

# Graduation Plan

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences

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## Graduation Plan: All tracks

Submit your Graduation Plan to the Board of Examiners ([Examencommissie-BK@tudelft.nl](mailto:Examencommissie-BK@tudelft.nl)), Mentors and Delegate of the Board of Examiners one week before P2 at the latest.

The graduation plan consists of at least the following data/segments:

Personal information	
Name	Nikita Ham
Student number	4882091

Studio	
Name / Theme	Design of the Urban Fabric
Main mentor	Machiel van Dorst      Urban Studies
Second mentor	Francesca Rizzetto      Urban Design
Argumentation of choice of the studio	The problem that this research addresses is that cemeteries are not adopted in the urban fabric, causing a whole range of negative consequences which are both spatial and mental. Urban cemeteries are enclaves which lack physical and social connection with the city around. To design solutions for this challenge we have to zoom in to the scale of the neighbourhood and its communities, which is at the core of the Design of the Urban Fabric studio.

Graduation project	
Title of the graduation project	Rest In Peace? The death and life of urban cemeteries
Goal	
Location:	Rotterdam-Zuid
The posed problem,	For the past two hundred years, cities and cemeteries in the Netherlands have been planned separately, leading to a weak connection between the two. The physical disconnection has created a societal gap between life and death. Today, with growing challenges at different spatial levels, there is an urgent need to rethink and revalue the place of the cemetery within the city.
research questions and	This project has a research aim instead of a question:  to make places connected to death part of daily business again,

	focusing on making urban cemeteries in Rotterdam more relevant by designing spatial interventions.
design assignment in which these result.	First, a pattern language, structuring all findings. Second, a structure plan on city-scale how cemeteries can be better taken up in the urban fabric. Third, a vision for a transformation for an existing cemetery, making it more accessible and lively. Lastly, a design for a new cemetery in a place that is currently not associated with death, for example in a public park.

Sub-questions:

1. How is death connected to the city of Rotterdam?
2. How can public space design alter people's death attitude?
  
3. How have urban cemeteries developed historically?
4. How does the end-of-life system work?
5. How do visitors use the cemetery?
  
6. What makes a space sacred and which spatial elements are necessary?
7. To what extent can existing public spaces be used as cemetery?
8. Which functions can be combined with a cemetery?
9. How can we make the cemetery more sensitive?

**Process**

**Method description**

This research adopts a diverse methodological approach to address the complexity of the topic. By combining different forms, it aims to capture both practical and experiential dimensions. Preference was given to on-site methods because they allow engagement with the physical and sensory qualities of cemeteries. These elements that cannot be fully captured through desk-based research alone.

***Fieldwork***

To gain an understanding of the appearance, functioning, and contemporary use of cemeteries, I conducted fieldwork through a combination of photography, videography, and sensory analysis. Given the methodological choice not to interview cemetery visitors, particular attention was paid to traces of use. As the research also explores the notion of mental or perceived boundaries within space, I recorded personal impressions and emotional responses to different locations. In some cases, cemetery visits were combined with on-site expert interviews, creating a valuable link between experiential observation and professional knowledge.

In the next stage, I will conduct more fieldwork by visiting cemeteries in European cities abroad. In some cases the reason is to learn from cemeteries which are exemplary for the project because they are more embedded in the urban fabric. This includes cemeteries in cities such as London, Stockholm and Copenhagen. Other times it will be simply to learn from other cultures and take inspiration.

Finally, I hope to arrange the possibility of joining the Zuiderbegraafplaats cemetery employees for a day. This gives me the opportunity to fully experience how a day on the cemetery looks like and what the maintenance needs are, in order to make a more usable design. This can be documented as a comic.

### ***Expert interviews***

The interviews conducted in this study were unstructured, because each interviewee has different backgrounds and areas of expertise. As mentioned in the ethical considerations, it was a deliberate decision not to interview current visitors of cemeteries. Instead, this perspective is represented collectively by the experts consulted. This approach is justified by the professionals' close engagement with clients, which are individuals nearing the end of life and their relatives, that provides them with a nuanced and representative understanding of their wishes.

### ***Stakeholder analysis***

Mapping the positions of involved parties to get a better understanding of their values, wishes and relationships.

### ***Literature review***

The literature review forms a continuous thread throughout the research, providing academic grounding and contextual depth. Sources include historical analyses, philosophical theories, books, essays and news articles. The primary aim is to identify the knowledge gap that this research seeks to address.

### ***Spatial analysis***

There can be no urban study without spatial analysis. For this research, different information is mapped on different scales with information on among other things functions, accessibility and micro-climate.

### ***Pattern language***

There are many ways to synthesise findings from multiple methods into a format that is cohesive and useful. In this research was opted for a pattern language because it creates structure and makes it possible to identify relationships between different types of interventions. In addition to patterns gathered from fieldwork, interviews, and literature, this approach also allows me to explore new patterns and design interventions to make death more visible and accessible. The aim is make the pattern language easy to comprehend and apply, for both designers and for people working in the funerary field.

To bring structure, the patterns can be classified in the following ways:

- Goal (life in the cemetery-death in the city-transitioning)
- Spatial scale of the intervention (macro-meso-micro)

- Time scale (tomorrow-next year-10 years)

### ***Experiment***

To explore how people respond to the integration of recreation within the cemetery, one or more patterns can be tested in practice, particularly within the theme of "recreation in the cemetery". In an ambitious scenario, this could involve a running trail through different types of public space in and around the Zuiderbegraafplaats. A softer alternative can consist of outdoor activities such as yoga, painting sessions, or musical performances on the cemetery.

During the experiment, observations will focus on the spatial and functional fit of the activity, the adequacy of existing facilities, and the responses of both participants and bystanders. In addition, the experiment serves as a form of place-making to demonstrate the feasibility of such interventions.

I will present the plan for an on-site to the management of the Zuiderbegraafplaats shortly after the P2 presentation. If the proposal proves unrealistic, alternative methods such as surveys and visual collages will be used to investigate perceptions of mixed use and compatibility between recreational and funerary functions.

### ***Informal meetings***

Finally, throughout the entire process, the research was influenced by informal conversations with people in educational or personal settings. These meetings are not mentioned in any specific place in the research, but they do help to sketch the general picture of the overall view on the subject.

## **Literature and general practical references**

### **Deathscape**

Deathscape is a concept first coined by Kate Hartig and Kevin Dunn (1998), which continues of on Appadurai's (1996) theory of Scapes. It entails all places in city that have to do with death, however (in)visible.

### **Polis**

Arendt (1958) stresses the importance of the Polis, where people can come together and build community in the public space. It is also interesting to look at the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa*.

### **Heterotopia**

With heterotopia, Foucault (1967) points out places which are neither private nor public. Taking the cemetery as an example, he poses that heterotopias have a clear function compared to the rest of the city and that the function or use of the function can change. This theory contributes to understanding the position of the cemetery in the city.

### **Disenchantment**

Max Weber (1919) talks about Disenchantment of the World (*Entsauberung der Welt*) to argue that the rationalisation of modern society, where scientific and rational

explanations replace mystical and religious beliefs and spirituality is minimised. In this research this theory is used as one of the causes for the disconnection between city and cemetery.

### **New Death Movement**

The modern death care is profit-driven, medicalised, de-ritualised and shaped by patriarchal norms, and this is a problem according to the New Death Movement because it distorts our relationship with mortality and nature. They encourage more spiritual and feminine approaches to death and have more acceptance of natural cycles of decay and renewal (Westendorp & Gould, 2021).

### **Ecofeminism**

Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974) introduces eco-feminist theory by stating that the oppression of women and the degradation of green are interconnected. They believe that by challenging patriarchal structures and promoting a more holistic, sustainable way of life, it is possible to create a more just and equitable society for both humans and the planet. For this research, eco-feminism can be used to articulate design values for a more sensitive approach to transform or design cemeteries.

## **Reflection**

### **1. What is the relation between your graduation (project) topic, the studio topic (if applicable), your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?**

Graduating in the Urbanism track, the project of urban cemeteries touches upon multiple topics that I learned about in the first year of the master. Sustainable city development plays a big role, as well as inclusivity, accessibility and creating spaces for people to meet. I have noticed during graduation I am taking skills I obtained from every quarter, from ecology to public space design. Past semester, my focus has been on researching social behaviour like we learned during a lecture in Q2. Starting my designs in the second semester, the project will also lean towards landscape architecture as the scale of the design and the nature-lens of the project asks for this. It seems that urbanism and landscape architecture master tracks are nearing each other in the faculty too, so I see this as a strength of my project. Death itself is not a topic that passed during the master, in Urbanism the focus was rather on climate adaptivity, living environment, water management and public space. Yet the necropolis is one of the oldest parts of cities and has evolved to many different forms, which makes it very relevant for the urbanism track.

As for my master programme: when I was first introduced to the Bouwkunde faculty, I was told I would be in the right place if you thought myself a world improver. I was not let down, during my studies I learned to be critical towards the current situation and *business as usual*. I chose the topic of my graduation project out of dissatisfaction about how Dutch cities (and society) are currently dealing with death, grieve and contemplation: its pragmatic, efficient, profit-driven way of dealing with death, leaving little space for (negative) emotions and spirituality.

In my project, I am not aiming to find the perfect solution – I don't think it exists. I am simply enabling space to discuss if we are content with how we are now doing it. Someone once told me that our job as urbanists is to spatialise and visualise possible futures, so we can talk about it.

(studio topic not applicable)

## **2. What is the relevance of your graduation work in the larger social, professional and scientific framework.**

### Social:

Because of the disconnection between the city and the cemetery in the Dutch context, only a small part of its citizens makes use of these places that are public, central and have many qualities. Some people are afraid to enter the cemetery, others get the feeling that they are not allowed. This project aims to open the cemetery for a broader audience, because being confronted with death is necessary to live a good life.

### Professional:

In recent years, the function and appearance of the cemetery has been questioned by different societal groups. Cemetery managers are struggling about what the cemetery should be, municipalities don't know what to do with those big areas of necropolis in their cities. In light of city densification, this topic will become more pressing in the future, but because of the taboo and a stiff image on cemeteries things are not really changing yet. The report can give guidance to spatial designers and planners on how to deal with cemeteries in the future, in the form of a pattern language and by showing examples in Rotterdam-South.

### Scientific:

Natural cemeteries have entered the world as 'new' typology, yet there is still to no research or projects about constructing cemeteries in public space. That might be because Dutch contemporary culture is not fit for this, therefore it is a good thing that this is an urbanism project in which visualisation and story-building is key.