

Urban Death Project wants to compost your grandma



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Instead of preserving the body of the deceased with embalming fluid, and then burying it in a casket designed to last for years and years underground, this project aims to turn them into compost.

When viewed from an environmental perspective, traditional burials, which preserve the bodies in a casket or vault underground, basically tying up space and materials forever, are not sustainable by any stretch of the imagination, especially in high population areas, where access to land is a limited resource. Not only do all the funeral and burial trappings require a steady supply of materials, which first need to be extracted or harvested, and then manufactured and transported, but then those materials (as well as the resources tied up in the human body) get taken completely out of the loop, because they're placed 6 feet under the ground.

So-called 'natural burials' and other **green burials** and **green funeral** practices are **nothing new**, and we've covered them **many times** over the years, but the Urban Death Project is planning to not only reduce the environmental and social costs of death, but to actually 'close the loop' with the human body.

The brainchild of Katrina Spade, an **Echoing Green Climate Fellow** who wrote a Masters thesis entitled "**Of Dirt and Decomposition: Proposing a Resting Place for the Urban Dead**", the Urban Death Project is "a new system for gently and sustainably disposing of the dead using the process of composting."

"The project utilizes the science of composting to safely and sustainably turn bodies into

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soil-building material, which is then used by nearby farms and community gardens. The Urban Death Project is transforming an industry where wasteful, polluting disposal practices are the status quo." - Katrina Spade

At the heart of the system is a three story core structure, which acts as both a giant composter, where microbial activity and aerobic decomposition convert the bodies (along with high-carbon materials like wood chips and sawdust, which are needed for optimal composting activity) of the deceased into a rich soil-building material, and which also functions as a contemplative space for mourners.

The body is first placed in the top of the core and covered with wood chips and sawdust, and as it decomposes, over the course of a month, it settles down to the bottom, where a rich, finished, compost emerges.

urban process + ritual



- 1 The deceased may be stored in a refrigerated space for up to three days before the ceremony begins. There is no embalming - **decomposition** is an important part of the design.
- 2 The closest few family members meet the deceased in the shrouding room, where they wrap the body in simple linen. **Death midwives** are on staff to help with this difficult process.
- 3 Mourners enter the facility and climb to the top of the core, where they will say goodbye to the deceased at the **laying in**.
- 4 At the top of the core, **friends and family** cover the deceased with a high-carbon mixture of wood chips and sawdust.
- 5 As bodies decompose, they settle down towards the bottom of the **core**, which is constructed out of concrete.
- 6 Due to the decomposition inside, the concrete core is **warm to the touch**, reminding visitors of the incredible process happening within.
- 7 After 1-2 years, a rich **humus** has been created. At the bottom of the core, a rotary screen filters out any remaining objects and a screw conveyor pushes the compost out to the grove.
- 8 As the materials settle and are removed, more wood chips and sawdust are added to the top of the core. The **process is continuous** - as bodies are laid into the material on top, finished compost is extracted below.
- 9 In the grove, friends and family contemplate the finished compost, a crucial building block of healthy soil. This **compost is sacred**, both its past and its potential.
- 10 Friends, family, and the neighboring community take the compost to their homes and gardens. In this way, the dead are folded back into the **fabric of the city** and reborn to support new growth.

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"Friends, family, and the neighboring community take the compost to their homes and gardens. In this way, the dead are folded back into the fabric of the city and reborn to support new growth." - Urban Death Project

According to **FastCoExist**, Spade is now working on the project full time, thanks to the Echoing Green fellowship, and is working toward building a prototype in Seattle. If the prototype performs as designed, then finding a location for a full-scale version of the facility



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More details of the project are available on the [Urban Death Project website](#).

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