

Beyond burial & cremation

Funeral Director Monthly takes a look at developments in disposal methods being introduced or considered around the world.

Flagship facility for composting designed by global architects

In the United States, Seattle-based global architects, Olson Kundig, are supporting the development of human composting, designing a flagship ‘after-death’ facility in Seattle for human composting start-up, Recompose, where human bodies will be composted and turned into soil, a project that has gathered pace after Washington State made ‘above-ground decomposition’ legally permissible in 2019 - the first place in the world to do so.

Led by design principal Alan Maskin, and originally due for launch in Spring 2021, it will provide an alternative to traditional burials and cremations that, says the firm, uses “one-eighth the energy of cremation and saves over one metric ton of carbon dioxide per person.”

Designed in collaboration with Katrina Spade, founder and CEO of Recompose, the new facility will offer a service called “natural organic reduction” which gently converts human remains into soil in about 30 days, helping nourish new life after death. The process is designed to accelerate what naturally happens to bodies after we die - decomposition. By creating conditions that allow microorganisms to thrive, Recompose says it can turn a body into soil in 30 days, each hosted in a unique vessel. Recompose|SEATTLE will contain approximately 75 of these vessels, stacked and arranged around a central gathering space.

Prior to the change in the law, a study at Washington State University that was testing options for body composting concluded that “the body is reduced to soil that was indistinguishable from gardening soil with no possibility of transmission of disease.” The soil also meets safety



standards set by the US Environmental Protection Agency for such contaminants.

For one participant in the study, a terminal cancer patient, it represented her dying wish not to be buried or cremated, but to have a positive impact on the environment. Once the process was complete, family and friends spread her soil out in her garden with her flowers allowing her to become part of the plants that she loved during her life.

Architects also turn their experienced eye on cemetery design

Vancouver-based landscape architect, Erik Lees, is one of a handful of professionals focused on the practice of cemetery planning and design, building a business born of professional interest but now booming due to a combination of lack of cemetery space, changing views on burial and cremation and growth in interest in green burials.

Lees began designing cemeteries while working for the local parks department, and continued to hone those skills when

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he became districts parks manager in the West Van area of the city.

He said: “In 1998, when I launched my own business, people rolled their eyes and wondered ‘How on earth are you going to be able to make a living doing this?’ But I knew that demographics were on my side - that the baby boomer generation were going to age out, so there was a need. But for the first few years, I was a bit of a voice in the wilderness.”

Mountain View Cemetery, Vancouver’s only sanctioned burial ground, officially stopped accepting new residents in 1986. It only was able to reopen in 2008, when the city allowed for the infill of redundant roads to inter more cremated remains, a project which was led by Lees.

His award-winning firm, Lees & Associates, now designs cemeteries across Canada, aiming to connect communities with meaningful landscapes through design.

Cremations, which make more efficient use of that precious space, have been on the rise in Canada over the past two decades. In 2018, they accounted for slightly over

72% of all funerals in Canada, according to the Cremation Association of North America, up from 50% in 2003.

But Lees believes that the baby boomer generation focus on its carbon footprint will extend to funeral choices. He adds: “I think when baby boomers realise the energy required to embalm a body and the carbon footprint associated with cremation, they will have second thoughts,” says Lees.

This has led to the rise of ‘green burials’ - increases in funerals which comprise no embalming, biodegradable caskets, no vault and natural stone grave markers.

Launched in Britain in the 1990s, the trend jumped the Atlantic to South Carolina in 1998 and crossed the border to Canada a decade later with the opening of the country’s first green cemetery, Victoria’s Royal Oak Burial Site. Five years later, Erik Lees and a handful of colleagues started the Green Burial Society of Canada to further the adoption of sustainable burial practices.

While the West Coast of Canada hosts the majority of green burial grounds, interest is growing from all corners of the country.

“In just the past week alone, we’ve had half a dozen enquiries from across the country,” says Lees, who stepped down as president last year but continues to serve on the Society’s board.

Erik Lees’ interest in burial grounds also extends to how residents interact with them as public spaces, and he is keen to support efforts to help the community feel comfortable in cemeteries too. Mountain View was the first cemetery in Canada to hire an artist-in-residence, who runs the ‘Night for All Souls’ - a week of events each October that includes poetry readers, musicians and artists. For Lees, inviting the community back into the cemetery represents another way of ensuring their sustainability and contribution to society.

Organic burial pods

When *Beverly Hills, 90210* star, the actor Luke Perry, unexpectedly died in 2019, his death made headlines for many reasons, one of which was his wish to be buried in an “eco-friendly mushroom suit” that allowed his decaying body to become a part of nature.



“Now, mushrooms hold an entirely new meaning for me,” his daughter Sophie wrote on Instagram. “Any explanation I give will not do justice to the genius that is the mushroom burial suit, but it is essentially an eco-friendly burial option via mushrooms... they are truly a beautiful thing for this beautiful planet, and I want to share it with all of you.”

Organic burial suits and pods have been under development for some time, and several are now commercially available. Essentially, they are biodegradable containers into which the body is placed, which work with nature to turn the decaying body into soil, often to feed a tree planted above in memory.

One such idea that has been in development for some years, and has previously been reported on in this magazine, is Capsula Mundi, the brainchild of Italian designers Raoul Bretzel and Anna Citelli.

The Capsula Mundi is an egg-shaped biodegradable capsule. It's organic and can be used for either bodies or cremated ashes. The biodegradable plastic shell is buried with a body or ashes inside it. Once buried it breaks down; the remains inside give the surrounding soil nutrients, and a sapling planted above the body begins to take root.

While Capsula Mundi remains in the development phase, there are some biodegradable urns available on the market that contain soil and a seed, which are mixed with cremated ashes before interment - allowing a tree to grow above.

Alkaline Hydrolysis takes another step forward in the UK

Alkaline Hydrolysis, often referred to as resomation or ‘water cremation’, is also now permissible in several US States. In the UK, Resomation Limited - as reported by *Funeral Director Monthly* - has been working towards its introduction into the UK.

In 2019, Resomation achieved the UK's first ‘wastewater consent to discharge’ for the water cremation process from Yorkshire Water, opening the way for water cremation consent applications from across the country.

Samples from five UK water cremations conducted in April 2019 were analysed against a range of organic, inorganic and microbial parameters by Yorkshire Water, with the results assessed by experts at

Middlesex University. The results showed that water cremation poses no concern for sewer systems, wastewater treatment works and their related operations and receiving water quality. No DNA was found to be present in any of the samples. Yorkshire Water has subsequently granted a ‘consent to discharge’ for water cremation to Leeds-based LBBC Ltd, the parent company of Resomation Ltd.

The results from the sample analysis were assessed by Lian Lundy, Professor of Environmental Science at the Urban Pollution Research Centre at Middlesex University. Commenting on the study, she said: “We worked closely with Yorkshire Water to set the sampling methodologies and parameters to ensure they were in line with the UK's water industry. For the first time, we now have robust comparable scientific data on water cremation using standard sampling procedures and analytical methods.”

“The results from the samples indicate that there is no technical reason why the liquid from water cremation cannot be discharged to sewer for processing by standard water treatment methods.”

Howard Pickard, Managing Director of Resomation Ltd, said: “The granting of the first ‘consent to discharge’ by Yorkshire Water represents a major milestone for water cremation in the UK. Having demonstrated that the issuing of a water consent is a realistic possibility, Resomation will now work with those interested in providing water cremation and, together, engage with their respective water companies through the application process.”



Brookwood Cemetery to open 'Museum of Death'

A cemetery is to open a 'Museum of Death' as part of a new visitor attraction.

The plans to encourage more visitors to visit Brookwood Cemetery have been approved by Woking Borough Council.

The Surrey cemetery was opened in 1854 when London cemeteries became overcrowded following a cholera epidemic in 1848-1849.

Brookwood Cemetery is home to the largest military cemetery in the country, and contains 1,601 Commonwealth burials from World War One and 3,476 from World War Two.

"New visitor facilities including a café, walking trail, education centre and the provocatively titled, 'Museum of

Death' are among the plans to attract new audiences and promote greater appreciation of this largely hidden public asset," a council spokesman said.

Graham Cundy, from Woking Borough Council, said: "First and foremost, the cemetery's main function is, and always will be, to provide a dignified and respectful resting place for Woking's deceased, of all faiths and none."

He said the new plan was as much about inspiring Woking residents to explore the Grade I listed park as it was about attracting new visitors. It is home to a collection of giant

redwood trees as well as a collection of Victorian monuments, many of which are Grade I listed.

Avril Kirby, Brookwood Cemetery Manager, said: "Many of the issues faced in the mid-19th Century, to a greater or lesser extent, still exist. Funeral poverty, population growth, excess deaths and growing concern for the environment are all issues which continue to challenge the funerary industry today."

A new burial site is being prepared at Brookwood for the bodies excavated and exhumed from St James's Garden in Euston, London as part of the construction for the new HS2 station.



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