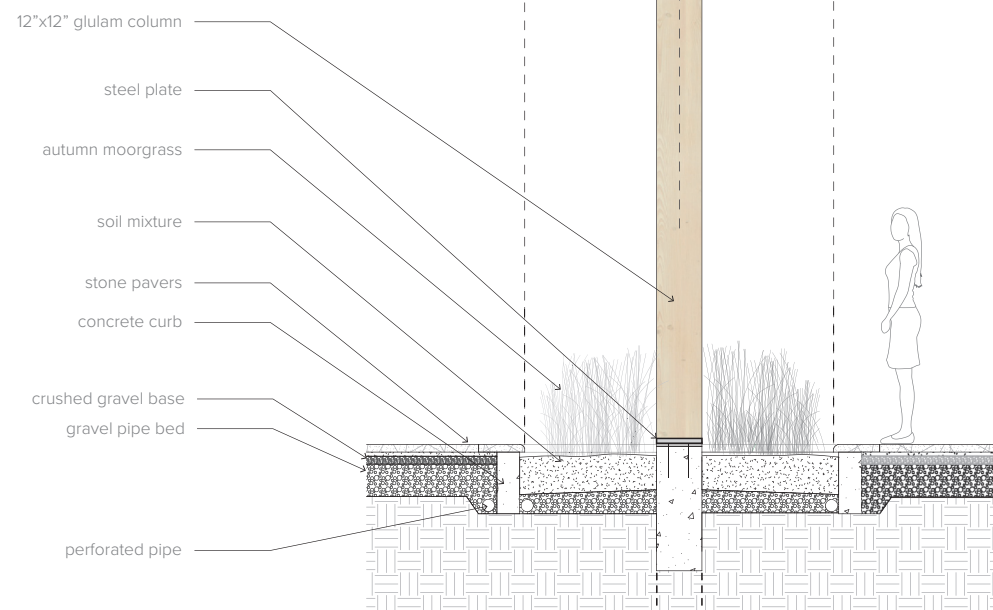
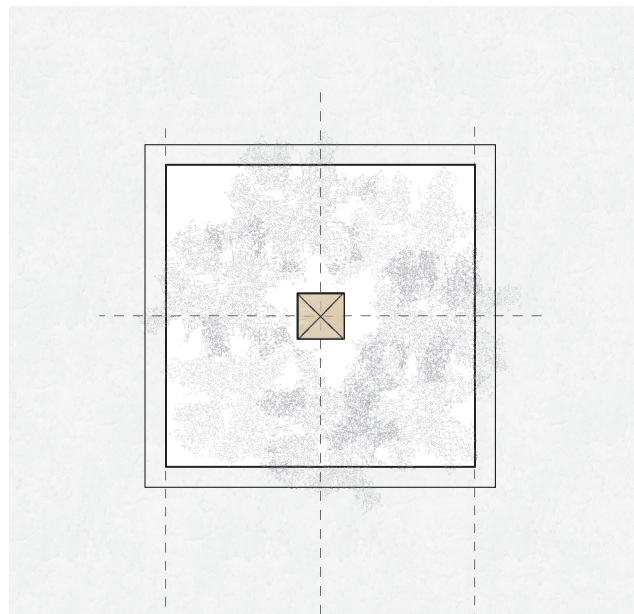


figure 83

growth and structure

Mimicking the procession of the trees, glulam columns rise out of a bed of moor grass, just beyond the planters. Untouched and uncovered, the glulam's natural qualities and value are revealed, aiming to create parallels in the revealing of emotion throughout the site.

courtyard

Passing through the forest of glulam columns, visitors step into the courtyard where the floors open to above. A skim of water blankets the ground creating a sense of formality, yet its lack of depth allows one to walk across its surface.



figure 84



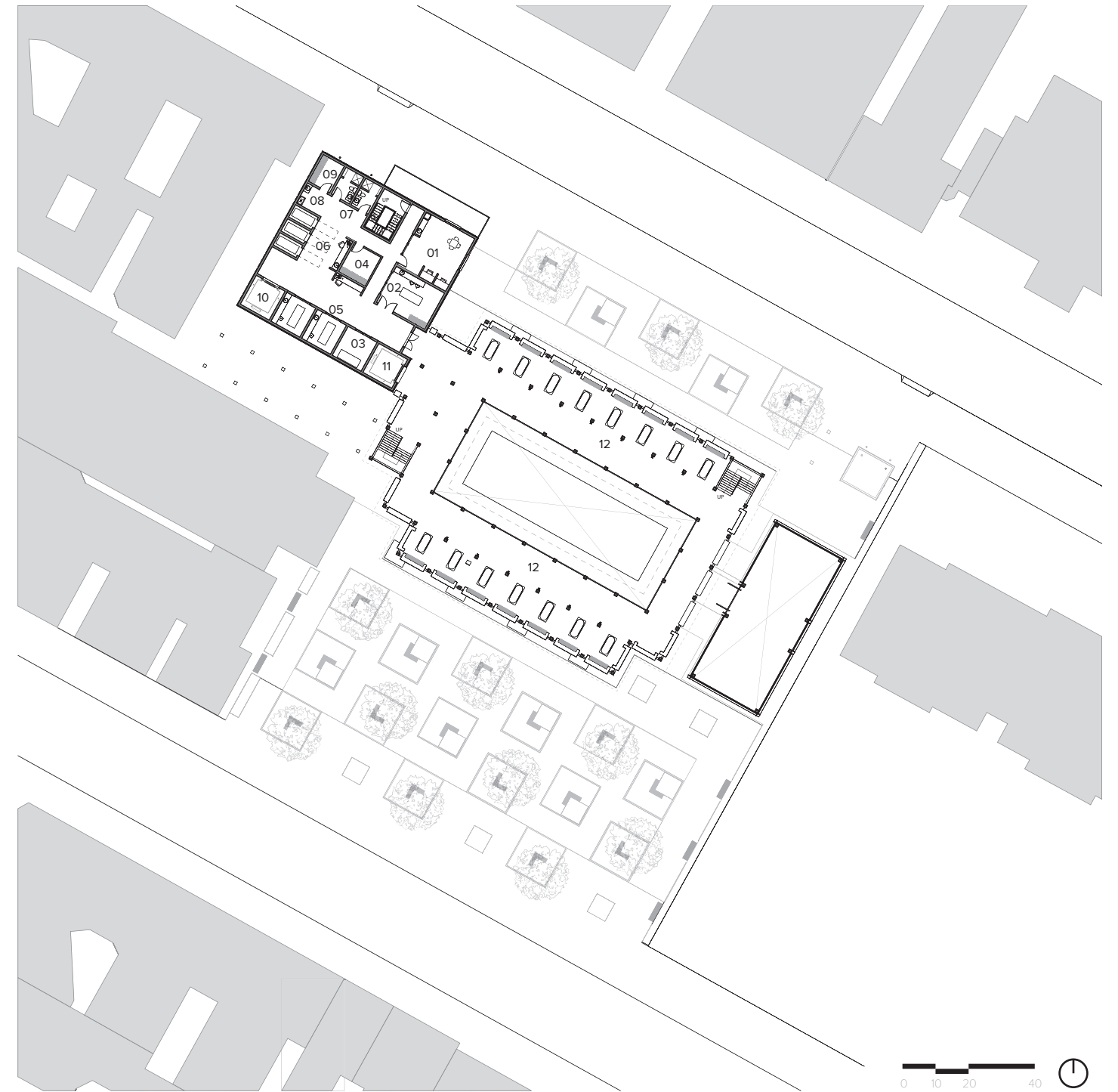
figure 85

ceremonial space

After the deceased body arrives and is prepped, it passes by an evergreen garden, through the glulam columns where it reaches the ceremonial space. Wrapped in a veil of corten steel rods, the ceremonial space offers privacy for loved ones to say goodbye. The capsule containing the body wrapped in a shroud sits at the center of the room below a skylight. As the first step of natural organic reduction, loved ones partake in placing clusters and fragments of wood chips and organic material necessary to help break down the body.

process

Once the funeral ceremony ends, the capsule is closed, sealed and brought to its individual niche located within the structure. Taking approximately 30 days, the body will undergo natural organic reduction, resulting in soil. Once cured and tested the body will be combined with PUREsoil and relocated to assist in site remediation or general use.



Levels 02-05

- 01 staff office
- 02 processing
- 03 capsule storage
- 04 plant storage
- 05 prep rooms
- 06 soil curing
- 07 locker rooms
- 08 clean staging
- 09 storage
- 10 back of house elevator
- 11 passenger elevator
- 12 capsule niche

figure 86



figure 87

capsule niche

Unlike a traditional cemetery, the resting place is elevated above the ground and temporary, responding to the challenges of reintegration. Ascending within the structure, loved ones are able to revisit during the reduction process. Flower holders at every niche, offer a personal touch while built in benches provide comfort for extended visits.

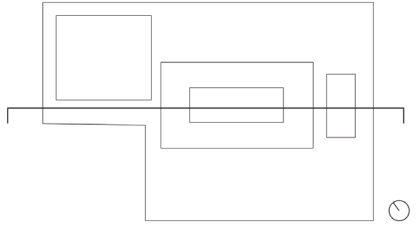
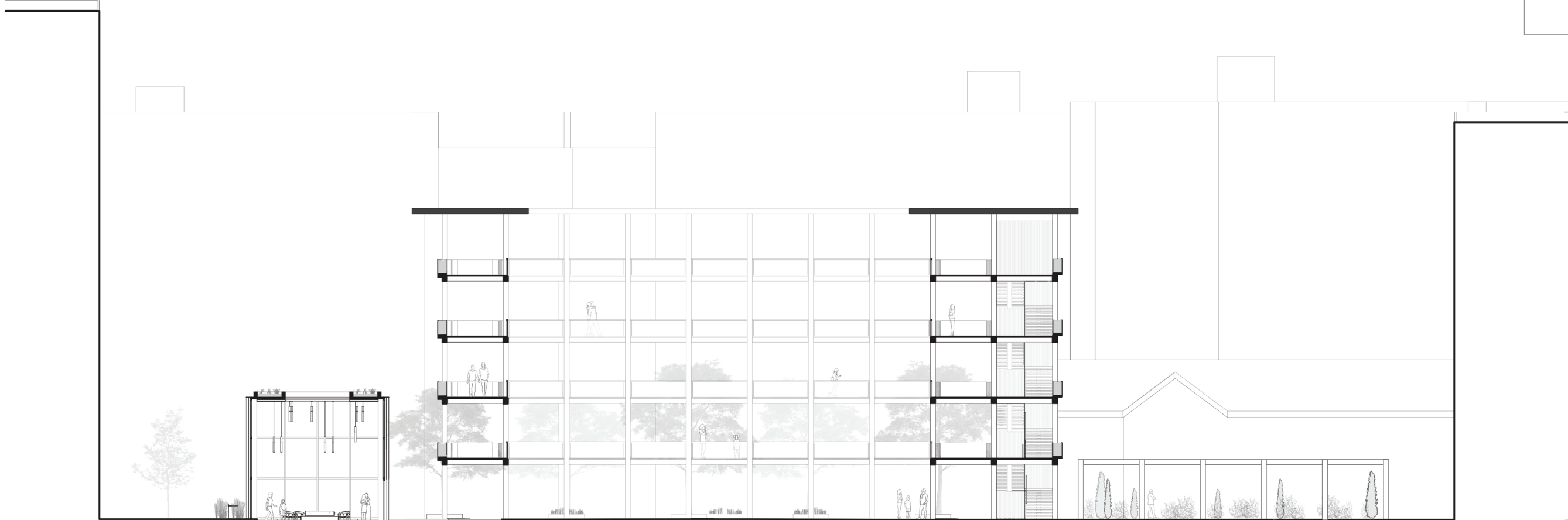
revealing emotion

Lacking walls and partitions the experience of loss and grief is meant to be shared. Internal walkways wrap each level, creating views above, below and beside revealing emotion.



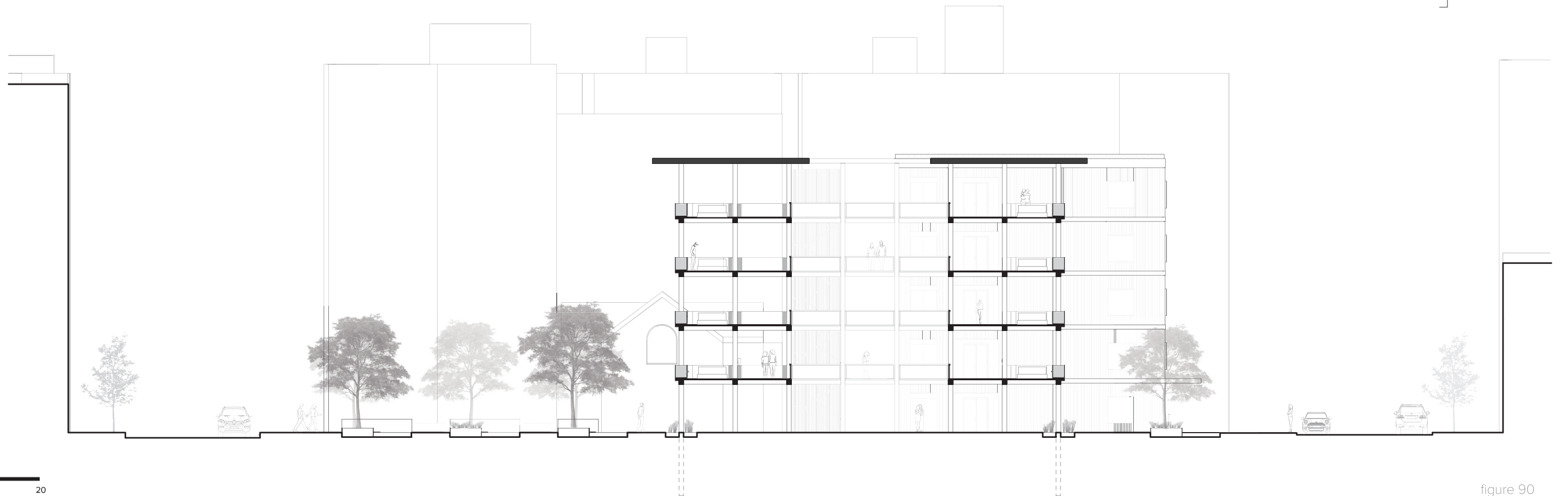
figure 88

longitudinal site section



0 5 10 20

traverse site section



0 5 10 20

weathering elevation

Referencing back to Juhani Pallasmaa’s “*Eyes of the Skin*”, it was important to represent age and avoid materials that aimed to remain perfect. For this reason the planters and ceremonial space are wrapped in corten steel. Through the process of oxidation, the corten steel slowly darkens over time. Its use as a planter connects oxidation and photosynthesis to represent growth. Additionally, charred wood, shou sugi ban, clads the faces of the service and prep building. As time passes the charred surface will begin to fade, lightening the color of the facade.



south elevation



0 5 10 20

07

conclusion

This thesis seeks to question our relationship with the ones we have lost. Overtime our cemeteries have become a place of rest for loved ones, where memories, emotion and time are contained, but as land has become more valuable all of these associations are sequestered. Continuing these actions, cities fail to create places that recognize the importance of grief and loss. As a response this thesis provokes the reintegration of death into cities through means of casual interactions. By addressing death as a natural process and treating it with a natural process, this proposal outlines a cut and fill process that balances the city of the living with the city of the dead and as one that accepts a place to grieve.

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thank you.

