

An introduction to Death: *Agora*

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The Death: *Agora* project is concerned with developing a better understanding of the place of death in the 21st century. Taking a perspective of religion, environment, psychopathology and design, the team from Hirosaki Gakuin University are investigating the modern places of death in Japan. The team is composed of Professor Ishida (Heath and Social Welfare dean), Associate Professor Irie (Japanese department), and Lecturer Steven G.B. MacWhinnie (English department).

The Death: *Agora* project was inspired by the Death: Lab at Columbia university. That project is concerned with how architecture and design might adapt and change to develop new methods to memorialize and take care of the dead. Death: Lab is focused on the design of spaces to memorialize death and develop new eco-friendly methods to dispose of, or put to use, the deceased.

Death: *Agora* is focused on not only the architecture of death, but the philosophical, religious, and physiological aspects of death. The project title, Death: *Agora*, draws on the Greek word, ἀγορά (agora) which was used to indicate a public square. This space was used for a variety of purposes, including as the center of athletic, artistic, spiritual and political life. This meaning of a public square, or more generally, an assembly, or gathering place, encompasses the scope of the Death: *Agora* project. By analyzing and attempting to understand the “gathering place” of death within modern society, but within new terms, this project is exploring the significance of those places which serve a critical function in everyday society, and yet are often overlooked or purposefully ignored.

Death: *Agora* will raise awareness of and understanding of the spaces of death as they relate to different aspects of human society. As the population of Japan ages, it faces the inevitability of death and all that entails. But with this change in population dynamic there is sure to be a change in the place of death and how it is represented in society as a whole.

By 2060 nearly a million people will be dying each year. This number alone is, perhaps, not shocking read out of context. But this means that the population of Japan will fall from its current level of 126 million, to around 86 million by 2060 (Population Projections for Japan,

2012). This will surely lead to a change in both death practices and the spaces where those rituals are carried out.

This project will exist as a part of these changes that are facing Japan. To look forward and prepare for the imminent future, it is imperative to understand current practices and edifice and how they might be changed or adapted in the future.

To better understand the context of today and tomorrow, it is important to look back at past practices and examine what has persisted over generations, and why. To understand why some aspects of ritual have stood the test of time, while others have ceased. Japan faces a watershed, and the Death: *Agora* project is poised to analyze and explore it, looking both backwards and forwards.

References:

Population Projections for Japan: 2011-2060. (2011). Retrieved from http://www.ipss.go.jp/site-ad/index_english/esuikei/econ2.html