

## Experience Design at the End of Life

### Contribution to *An Extra Place at the Table: Food and Funeral Feasting*

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In April, I spent a day delivering an undergraduate workshop on experience design to support the *Death over Dinner Event* element of Moth's *An Extra Place at the Table: Food and Funeral Feasting* project.

The workshop manifest as a series of explorations, conceptual and practical, into theories and methods drawn from multiple disciplines. It was designed to both illuminate the nature of a new era of critical discourse about event experiences, their design, their meaning and their impact, and to consider how this can be utilized in the design of contexts for potentially deeply existential dialogue and thought.

Whilst this critical era of events scholarship is new, the study of events is not; they have been the object of scrutiny in a number of other disciplines for many years, most notably perhaps, social anthropology, in which the analysis of the events around death has long provided rich commentary on the meaning, structure and value within societies.

In recent years, events scholars have been pushing at the boundaries of what has been considered legitimate areas for research, with the result that event studies has become, for some at least, whatever the researcher wants it to be; it has, as Pernecky notes, become a site of '*neutral territory, erected upon the ideals of epistemological freedom and academic creativity ... [embracing] ... disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and post-disciplinary modes of inquiry*' (2016:4).

From a new event studies perspective, consideration of how one might design experiences in which food and funeral feasting either enable dialogue on mourning, bereavement and end of life choices or which are themselves contexts for funeral feasting, must surely include establishment of an appropriate conceptual framework. However, 21<sup>st</sup> century event management professional practice has stood accused of having sacrificed awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic elements in favour of artificially manufacturing events (Brown & James 2004).

In part therefore as a personal response, my research (and thus the workshop) explores experience design both practically, using management theory and activities to consider immersivity, inclusivity and co-creation methodologies but also conceptually, discussing the role of ritual, liminality and tradition in the design of funerary experiences, alongside nostalgia, authenticity, habitus, and of course, commensality.

At the time of writing, death research is experiencing a resurgence within international academia and industry. Recent studies have noted the increasing trend in Australia for a '*deadly individualisation*' pervading the funeral in post-Christian societies, with collective rites replaced by personally tailored experiences focused solely on the individual (Singleton 2014).

The 2019 Global Wellness Trends Report named 'Dying Well' as its 8<sup>th</sup> trend, evidenced by research into the rise in popularity of 'death doulas', the 'green burial wave' and 'death acceptance tourism', all acts conducted in response to what author Beth McGroarty notes as our death denying society, fueled in part in the US by the Silicon Valley biotech industry aiming to cure death, and a pervasive 'wellness' agenda, a '*21st century secular belief system ...fundamentally directed at avoiding death anxiety...[by] convincing oneself that the right regimen of diet and exercise will keep you perpetually young or ...perpetually alive*' (Soloman, cited in McGroarty 96: 2019).

The UK Competition and Markets Authority are conducting the second stage of their enquiry into the UK funeral industry, a hitherto unregulated sector, accused of opaque pricing at best and financial exploitation of the vulnerable at worst.

Such concerns are however, not without precedent. In 1963, Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, a seminal text for the then nascent *death awareness* movement, accused the US funeral industry of profiteering by the selling of unnecessary services to the vulnerable bereaved.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century post-Christian secular societies, where discourse around death has been '*privatized, secularized and medicalized*' (Simpson 7:2018), perhaps it is the role of experience designers and scholars to explore what new meaningful and performed rituals are needed in order to mark death. Szmigin & Canning suggest, when now bereaved, that we '*are faced with situations often inherent in the social and/or cultural structure of the ritual that [we] find difficult, or which seem inappropriate or even anomalous to the personality or experience of the deceased or the mourners*' (749:2014). The loss of the accepted ritual experience of previous religious practices, which had served such a significant function in restoring a social fabric rent by loss, leaves us further bereft.

If we accept that funerary experiences provide (admittedly sometimes rejected) sites for collective acceptance of loss, where the dead are '*reassembled, resurrected and regenerated in ways that are meaningful to those who have been left behind*' (Simpson 5:2018), how might we now need to design for these? As Wilson states, '*the problem facing all who celebrate rituals in a fast-changing society is how to combine relevance to changing to changing circumstances with the sanctity of tradition*' (cited in Rothenbuhler 46:1998).

Currently, I suggest that the funeral is the only shared, least discussed and thus unplanned event within our experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). It is the site of things which must be done (Mandelbaum 1959). But do we know what these things are? And by whom they should be done?

Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennap's seminal work, *The Rites of Passage*, remains instructive. He observes that '*changes of condition [deaths] do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual and it is the function of the rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects*'(13: 1960).

There persists a pervasive reluctance to openly engage with such existentially charged dialogue, despite the efforts of increasing numbers of communal initiatives, including Swiss sociologist Bernard Cretz's Café Mortels, Jon Underwood's subsequent Death Cafés, and Hebb and Macklin's Death over Dinner phenomenon.

Thus whilst growing numbers of 'alternative' funeral services appear, offering more simple, perhaps more 'rational' (as opposed to 'religious' or 'superstitious') experiences, including environmentally conscious options, these are still relatively rarely chosen; perhaps the notion of a '*bare death*', relatively un-marked and thus un-mourned, still creates fear (Simpson 9:2018).

The notion of commensality, whilst core to the *An Extra Place at the Table* project, is not an automatic component in an exploration of experience design; however, in the context of the funeral experience, its relationship with ritual is essential. Food is often one of the core aspects of the ceremonial, of ritual events. Commensality, the sharing of meals, symbolizes and denotes social bonds and divisions, drawing boundaries between those who still eat together and those who do not.

For designers then, how might we reconcile the '*deadly individualism*' of personalised rites of passage with the collective needs of those left behind to restore the integrity of social fabric through feasting and other rituals?

The funeral, an agreed space for mourning, can be deliberately designed to reflect current belief systems, to act as an essential bounded transitional period, in which we can carefully move the dead into a socially collectively constructed mythologized narrative, enable survivors to experience separation communally, begin to darn the space left by death and start re-integration into society in its new form.

Through framing experience design with such concepts, enabling awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic and other elements, we are far from providing Rojek's *'technocratic view of events, focus[ed] on the nuts and bolts in the machine and when and where to oil the parts'* (2013: xii).

We are instead creating and re-creating experiences, and, as Rothenbuhler comments, *'rituals, like all social conventions, must be at some point be invented...'* (50:1998)

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