Ritual Landscapes: Death in Time and Space

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"It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history. Human life... takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch"[3]

(Milan Kundera)

INTRODUCTION

In his novel entitled *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, writer Milan Kundera continually revisits the theme of *borders* through a series of short, fictional narratives. Indeed many of Kundera's novels elicit their intensity through this theme – dealing in provocative but incredibly real, visceral ways with issues of memory, death, forgetting, and laughter. These issues are explored though characters, interactions, events and historical, political conditions. They are not engaged superficially but experienced relatively - that is, in relation to their opposite. For example, in his stories laughing represents elation or collectivism while at the same time causing alienation, awkwardness, or cruelty. Similarly, the process of forgetting is not an inevitable consequence of time but rather a structured, deliberate act that occurs collectively rather than individually. (Such as with the Czech censorship that forced Kundera into exile in France). In short, the "border beyond which everything loses meaning" is a precarious one defined in relation to shifting and dynamic events.

In all of the stories in the novel the issues of memory, forgetting, remembering, pleasure or death are, in effect, tenuous, highly relative states of being. They are not absolute or fixed, but unstable phenomena that are only seconds away from becoming their opposite. The circle of social collectivity, for example, (the circle of friends, dancing in a ring, the round table...) is simultaneously inclusive while also being the most exclusive, difficult perimeter to penetrate. It exudes social-ness, but also demands exclusion and embarrassment. In this sense Kundera's depiction of issues of memory, forgetting, death or life, are understood as existing within a boundary defined by resistance and tension. They can easily shift from one to the other, from somber mourning to hysterical laughter, for example, based on the events surrounding a particular situation.

This paper considers issues of death in these terms - that is, not as an absolute distinction between two opposing realities (life and non-life) but rather in relationship to a border whose determinacy is unstable, or as a process whose pattern is cyclical. Cultural rituals of death demonstrate these indeterminate qualities, often invoking issues of time, transition, threshold, and transformation. This is evident at a variety of scales of consideration - from human, bodily death of the individual to the attitudes of collective societies. Death is a transition within a much larger system of biological, cultural, and material relationships, and the border that separates these phases is highly variable and dynamic. In this sense death can be understood as cycle, or loop, whereby death rituals inform life attitudes, which in turn impact practices of death. Architecture (and landscape) participates in this loop, reflecting cultural values of the living while memorializing the legacy of the dead.

It is within this conceptual framework that the basis for a graduate architecture design studio was formed, (entitled Ritual Landscapes) focusing on death, landscape, ritual, and the ever-transitioning urban environment. This first part of the paper will

focus primarily on the research foregrounding the studio, specifically that which explores the physical and metaphysical relationships of death to space. Students researched cultural attitudes and practices surrounding human death at increasing scales of the body, the family, the public realm, and architectural or landscape space. The themes uncovered in the research focus on issues of memory, narrative, cycles, and time, and often seek to negotiate the boundary between immaterial ritualistic beliefs with material, architectural practices. Indeed all of the practices which take place at death, from treatment of the body to the design of landscapes, are fundamentally dictated by beliefs in other-worldly phenomena, practiced through material processes and acts.

The second part of the paper highlights work undertaken in the second part of the semester, at which point students were asked to formulate a thesis statement positioned at an intersection between cultural values of their research and architectural or landscape space. All of the projects in the studio were therefore different - some addressing human death quite literally while others translated themes of death for alternative urban programs.

The antagonistic boundaries that for Kundera define states of memory or forgetting provided infinite source material for student propositions in that they could look at their own research interests as a boundary condition between two, sometimes paradoxical, states of being - between laughing and forgetting, between contemplation and recreation, or between slowness and memory, (to cite examples that will be described in detail below) but always between what Kundera describes as the Two faces of Death - "One is nonbeing; the other is the terrifying material being that is the corpse."[4] Three projects will be described in terms of how they addressed these various border conditions.

RESEARCH

> What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; the are eaten - raw, cooked or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of those ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive."[5]

The rites and rituals associated with death describe the notion of a body at several scales: the physical body of the deceased: the *corpse*, which is treated in accordance with cultural rituals, the *familial* body of people closest to the deceased, and the *public* body of people who were peripherally associated with the deceased or those institutions who organize the event of a death. At every scale, death rituals exist solely for the purposes of the living, allowing the diversity of cultures and religions to deal with death as a rite of passage of life. Belief in death as a transition among other forms of change such as birth, puberty, marriage, and parenthood is common in many traditions, and denies an understanding of death as terminal.

The ritual landscape is the space of death - the landscape or architectural space upon which death rituals are played out and where the boundaries between body and collective, material and immaterial, historical and future are mediated.

Student research was divided into four sections corresponding with each of these scales. Students were asked to choose either a religion or a geographical location and filter their research through this topic. The topics chosen included Buddhism, Catholicism, African religions, Athesim, Navajo culture, Victorian England traditions, Wicca, Islam, Judaism, Slave Christianity and others, and ranged geographically from Europe to Africa, North America to Asia. Research was conducted in a series of one-week charettes and formalized in digital, verbal, and book formats. Below are themes uncovered by the student research at each of the four phases of work.

The Body

Treatment of the body within death rituals was researched within two contexts - in terms of the body of the dead - the corpse and relative to the body of the living - how one dresses at death.

Stage	Body	Mind
1. Earth to Water	body becomes weak, images become cloudy	energy of delusion fades
2. Water to Fire	dehydration, numbness, hearing loss	energy of attachment fades
3. Fire to Wind	feeling of cold, smell is lost	energy of attachment fades
4. Wind to Consciousness	breathing stops, taste and texture are lost	energy of competitiveness fades
5. Consciousness to Luminance	sensation of whiteness	
6. Luminance to Radiance	sensation of redness	
7. Radiance to Imminence	sensations of darkness	

Across many traditions, cultures, and geographical locations there are rigorous processes for preparation, display and disposal of the corpse at the time of death. These practices often dictate particular procedures for cleansing and dressing of the corpse and mirror cultural beliefs having to do with the relationships of body to soul and life to afterlife. For example, procedures of bathing, dressing, and wrapping are evident in Buddhist traditions, as is the process of blocking facial openings for prevention of evil spirits interfering in the transitional phases of death. In Thailand the body is wrapped in white cloth with three strings: one at the neck symbolizing the descendants, one at the hands symbolizing the spouse, and another at the feet symbolizing assets and money. These knots represent one's worries in life and are cut before the soul is released, just before the cremation process.

Water is another common element in preparations: for cleansing, purification, and as a symbolic indicator of life. Cosmological orientation of the body is highly specific. Navajo rituals place the body facing east, the direction of blessings. Similarly, Buddhist traditions in Thailand arrange the ashes of the deceased in a figure facing west, representing death, initially after cremation, and then immediately scatter and reform them into a figure facing east, representing re-birth. In Tibet, phases of bodily death are equated with elements of nature and stages of mental consciousness. They are as in the table above:

In terms of the body of the living students researched the formalities of dress within death traditions. The changing of one's clothes after a death is common practice generally, as a form of formal appropriateness and also, as in the Navajo traditions, to avoid contamination from the dead (spiritual and biological). Many western funeral traditions wear black as the appropriate mourning attire, while in Korea, white hemp clothing is traditional and red should be avoided. Masks are used to ward away evil spirits (Korea), as is body paint (Africa).

In all cases the body is understood relative to forces, communities, and spatial structures existing far beyond the immediate individual or geographical location, and the impact on landscape (discussed later) materializes these broader associations. The rituals undertaken at death thereby materialize latent social, familial and spatial relationships previously understated or invisible.

The Family

> " During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person. Mourning requirements are based on degrees of kinship and are systematized according to the special way of calculating that kinship (patrilineally,

> matrilineally, bilaterally, etc.) It seems that widowers and widows should belong to the special world for the longest time. ...The rites which lift all the regulations (such as special dress) and prohibitions of mourning should be considered rites of reintegration into the life of society..."[6]

Common themes emerging within the student research of family rituals at death revealed a hierarchical structure to mourning rituals, specified durations of grieving, collective feasting, fasting or drinking, and practices of offering made to the family. The events organized for mourning are either manifest as dark, solemn, contemplative hours, or boisterous celebrations of feasting and drinking honoring of the power of life. Indeed the simultaneous confrontation with loss and emptiness as well as hope and livelihood defines the conflicting status of events whose goal it is to negotiate the transitional, ineffable and liminal space created at the threshold of one's death.

Mourning practices vary with faith and with levels of kinship, and in many cases there are certain thresholds after which a shift of behavior is deemed appropriate. For example, in Thailand mourning and chanting takes place for the first 7 days, with offering services being conducted at the 49th day and 100th day. In Islamic cultures there are gatherings at 3 days and 40 days following a death. Often the designation of mourning stages is calculated in accordance with how close a family was to the deceased in terms of kinship.

THE PUBLIC

Death in the public realm deals simultaneously with two 'faces', the mass of people with whom death comes in contact *personally*, and the *institutions* which manage, profit from, and regulate the industry death. The peripheral ring of public participants are more distant from the deceased in terms of hereditary connections, and the meaning of the connections to the deceased are as diverse as the numbers of people who participate. This collective is more aptly described as by-standers or spectators, than emotionally bereaved. Their connection is one of mutual support and respect more often than personal emotion or response. The network of people moved to participate, whether it be through attendance, offering, or voyeurism, constitutes a support structure held together not by emotional necessity, but through collective social emergence.

In addition to the social support structure, the public space of death also consists of those institutions operating 'behind the scenes' and necessary to the organization of death rituals at every scale. These industries, which include hospitals, cemeteries, crematories, morticians, florists, musicians, groundskeepers etc., transform individual bodily death into a collective, public event.

As part of the studio we visited various public and commercial organizations and spoke with morticians, funeral directors, cemetery managers, casket manufacturers, cemetery maintenance staff, and other funerary professionals. These field-trips comprised a necessary 'stepping back' from the particulars of the religious and cultural traditions to gain perspective on the institutional and commercial forces at work in death rituals. Although these experiences within the studio were particular to American funeral customs, students proceeded from the understanding that information gleaned through these discussions was applicable at some level across those traditions similarly practicing burial and cremation.

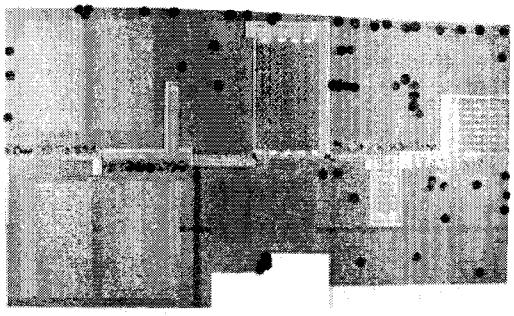
ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE

Once funerary events have passed, and the body of the deceased is gone, multiple and diverse forms of memorialization extend death rituals into the practices of everyday life. While attending funeral services indicates some degree of personal connection, even if tenuous, visiting a cemetery presumes no direct or personal connection at all. Cemeteries function as much for funerary rituals as for sites of leisure and tourism, which is especially true of the larger, urban cemetery-as-city park. Indeed, at the macro-scale the public face of death enables necro-tourism in cemeteries such as Pere-Lachaise in Paris (which is visited by two million tourists each year), Mt. Auburn in Cambridge or the necropolises of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Rome. The relationship between life and death in these cases is not one of opposition, but renders unclear the historic distinctions between metropolis and necropolis, museum and mausoleum.

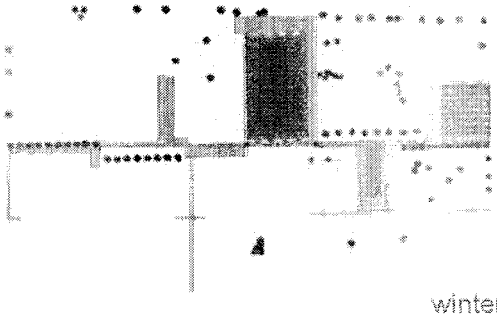
Research into the landscapes of death was focused on extending ideas generated from the first three phases of work to understand how death affects a terrain beyond that of the social or spiritual. This is not to deny the presence of metaphysical beliefs existing at the scale of landscape, indeed these concerns dictate most decisions regarding placement of corporeal remains (back) within the earth. Rather, this was an opportunity to explore discrete and tangible factors impacting space and landscape such as climate, vegetation, orientation, time, erosion, and topography.

Within the landscape of death it is common for broader cosmological factors to become aligned with religious or cultural beliefs. Issues of orientation, transformation, and elevation dominate exterior spaces of death rituals. Practices conceived at the scale of the treatment of the body, or behavior of the family, are extended to landscape space. Similarly, social values are often reflected in landscapes of death - mirroring attitudes toward wealth, family, or individuality. This is commonly visible in layout of cemeteries (plot real estate values), status of grave-markers (monuments and degrees of permanence) and also in the means by which the deceased are transported to their final location (automobiles, funerary biers).

In the burial landscape of Korea for example, a distinction is evident between those burial practices that dig into the earth and those that elevate toward the skies. In this case the corpse is placed into a hollow in the ground, and covered with a mound of soil and sod. A tablet with the name of the deceased is placed at the foot of the mound for identification. The mound transforms in color and shape with the change of season and temperature, eventually germinating to prairie grass and then physically eroding until neither the head nor the foot (of the mound) is legible. Gradually, over a period of about 100 years, the mound will recede back into the earth. The result is a landscape wherein the history of the community is immediately legible: new, sodded mounds protrude sharply against older, subtle bumps indicating the location of ancestors. In this landscape death, too, dies. One lives 100 years, and dies 100 years. For this reason it is often said that a Korean dies twice, one in life and once in death.



spring



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THREE PROJECTS : THREE BOUNDARIES

Beth Cady : Memorial Life

> *"We never remember anything by sitting in one place waiting for the memories to come back to us of their own accord! Memories are scattered all over the world. We must travel if we want to find them and flush them from their hiding places!"*[7]

Beth's project began with an interest in the historical and cultural characteristics of the city of Detroit, Michigan. Detroit, once the 4th largest city in the country, lost half of its population in the last half of twentieth century. Currently estimated at over 970,000 people, Detroit's population is scattered throughout the discontinuous city fabric - some residential units strangely in tact and many others isolated by blocks and blocks of vegetally-reclaimed former housing sites. Dedicated almost exclusively to the automobile industry, Detroit's own form of production ironically also produced the evacuated condition plaguing the city to this day. Add to this

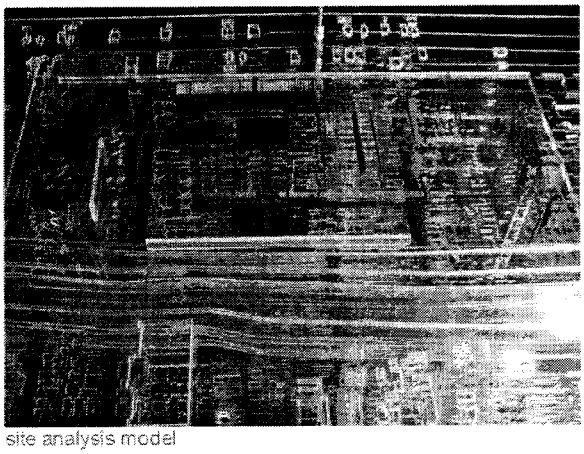
condition several mega-entertainment complexes in the heart of downtown (Tiger's Comerica Park, Lion's Ford Field, and the Greektown and MGM Grand Casinos, all completed within the last five years) and the result is a city of hyper-boundaries and stark contrasts between old and new, dense and sparse, black and white, big and small.

> "Forget what you think you know about this place. Detroit is the most relevant city in the United States for the simple reason that it is the most unequivocally modern and therefore distinctive of our national culture: in other words, a total success."[8]

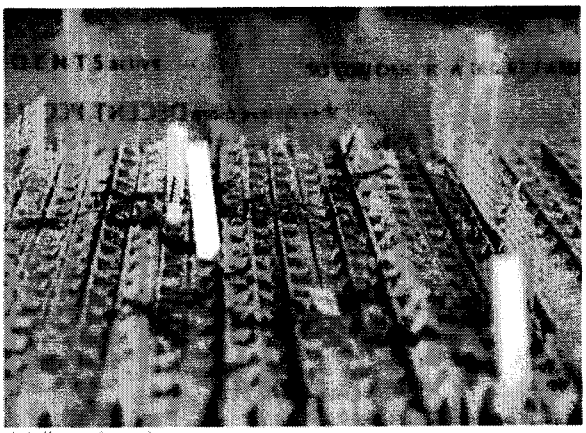
The urban blight, neglect, and depopulation in Detroit are more than just social and industrial problems. As a result the city is forced to dedicate millions of dollars to the removal of abandoned houses, upkeep of obsolete infrastructure, and policing of under-populated neighborhoods. In 1990, after spending $25 million to raze abandoned structures and deter "Devil's Night" arsonists (setting vacant houses on fire in the days around Halloween), the city of Detroit proposed a program to discontinue services from the most abandoned portions of the city and relocate residents. The proposal, had it been accepted, would have worked to merely institutionalize the post-industrial process already naturally taking place within the city, and would have accelerated the evolutionary cycle of re-invention described by Hoffman above.

"If Detroit is to be called "The Capital of the Twentieth Century," it is not because of its architecture, monuments, or great cultural achievements. Detroit is the Capital because of its singular devotion to the idea of industrial production, investing all of its resources into a technology and product that has transformed the face of every modern city. In the process, Detroit has allowed itself to be reinvented time and again; recasting its space culture, and architecture in the form of the latest production idea."[9]

This project looked at the relationship between death and life in terms of landscape and program. Landscapes of death are often quiet places of solitude that are visited momentarily and sporadically. Over time, as friends and family of the deceased move on or pass away, or as memory recedes, the burial markers become anonymous and are eventually reclaimed by the ground. This project rethinks contemporary forms of memorialization by infusing a landscape of death with activities of life. An occupiable "dividing line" runs through the site to separate the space of burial from that of recreation. Playing fields for local sports teams and residents lie to one side of this line and places of burial to the other; the two realms are connected only visually and aurally. This memorial landscape reminds mourners of the continuation of life, while those who visit the site for recreation or leisure are reminded of the inevitability of death. The juxtaposition of these two programs facilitates an open interaction between life and death.



site analysis model



detail - oral gardens

Kourtney Baldwin : Oral Gardens

> "Before it becomes a political issue, the will to forget is an anthropological one: man has always harbored the desire to rewrite his

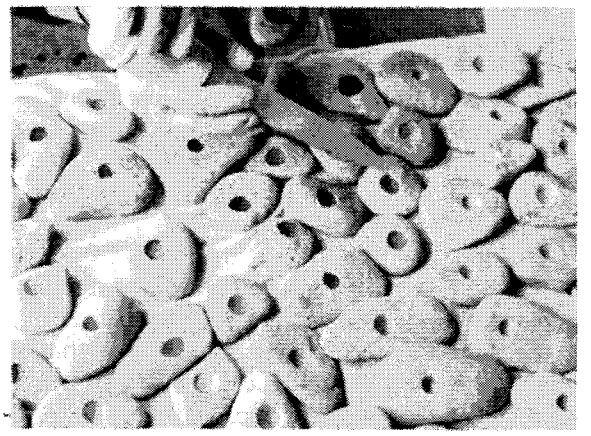
> own biography, to change the past, to wipe out tracks, both his own and others'."[10]

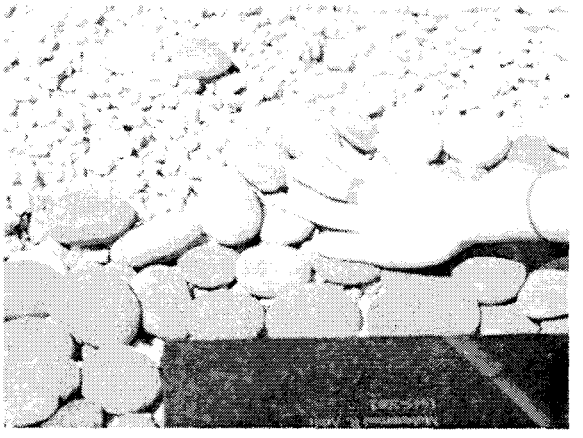
This project stemmed from research into African religions. Two themes guided the project, firstly that doctrines in the religions she studied are often handed down verbally rather than originating from a single authority or holy book. Secondly, from the understanding that these traditions and emerge through experience and in direct relationship to the geographical place in which they are practiced, rather than being fixed through history

Kourtney's site, the former location of the Jeffries Homes West, presented issues which paralleled those presented in initial research. The Jeffries Homes, 13 residential towers with 2,170 housing units on 47 acres, were constructed in 1955 as part of many housing projects built to accommodate the rush of southern immigrants migrating to Detroit following WWII. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, the complex was plagued with management problems, crime and illegal drug traffic. In 1996 Mayor Dennis Archer announced a 5-year plan to raze the Jeffries Homes and, as part of the Hope IV project, make way for a $100 million development to include single-family homes, apartments, lofts, towers and stores. Its identity was to pay homage to Detroit's historical roots, naming streets after famous Motown stars. In 1991, 5 of the 13 towers were imploded, and in 1997 went 4 more. The 4 that remain will either be renovated or imploded.

In its currently evacuated condition this site suggests an archaeological attitude towards design and the opportunities for an architectural palimpsest. At the same time, the future for such a charged site is one of the clearest examples of Detroit's "renaissance," the forward-looking and optimistic new urban future.

The project proposal began by looking closely at the site in Detroit. The first implosion of the Jeffries Towers took place in 1997, and demolition has been carried out sporadically ever since. Although remnants of these historic structures remain on the site, their erasure contributed to the depletion of the rich oral history of this locally famous housing development. The evacuation of these buildings brought an eerie silence to the site, through which only an occasional visitor now passes. Oral history passed down from generation to generation is possible only through the presence of people, a





presence the site does not currently offer.

This project proposes to both reveal the site's oral history and activate its future histories through the design of an urban park. The park contains parking for the adjoining church, community and allotment gardens and neighborhood recreation space. The garden commemorates the site by recording its oral histories on semi-transparent garden walls. The presence of the community gardens encourages neighbors to lavish attention on this otherwise forgotten landscape, and in so doing suggests reactivation of the site's ongoing history through the increased presence of residents, visitors and ever-emerging narratives.

Golnar Adili : Grave Marker

> "There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. ... In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness id directly

> proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting."[11]

Instigated to design a more personal grave marker for her recently departed father, this project became an independent study to design and fabricate a permanent installation in a cemetery in Arlington Virginia. The study began with an exploration of materials readily available in the landscape and geology where she lives. Exhaustive samples, experiments and material tests guided Golnar toward the use of a system of marked stones. After traveling around the state of Michigan to collect river stones, each stone was drilled to form a small, concave hollow. These markings were a sort of thumb print pressed into the otherwise anonymous rock, and acted as a form of personalization to the stones both individually, and as seen in the pattern covering the ground when laid out collectively. Each hollow "thumbprint" was then filled with a phosphorescent resin mixture which absorbs sun during the day and glows yellow at night. Following completion of the markers, the hundreds of rocks were transported to Arlington and placed over the entire grave site.

Though the project began as a material study looking closely at appropriate and interesting material properties such as durability, transformation and identity, the process of design and installation of the project brought new insights and levels of significance to this initial study. The collection of uniquely and attentively produced markers created a geographical connection between her father's grave and her place of residence. (The ground of Michigan was quite literally transplanted to the ground of Virginia). As well, the hand-scaled stones continually transform from day to day – as seen in the difference between day and night when they shift from a series of dotted stones to a series of glowing dots. Interaction by visitors lends another layer of transformation to the memorial – as stones are picked up, taken away, or moved around by others the landscape is continually changing and effecting (even if in the smallest capacity) those around it. (Her reaction to people taking the stones was positive because for her it seemed to distribute her memorial to greater and greater levels of influence. Lastly, they became a contemplative and tactile means by which to pass time visiting her father, providing something to subtly and unconsciously occupy one's mind and hands while spending time at the site. This was an unforeseen and highly positive aspect of the project and has become the thing Golnar anticipates with each return visit.

Golnar's project explored the boundary between speed and memory. The stone landscape provided a distraction and allowed her to behave slowly. Slowness creates memories, re-establishes connections, or as she recently put it, "it makes me light."

STUDIOWORK-

The work in this studio challenged the *program* of death (and of landscape) by engaging the shifting border between a physical site and its cultural, historical and architectural potential. The resulting projects dealt with death physically and/or socially in the urban realm, sometimes relative to human death and other times translating the themes of death for particular urban conditions. In all cases, however, death was not understood solely as a point of finality or absence, but equally as an occasion for leisure, learning and remembrance. The implications of these traditions for landscape and architecture fostered a broader discussion of the relationships between ritual and public space within the discourse of the studio.

ENDNOTES

[1] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980) p. 206.

[2] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: an Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual,* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[3] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980) p. 206.

[4] ibid, p. 207.

[5] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthology of Mortuary Ritual,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p24

[6] Metcalf, 63-64

[7] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 167.

[8] Jerry Herron in "Three Meditations on the Ruins of Detroit," in *Stalking Detroit,* Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, Eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2001),p33.

[9] Dan Hoffman, "The Best the World Has to Offer," in *Stalking Detroit,* Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, Eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2001),p42.