

The Embodiment of Consolation

an architectural unfolding of dwelling in the presence of absence

Recent bereavement studies are observing and documenting a growing divide between the well-known existing 'deathscapes' (Sidaway & Maddrell, 2016) and the changing socio-cultural landscape of mourning within our secularised western society. Memorial practices are moving away from the public domain towards the everyday and private environments while the strive for closure is shifting towards a longing for 'continuing bonds' with the deceased: an 'open-ended process of ritualization' (Hockey et al., 2010) which relies on the sensation of the deceased's presence attached to a material object or a place.

This study positions itself within the aforementioned 'gap' and argues that this evolving landscape is full of potential to explore new ways of designing space within the context of loss.

This claim is supported by the author's master dissertation 'Consolatio Loci': a design-driven research that involved the hypothetical renovation of the author's childhood home in response to the passing of one of its inhabitants. Materialising site-specific memories into the architectural detail culminated in a series of three spatial interventions: a room for saying goodbye, one for remembrance and one for dreaming.

A reflection on this first successful case study reveals how both the design process and the resulting space were able to transform the uncanny sensation of the deceased's presence inside of the house into a comforting experience, thereby embodying consolation. The author subsequently uncovers possible intersections between the disciplines of Architecture and Creative Therapy by contextualising the different steps leading up to the final design and by unfolding them as a 'rite de passage' (Van Gennep, 1909) consisting of the following phases:

- (1) separation: observing the initial experience of the home environment while mapping emotional traces throughout the house and conceptualising these observations by means of a literature study and the reading of existing case studies
- (2) transition: associating the concepts from phase 1 with spatial elements and implementing these elements into the home environment through a cyclical drawing process
- (3) incorporation: reflecting on the consequences of these spatial propositions on the analogous space of the house and observing the changed experience of the home environment

The author is currently preparing for a PhD project relying on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle to research how architecture's non-verbal media 'drawing' and 'space' can be implemented towards the development of a more empathic architecture. This reframes the position of the architect as a mediator between mental and physical space.