

Skander Saâdi

Reflection on Graduation Project: *Approaching Death Today*

Social Relevance

I decided for my graduation project to address the theme of death. This resulted from a fascination for the relationship between architecture and the existential questions that humanity has to deal with. While death is a fundamental aspect of human life, it seems that it does not receive much attention in our contemporary western society. Why do we talk so less about such an important matter? The taboo can also be observed on an architectural level: funerary buildings are often meaningless and located outside the city life. How can we improve this situation? To answer this question, I had to first understand the society's relationship with death. How do we stand today towards death? The social relevance of the project was, as such, an integral part of the research itself.

From Research to Design

The latter consisted of a philosophical and sociological thesis that allowed me to understand how the human attitude towards death changes through time. While the modern society is characterized by an extreme denial of death, today's postmodernist society is slowly re-accepting it as being part of life. However, this process is very personal and private, and the individual often finds himself isolated from a big part of the society when dealing with death. The research allowed me to see things differently, and opened new questions more relevant to today's context, such as: How can we bring different people together when they are dealing with death? How can we use death as a beautiful instrument to generate a sense of community in the city?

While this research was necessary, it was unfortunately too broad to start designing and a lot of steps were needed before getting to an actual brief with a specific program, site, requirements, etc. This cost me a lot of time and pushed me to make fast and not thoroughly-thought decisions. More research was needed to link theory and practice.

Consequently, I deepened my knowledge on the funeral- and grief-processes as we know it today and came to the conclusion that existing funerary typologies or rituals depend too much on the individual's personal beliefs and ways of looking at the world. They did not allow us to deal with death together as a community. This motivated me to think outside of the box and focus on the objects that the dead leave behind rather than their body. I was very much inspired by the philosophy of Heidegger, and the powerful capacity that objects have to gather memories and meanings, as well as to represent one's identity. This is how the idea of designing a building that collects the objects of the dead is born. It gave me possibility to explore new rituals based on things that everyone shares regardless of their cultural background. The design became an attempt to deal with death differently in order to address contemporary social issues.

Looking back at the jump from the research to the design, I wish I had more time to further elaborate my thoughts on the potential of objects in the grieving process, as well as on architectural tools to generate a sense of community.

As to the design, it was a difficult process because I am dealing with a typology that does not exist. It requires a lot of try-outs to understand what such a building should express and what the appropriate criteria are. While the process was very much intuitive in the beginning, some aspects became more important than others. In that sense, it was an unfamiliar way of designing because the concept appeared late in the design-process while it is generally what we start with.

The Studio

To conclude, I believe Explore Lab was the right choice for me. It allowed me to do research that does not directly relate to architecture, and consequently, to see architecture differently. Rather than designing a building with a given theme, program or site, I had the chance to invert the process. I could first look at how we live and subsequently arrive at a building with the appropriate qualities.