# Virtual Colloquium

# Friday 21st November 2025

**PROGRAMME**

Note that the timings here are in GMT (ie UCT+1).

Session 1: 8:00-10:00 Displacing the dead

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| 8:00-8:15 | Julie Rugg, University of York*Welcome* |
| **8:15-9:00** | **Plenary: Ruth Toulson, Maryland Institute College of Art, US*****The last cemetery: shifting deathscapes in contemporary Singapore*** |
| 9:00-9:30 | Einar Sigurður Einarsson, Université Paris Nanterre & Université Paris 8*A ghoulish war: desecrating burial sites on the Western Front, 1914-1918* |
| 9:30-10:00 | Benna Fathima, Ashoka University, India*Graves across the sea: death, grief and ethics of separation in Laccadive Islands* |

Session 2: 10:30-12:30 Material culture

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| 10:30-11:00 | Simon Kilbane, University of Western Australia *Future landscapes of memory: three years of collaborative tertiary design studio teaching in Perth, Western Australia* |
| 11:00-11:30 | Galini Nikolaidi & Georgios Dionysios Lountzis, Technical University of Crete & National Technical University of Athens*Urban voids of memory and living community spaces: the dual nature of Greek cemeteries* |
| 11:30-12:00 | Artis Zvirgzdiņš, Art Academy of Latvia*Between earth and heaven: the emergence and development of cemetery chapels in Vidzeme, Latvia* |
| 12:00-12:30 | Fabio Mélo, Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil*What do the symbols and burial types in the Senhor Bom Jesus da Redenção cemetery from 1851-1900 tell us?* |

Session 3: 13:30-15:00 New accommodations

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| 13:00-13:30 | Saran Joseph Alexander, University of Kerala, India*Shrouds of Kerala: A socio-political study of coffin-less burial in Kerala Catholic Churches* |
| 13:30-14:00 | Alba Arillo García. Aalto University, Finland*Dressing for decay: reimagining the cemetery through regenerative burialwear* |
| 14:00-14:30 | Beauty Kujinga, Rock and Roll Foundation, Zimbabwe*Sustainable death care in Africa: exploring cremation as a land-conserving alternative to traditional cemeteries*  |
| 14:30-15:00 | Sophia Lambert, University of Leeds, UK*The rise of cremation and its impact on the Bradford Reform Jewish Cemetery and Berlin’s Reform Jewry, 1877-1926* |

Session 4: 15:30-17:45 Respecting minorities

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| 15:30-16:00 | Lari Hallowes-Welman, Rhodes University, South Africa*‘Coloured’ Graves in a ‘Settler’ cemetery: the forgotten London Missionary Society burial ground in Gqeberha, South Africa* |
| 16:00-16:30 | *Kerry Boutte*, University of New Orleans*Tomb it may concern: Benevolent Societies of New Orleans* |
| 16:30-17:00 | Amy Oke, Queen’s University of Belfast, UK*Planning for the end: the intersection of deathscapes, power, and religion in a post-conflict society* |
| 17:00-17:30 | Magdalena Nordin, Gothenburg University, Sweden*Politics of death and multiculturalism at cemeteries in Sweden* |
| 17:30-17:45 | Julie Rugg, University of York, UK*Closing remarks* |

ABSTRACTS

## **SESSION 1: 08:00-10:00 Displacing the dead**

**PLENARY**

8:15-9:00 ***The last cemetery: shifting deathscapes in contemporary Singapore***

***Ruth Toulson*, Maryland Institute College of Art, US (****rtoulson@mica.edu****)**

Cemeteries have become sites of acute political contestation in the city-state of Singapore. Confronted with high population density and rapid economic growth, the government has ordered the destruction of all but one burial ground forcing people to exhume their family members. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Chinese funeral parlours and cemeteries, anthropologist and mortician Ruth E. Toulson demonstrates that as part of a large shift to transform a Daoist-infused obsession with ancestors into a sterile, more easily controlled ‘Protestant’ Buddhism. Further, in a context where the dead remains central to family life, forced exhumation tears the social fabric, turning ancestors into ghosts. Using death ritual and grieving as interrogative lenses, Toulson explores the scope of and resistance to state power over the dead, laying bare the legacies of colonialism and consequences of whirlwind capitalist development. In doing so, she offers a new anthropology of death, one both more personal and politicized.

9:00-9:30 **A ghoulish war: desecrating burial sites on the Western Front, 1914-1918**

*Einar Sigurður Einarsson*, Université Paris Nanterre & Université Paris 8 (einarsigurdureinarsson@gmail.com)

The First World War was not only fought between the living, at times, it was also fought against the dead. Cemeteries were occasionally turned into battlegrounds where soldiers entrenched themselves among the deceased. Elsewhere, burial sites were blindly shelled and reduced to rubble by artillery fire. Alongside this mainly incidental damage, were also deliberate acts of desecration. Wooden crosses were kicked down, vaults forced open, headstones destroyed, latrines placed over graves, tombs looted, coffins broken open, and even corpses violated. While reasons that led soldiers to act in such ways are complex, it remains essential to situate them within the changing contexts of the war on the Western Front. The invasion of 1914, the strategic retreat to the Hindenburg Line in 1917, and the collapse of the German army in 1918 each created different conditions where such violations could occur, and these moments also gave soldiers different opportunities and the perceived licence to attack both civilian and military cemeteries. Cemetery desecrations therefore cannot be dismissed as incidental missteps that happened during the war; they must instead be seen as part of a wider dynamic of totalising warfare. This paper examines how these acts of outrage were addressed and constructed in newspaper articles, official reports, photography, literature contemporary to the war, and diplomatic exchanges. While it stresses that these were not entirely widespread practices on the Western Front, this paper does show that the desecration of graves are meaningful acts as they can reveal a lot about the nature and the multifaceted dynamics of wartime violence.

9:30-10:00 **Graves across the sea: death, grief and ethics of separation in Laccadive Islands**

*Benna Fathima*, Ashoka University, India (benna.k\_phd23@ashoka.edu.in)

Drawing on the anthropology of proximity, this paper examines the ethical, emotional and economic negotiations surrounding death and burial of patients who are medically referred from the Laccadive Islands to the Indian subcontinent in search of advanced healthcare. Death in the Lakshadweep archipelago unfolds within an entangled terrain of ecological precarity, political transformation, and enduring islandic Islamic traditions. For the Muslim-majority islanders, embalmment and post-mortem procedures are religiously discouraged, and the imperative for swift burial often prevents the return of the deceased to their homeland. This results in a critical rupture: the body is interred in a distant land, while grief remains anchored in the island. How do islanders reckon with loss when the grave is permanently displaced across the sea? How are care and care acts enacted across these shifting terrains of life, death, mourning and memory across regions? Through oral narratives, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival analysis of burial and medical records, this paper examines how do these separated graves and grief produces discursive, historical and political proximities and coexistences, which disrupts the claims of belongingness, autochthony and identity. Here, rather than serving as fixed anchors of memory, burial sites emerge as dispersed material markers of rupture and continuity, shaped by socially negotiated experiences. The paper argues that this separation between graves and grief reconfigures both the materiality of death and the ethics of relatedness, entangling islanders in a transregional deathscape that unsettles conventional, linear notions of death, disposal and remembrance.

## **SESSION 2: 10:30-12:30 Material culture**

10:30-11:00 **Future landscapes of memory: three years of collaborative tertiary design studio teaching in Perth, Western Australia**

*Simon Kilbane*, University of Western Australia (simon.kilbane@uwa.edu.au)

This presentation reflects on a three-year collaboration (2023–25) between the Metropolitan Cemetery Board and the School of Design at Rockingham Regional Memorial Park. Here, Master of Landscape Architecture students developed innovative masterplans addressing contemporary challenges of cemetery design, memory, and memorialisation through research, fieldwork, mapping, and design exploration. Harkening back to the elemental origins of Landscape Architecture as a discipline, students engaged with landform as well as the intersection between future ecology and existential inquiry, to create personalised designs underpinned by creativity and scholarly rigor. Guided by industry feedback, the partnership sought a new horizon for Research, Innovation, and Practice (RIP), highlighting new approaches to designing spaces of remembrance and the evolving role of landscape architecture in shaping memory.

11:00-11:30 **Urban voids of memory and living community spaces: the dual nature of Greek cemeteries**

*Galini Nikolaidi & Georgios Dionysios Lountzis,* Technical University of Crete & National Technical University of Athens (georgiosdionysioslountzis@gmail.com)

Cemeteries are multidimensional cultural and spatial entities where memory, architecture, and ritual converge. In the Greek context, they reveal a dual nature that reflects both monumental heritage and living social practice. Urban cemeteries, often inactive within the expanding city, function as ‘urban voids of memory’. Despite their extraordinary wealth of funerary sculpture and architectural expression, they frequently remain isolated enclaves or as repositories of past social and religious values but detached from contemporary daily life. By contrast, rural cemeteries retain their vitality as public spaces embedded in village life. Through ritual practices such as tomb cleaning, lamentations, offerings of food, and commemorative gatherings, they sustain a living relationship between the community and its dead, transforming the cemetery into a site of continuity and collective identity. This duality highlights the distinctive position of Greek cemeteries within Southern Europe. Unlike Northern European cemeteries, which are often harmonized with natural landscapes and ecological concerns, Southern examples emphasize monumentality, geometric order, and symbolic references to antiquity. Greek cemeteries thus operate simultaneously as sites of religious devotion, architectural landscapes of memory, and social arenas where identity is materially inscribed and ritually enacted. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Greek cemeteries, in both urban and rural contexts, as complex urban and social cells. Through comparative analysis and field observations, the study argues for their reinterpretation not merely as places of burial, but as vital public spaces where past and present, memory and community, converge.

11:30-12:00 **Between earth and heaven: the emergence and development of cemetery chapels in Vidzeme, Latvia**

*Artis Zvirgzdiņš*, Art Academy of Latvia (artis.zvirgzdins@gmail.com)

The cemetery chapel — also known as a funeral chapel (Latvian: kapliča) — is a distinctive type of building in Latvia, particularly in the historical region of Vidzeme (Livland) in the northeast. It combines two seemingly opposite functions. On the one hand, it is a utilitarian structure — a mortuary where the deceased were placed before burial. On the other, it has the qualities of a chapel, a sacred space for farewell rites. Symbolically, the chapel represents a threshold between life and death, often emphasized by its placement at the edge of the cemetery, marking a passage between two realms. Unlike churches, manor houses, or farmsteads, the parish cemetery chapel has remained a marginal and largely unexplored phenomenon in Latvian architectural and art history. This research provides a broader analysis of their architectural evolution, their connections to cultural and historical processes, and their role in the cemetery landscape as well as in the social and religious life of local communities. The paper examines the origins, development, and typological diversity of parish cemetery chapels in Vidzeme up to the First World War. It underlines their functional distinction from noble family mausoleums and ossuaries, while also tracing the influence of the German Leichenhaus (mortuary) tradition of the late 18th century. Burial reforms — notably Catherine II’s decree of 1772 banning interments in churches and towns, and the 1846 cemetery regulations in the Governorate of Livland, which mandated mortuary houses in every cemetery — significantly shaped this tradition. Over time, these structures evolved into chapels uniting three functions: mortuary, funeral chapel, and bell tower. Through selected examples, the paper demonstrates how modest wooden vernacular buildings gradually developed into refined masonry architecture, approaching the archetype of the temple in both form and symbolic meaning.

12:00-12:30 **What do the symbols and burial types in the Senhor Bom Jesus da Redenção Cemetery from 1851-1900 tell us?**

*Fabio Mélo*, Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil (faabio.melo@gmail.com)

Nineteenth-century Brazil underwent transformations in its funerary practices, shifting from burials inside churches to the interment of the dead in a new resting place: the cemetery. In Brazilian necropolises, new rituals, symbols, spatial arrangements, materialities, and perspectives on death and the deceased were developed, while certain practices also continued. Recife, located in the state of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil, was one of the first cities to implement this new model for the place of the dead, producing a vast materiality that can be investigated to understand the intertwined funerary and social changes within the cemetery. This research, therefore, seeks to understand the relationship between burial forms and the symbols used to establish the memory of the deceased to whom the structure refers, by employing the concepts of ‘primary burial’ and ‘secondary burial’. It aims to determine if there is a difference between the symbols used for primary and secondary burials, and whether this distinction also appears in relation to gender or age. To this end, the Senhor Bom Jesus da Redenção Cemetery is used as a case study, with the analysis focusing on its first fifty years of operation (1851-1900), a period during which Brazil experienced significant social changes.

## **SESSION 3: 13:00-15:00 New Accommodations**

13:00-13:30 **Shrouds of Kerala: A socio-political study of coffin-less burial in Kerala Catholic Churches**

*Saran Joseph Alexander*, University of Kerala, India (saranjoseph51@gmail.com)

The paper attempts a socio-political study of coffin-less burial practices adopted by two Catholic churches in the district of Alappuzha, Kerala. The paper argues that the practice reterritorializes and deterritorializes the contemporary churchyard scene while also examining its scope of expansion as a sustainable practice. The Kerala Catholic Church has traditionally relied on coffin burials, where coffins of varying quality and wood were used, typically as an indicator of social status. However, the increasing plastic content in the materials has hampered the decaying process of the body, thereby delaying the grave-reuse period. As a result, a ‘burial crisis’ is slowly burgeoning, which when coupled with the difficulties in finding new grave spaces, has prompted several churches to explore alternative, sustainable forms of burial. St George Church, Arthunkal, pioneered such a movement in September 2022, when it adopted a burial form that was alien to the modern Kerala Christian funeral heritage—coffin-less burial—the shroud replaced the coffin. A forane church of the same district, St. Mary's Church, Pallipuram, followed suit two years later. Both cited concerns of varying dimensions, mainly ecological, as the reason for adoption. The paper adopts Victor Turner’s concept of social drama as its primary framework while also relying on the Assemblage theory propounded by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Manuel Delanda to trace the evolution of the practice, from its conception to application. The paper, thus, attempts to plot the changing Catholic funeral culture in Kerala while also tracing its history.

13:30-14:00 **Dressing for decay: reimagining the cemetery through regenerative burialwear**

*Alba Arillo García* Aalto University, Finland (alba.arillogarcia@aalto.fi)

This presentation explores the cemetery as a site not only of remembrance, but of material transformation and ecological design. Drawing from my artistic research thesis Dressing for Decay, I investigate how garments made from biodegradable, biofabricated, and protein-based materials can actively participate in decomposition processes within natural burial contexts. Rather than treating the body as inert and the garment as a container, the work proposes the concept of the Garment-as-a-Body — a multispecies assemblage designed to decompose alongside the human it embraces. Through iterative field testing in a self-designed Burial Observatory, I developed textiles from bacterial cellulose, algae, and waste-derived binders to explore their interaction with soil, microbes, and humidity. These material trials were informed by both scientific decomposition metrics and ritual considerations, such as touch, scent, and mourning symbolism. The outcomes reveal not only the material viability of regenerative burialwear, but also its potential to shift how we understand memorialisation, grief, and bodily return in cemetery settings. Positioned at the intersection of design, anthropology, and death studies, this research reconfigures the cemetery as a co-creative environment—where garments do not preserve, but participate. This work contributes to broader conversations around posthuman deathcare, natural organic reduction, and the emergence of ecological aesthetics in memorial practices.

14:00-14:30 **Sustainable death care in Africa: exploring cremation as a land-conserving alternative to traditional cemeteries**

*Beauty Kujinga*, Rock and Roll Foundation, Zimbabwe (kujingabeauty263@gmail.com)

This study explores the potential of cremation as a land-conserving alternative to traditional

cemeteries in Africa. Using a mixed-methods approach, we examine the environmental, cultural, and

social implications of adopting cremation highlighting its potential to reduce land use, energy

consumption, and environmental impact. Our findings suggest that cremation can reduce land use,

energy consumption, and environmental impact. The research explores the intersection of death

care, sustainability, and cultural heritage, providing insights into the benefits and challenges of

cremation in the African context. In the evolving landscape of environmental challenges, the imperative for sustainable practices has never been more pressing. This abstract encapsulates the pivotal role of ‘Sustainable Death Care in Africa’, a concept that seeks to harmonize human growth with ecological preservation. We have been

actively engaged in this transformative journey, demonstrating innovative strategies and collaborative

efforts that embody the spirit of sustainability in Zimbabwe. We conclude that cremation is a viable

option for sustainable death care in Africa, and discuss the implications for policymakers, urban

planners, and death care professionals. Together, we can facilitate the eternal evolution

necessary for a harmonious and sustainable future.

14:30-15:00 **The rise of cremation and its impact on the Bradford Reform Jewish Cemetery and Berlin’s Reform Jewry, 1877-1926**

*Sophia Lambert*, University of Leeds, UK (ll17s2jl@leeds.ac.uk)

To what extent was cremation practised among the Bradford Reform Jewish community? What role did social class and migrant status play in shaping Jewish cremation rates? How did the practice of cremation among the Bradford Reform Jewry and Berlin’s Jewish communities shape the topography of their cemeteries? Previous studies of the rise of cremation among Jewish and non-Jewish Germans have overlooked the German Jewry in the diaspora. Therefore, this paper provides new insight into the ongoing dialogue between migrants and their country of origin by conducting a transnational study of cremation. I examine how the Enlightenment and the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) movements influenced German and German Jewish attitudes towards cremation, and became a significant factor in shaping the cremation rates of Bradford’s first-generation German Jewish immigrants. I will also address social class as an influential factor in rising cremation rates by analysing burial registers and the probates of the cremated, among other archival material. The Bradford Reform Jewish community is one of Britain’s oldest and smallest Reform Jewish communities, and many of those interred in the community’s cemetery originated from Germany. I will also analyse burial registers and cemetery plans to explore how far the rise in cremations impacted the topography of Weißensee and Bradford Reform, specifically whether ashes were interred in a separate section from earth burials. In doing so, I will explore the Berlin and Bradford Reform Jewry’s attitudes towards cremation and the status of the corpse, and how this compared to other Jewish communities.

## **SESSION 4: 15:30-17:30 Respecting minorities**

15:30-16:00 **‘Coloured’ Graves in a ‘Settler’ cemetery: the forgotten London Missionary Society burial ground in Gqeberha, South Africa**

*Lari Hallowes-Welman,* Rhodes University, South Africa (larichanel@gmail.com)

Russell Road Cemetery in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) in the Eastern Cape of South Africa is remembered as one of the final resting places of the 1820 Settlers to the city. Few are aware, however, of the presence of the so-called "coloured" graves. The cemetery, originally conceived of as three separate burial grounds, was first established by the London Missionary Society in 1838 for its Khoi and San congregation, and holds historical significance as the first "non-European" burying ground in the city. However, over time, the cemetery became associated with colonial settler history, and its origins were forgotten. Through archival research, this paper traces the history of the cemetery from its inception, to its closure as a result of typhoid fever in 1897. It argues that through selective commemoration practices in the colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid periods, neglect of material funerary culture, and backwards projections of racial apartheid-era beliefs, the old 'Union Burial Ground' has been forgotten. The lack of recognition of this burial ground perpetuates the same marginalisation these communities faced and continue to endure today.

16:00-16:30 **Tomb it may concern: Benevolent Societies of New Orleans**

*Kerry Boutte*, University of New Orleans (kerry.boutte@yahoo.com)

The late 1800s and early 1900s was a period of social contradictions within the United States. Jim Crow politics rolled back the rights of the emancipated, while the Third Great Awakening promoted altruistic behaviours and good deeds. Medical care was generally unreliable, there was no insurance system as presently known, and social services were virtually non-existent. Therefore, people of limited economic power reached out to benevolent societies for aid, which included medical care, burial assistance, and survivor financial support. Without aid, less affluent individuals would have found acquiring the resources to locate and pay for entombment to be quite difficult. Many benevolent societies were associated with employment or labour groups and primarily were by and for immigrants and people of colour. New Orleans was and continues to be home to numerous social aid and benevolent organizations. It has been estimated that by 1900, over 200 benevolent societies were registered with the Freedman’s Bank alone. This paper will look at some of the extant society tombs and will explore the contribution of benevolent societies to the unique necrogeography of New Orleans.

16:30-17:00 **Planning for the end: the intersection of deathscapes, power, and religion in a post-conflict society**

*Amy Oke*, Queen’s University of Belfast, UK (aoke01@qub.ac.uk)

This paper explores the intersection of religion, spatial planning, and funerary rites in Northern Ireland within the frameworks of neoliberalism and necropolitics. Drawing from an interdisciplinary literature, this paper examines how religion is planned for in the built environment through cemeteries, crematoriums, funeral homes, and scattering grounds (or ‘deathscapes’), questioning how the State and private enterprises adapt to an increasingly multicultural population. Due to a lack of literature on both planning for religion and the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities in Northern Ireland, this paper will make a valuable contribution to knowledge. Through the lens of necropolitics, the paper investigates how urban planning policies contribute to the marginalisation of vulnerable populations, particularly in spaces where religious and State authorities converge. Using qualitative methods to gather data and a thematic approach to data analysis, early results suggest a lack of focus and understanding of the spatial needs of minority religious groups, specifically Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, this restricts the ability of these groups to perform appropriate death rites and rituals. Consequently, this has led to minority groups reporting increasing feelings of ostracization. These observations are synthesised with extant debates in literature to examine how minority religious and ethnic groups are marginalised. (Beebeejaun *et al.*, 2021; Boland *et al.*, 2021; Gale, 2024; Greed, 2016; McClymont, 2015). This research provides a nuanced understanding of how religious and political forces intersect to shape urban environments.

17:00-17:30 **Politics of death and multiculturalism at cemeteries in Sweden**

*Magdalena Nordin*, Gothenburg University, Sweden (magdalena.nordin@lir.gu.se)

The presentation will explore politics of death at Swedish cemeteries using theories of multiculturalism as the analytical lens. It will include perspectives on multiculturalism in Sweden, a description of how to be dead in Sweden, and an analysis of Muslim burial practices including examples of what can be described as pragmatic multiculturalism. This pragmatic multiculturalism, however, confirms ‘Muslim’ as a social category both now and in the future and risks hindering the individual rights and recognition of those Muslims who do not uphold community representatives’ interpretations of how to be a Muslim.

17:30-17:35 ***Closing remarks***

*Julie Rugg*, University of York (julie.rugg@york.ac.uk)