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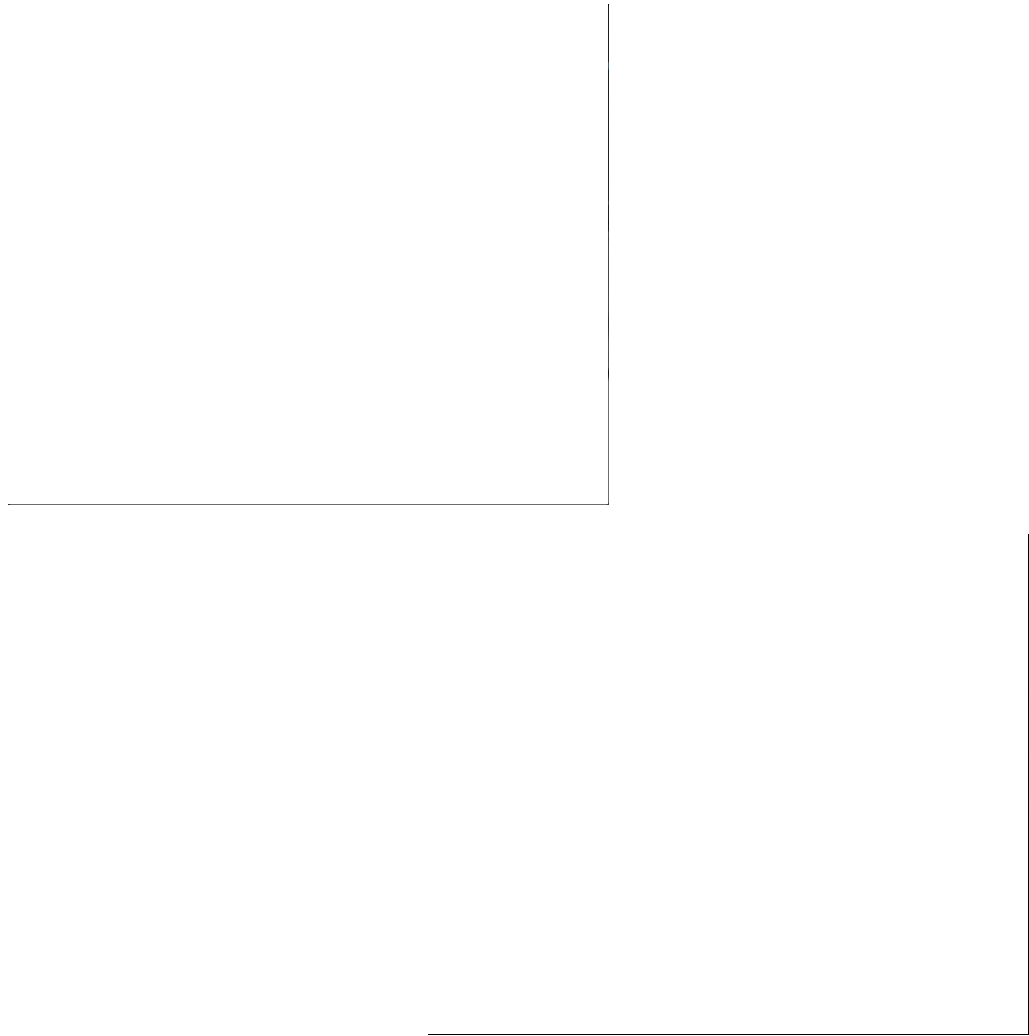
Seattle could get an Urban Death Project human composter in just 7 years



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Katrina Spade is the head designer behind the Urban Death Project, an initiative to find an alternative to burial or cremation — composting, based on technology used in livestock composting. Bodies would be interred in the same composting “core,” surrounded by organic material, and slowly mingle, resulting in a “communal” compost at the end of the process. Spade hopes to build a prototype “core” at WSU with the help of architects, soil scientists, and engineers. Friday, Oct. 6, 2016. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times)



You're going to die. What do you want to happen next? Seattle designer Katrina Spade has a radical idea — a part-chapel, part-funeral home to compost human remains — that may be up and running in seven years.

By [Brendan Kiley](#)

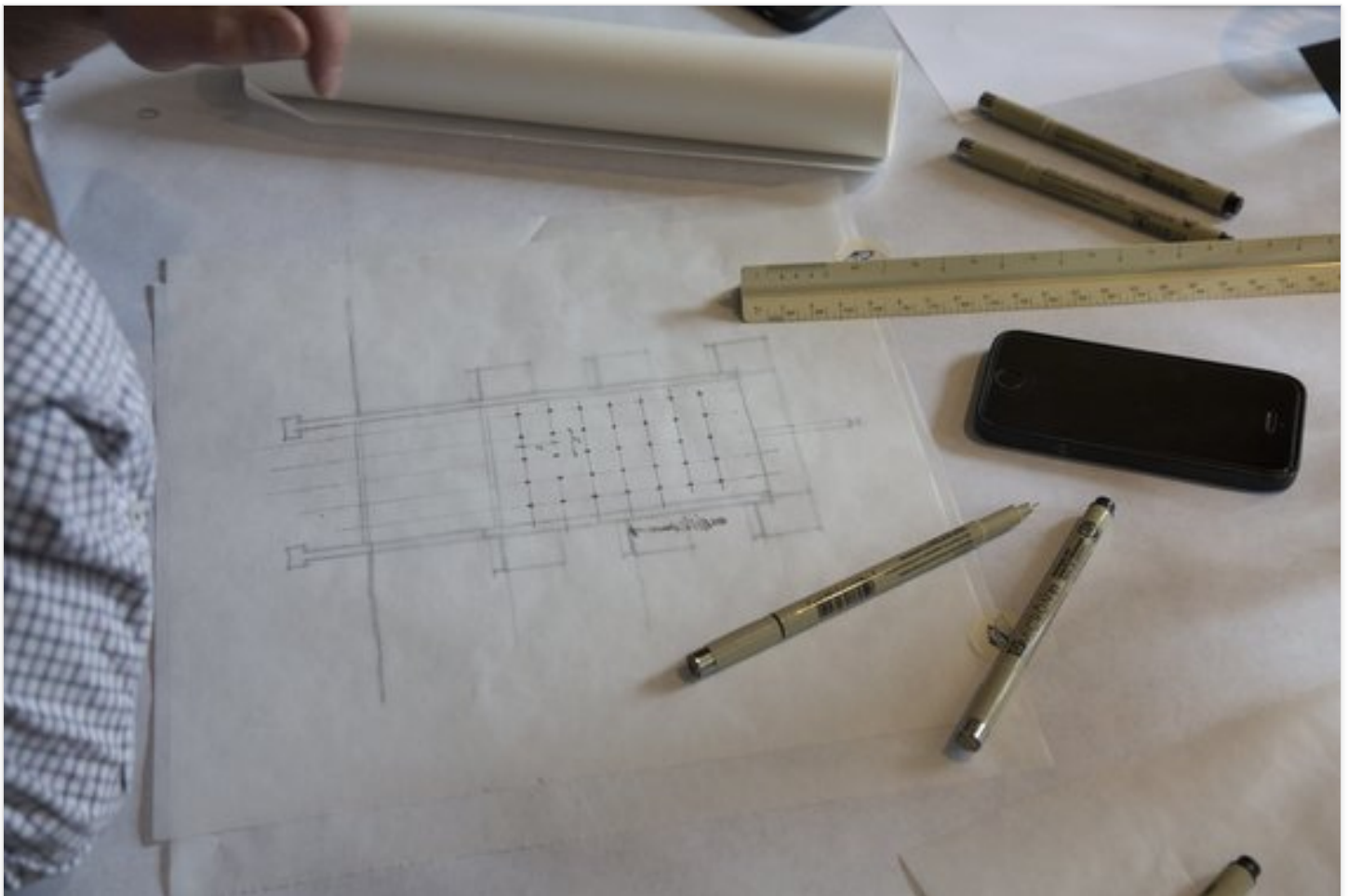
Seattle Times staff reporter

Around seven years ago, Katrina Spade had a radical idea about death.

As her second child became a toddler, the Seattle-based designer remembers thinking: “If they’re growing up, I’m going down.” The more she looked into conventional burial and cremation, the more expensive — environmentally and financially — they seemed.

“What if,” she thought, “we could just become compost?”

She started calling her idea [the Urban Death Project](#) and imagined a stories-tall, chapel-like building in the city where bodies could be laid to rest in a mix of other organic matter (wood chips, alfalfa, straw) and become nutrient-rich soil. At the end of the weekslong process, loved ones could return — not to gather ashes, but mulch.



Related story

[Respecting the Earth, even in death: Seattle designer proposes human composting](#)

At first, it seemed like an improbable fantasy that people responded to with disbelief, revulsion, nervous laughter or fascination — and a lot of questions.

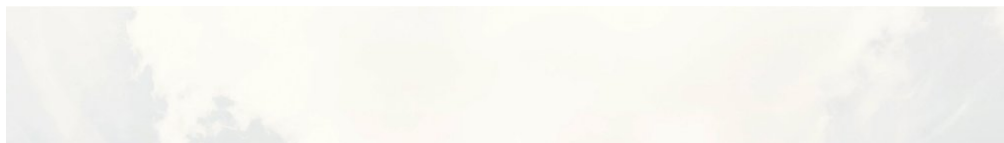
Would it work? Would it be legal? How long would the process take? Would it stink?

Spade formed a nonprofit and attracted a team of experts (architects, engineers, soil biologists, funeral-law specialists, a forensic anthropologist) that is getting close to the answers.

They've approached lawmakers in Olympia and partnered with scientists who already compost cows. They've run an experiment with a pile of wood chips and the body of a 78-year-old woman who donated her remains for scientific research. Over the next few weeks, they'll [try to raise \\$500,000](#), hoping to build the first Urban Death prototype at Washington State University this spring.

Some hurdles remain, but Spade is relentlessly optimistic that the project is viable, both technically and culturally. If everything goes according to plan, Seattle could have the first working Urban Death Project by 2023 — in just seven years.





1 of 3 Rural: A rendering of the recomposition prototype, which will be built at Washington State University. This rendering was done by the architecture firm Olson Kundig. Katrina Spade is the head designer behind the Urban Death Project, an initiative to find an alternative to burial or cremation — composting, based... **More** ✓

“Our bodies,” Spade said, “are full of potential. We have nutrients in us and there’s no way we should be packed into a box that doesn’t let us go into the earth. Decay and decomposition are amazing processes we are terrified of because they might seem icky and scary — your body aging, your food rotting — but without those processes, we would not be alive.”



Her idea is in line with other baby-boomer death-care trends. That generation has been moving away from so-called “traditional” burials with embalming, concrete grave liners and waterproof caskets — which, Spade and other “alt-death” professionals hasten to point out, are innovations that came into vogue between the Civil War and the 1960s.

This shift is especially strong in Washington state, with King County’s cremation rate at about 75 percent (the national rate is around 50 percent); environmentally sensitive funeral services like [Elemental](#) in Seattle (which offers carbon-neutral cremation and eco-friendly embalming); and natural burial grounds like the [White Eagle](#) preserve at Ekone Ranch in Klickitat County, where bodies are buried in simple, biodegradable baskets and shrouds.

The Urban Death Project goes even further.

Instead of one body occupying a single piece of real estate (an urn, a cemetery plot), the Urban Death Project would compost several bodies at a time, beginning with a “laying-in” ceremony at the top of its multistory “core.” Corpses would slowly descend through the process, resulting in soil that’s mostly the person laid to rest at the top — as well as particles of others.

Spade’s project is, in a sense, a communalization of death.

ARTS & CULTURE (3:39)

Seeking a sustainable death, designer proposes composting humans

Seattle-based architectural designer Katrina Spade is proposing a new death-care option for sustainability-minded people: composting our corpses. She hopes to build the first Urban Death Care facility in Seattle. (Lauren Frohne / The Seattle Times)

Ethical, emotional issues

Spade has a lifelong intimacy with compost. She grew up at the end of a dirt road in New Hampshire where her family raised animals for slaughter and vegetables to freeze for the winter. Between the rural lifestyle and her parents’ jobs — her father worked as a doctor, her mother as a physician assistant and environmental activist — Spade was introduced to the cycle of life and death at the dinner table.

She studied anthropology in Pennsylvania and worked in epidemiology at Stanford University (studying the bone density of long-distance runners) before returning to New England. While helping care for her grandfather, who had been diagnosed with

dementia, Spade attended the [Yestermorrow Design/Build School](#), where she studied permaculture and helped build a “Pain Mound,” named for French inventor [Jean Pain](#), which produces enough energy to heat water and methane to fuel stoves and generators — and ends with a rich mound of soil.

A few years after her motherhood-mortality revelation, Spade won an \$80,000 “climate fellow” grant from the [Echoing Green](#) foundation to pursue her idea.

Since then, the architecture firm Olson Kundig has hosted a design intensive, and law students at Wake Forest University — led by [professor Tanya Marsh](#) — are looking at state statutes to see what it would take to make human composting legal.

“Mortality composting is a blend of biology and engineering.” - Lynne Carpenter-Boggs, a WSU soil microbiologist

Talks about the prototype are under way at Washington State University. [Lynne Carpenter-Boggs, a WSU soil microbiologist](#), said her conversations with officials at the university — which already works with human subjects and has a well-respected livestock-composting research program — have been “very promising.”

She estimates that a 150- to 200-pound person will produce six pounds of nitrogen, two pounds of phosphorus and one pound of potassium: the same 6-2-1 ratio of cottonseed meal fertilizer.

“Mortality composting is a blend of biology and engineering,” Carpenter-Boggs explained, and it’s becoming more popular. In the past, a rancher with a dead, 1,500-pound steer could call a local renderer, who’d pay a little money to pick up the animal and turn it into ingredients for marshmallows, Jell-O and glue.

Those days are mostly gone. Partially because of disease scares (like mad cow) and partially because synthetic products are cheaper, the rendering industry shrank.

Burning and burying animals was cumbersome and attracted scavengers, so soil scientists like Carpenter-Boggs stepped in to teach farmers about mortality composting. A successful pile, she said, can turn that 1,500-pound steer into fertile, odorless soil within a couple of months.

Composting human beings, of course, brings a whole other kaleidoscope of ethical and emotional issues.

When Carpenter-Boggs first started talking about the Urban Death Project prototype with colleagues at WSU, she said she could “see the assumptions on people’s faces ... an assumption of disrespect.” Those reactions, she suspects, are partly because livestock composting — like human cremation — sometimes involves pulverizing leftover bones into grit.

Carpenter-Boggs, on the other hand, is trying to fine-tune a process for human remains that leaves the work of decomposition to microorganisms and minimizes mechanical interference.

“I think I need a better explanation for people’s assumptions than ‘oh, they’re going to grind up grandma,’ ” Carpenter-Boggs said, “but we’ve thought about this. It will be respectful ... The second or third time they hear about it, it’s no longer a surprise.”

Her work with the Urban Death Project has shifted her attitude about the death-care industry. Carpenter-Boggs has begun paying more attention to under-researched phenomena like how drugs in our bodies might impact the wider environment. (She’s currently studying how human dentistry might affect the Urban Death Project by composting buffalo teeth that have been fitted with posthumous fillings.)



More importantly, Carpenter-Boggs said she's begun to recognize "how the disconnection of our death care from culture and personal control has been sad — it's possible for companies to make a lot of money off something most people don't want to think about."

Service Corporation International, for example, is the largest funeral-business consolidator in North America, with roughly half a dozen brands (including Dignity Memorial) and over 2,000 locations. The company, which lists its stock price at the top of its homepage, has been the target of lawsuits and investigations, including [a 2013 Bloomberg Businessweek report](#) that found it charged an average of \$6,256 for a standard funeral — not including funeral plot or casket, which run between \$2,495 and \$175,000. According to Bloomberg, that price tag was 42 percent higher than the ones at independent funeral homes.

Beauty in rituals

Nora Menkin, president of the Urban Death Project's board, has been on the front lines of reforming the death-care industry for almost a decade.

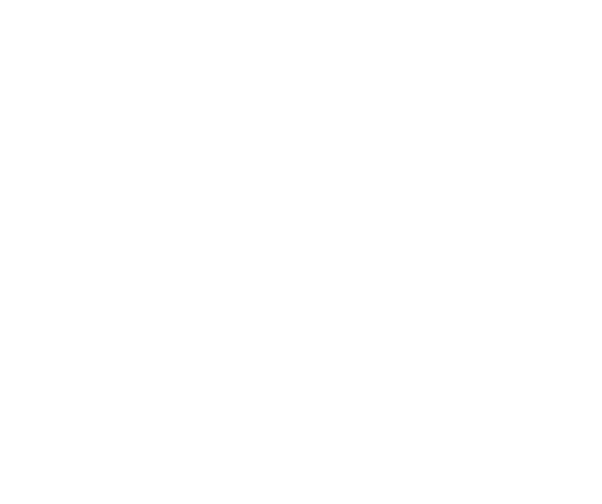
As managing funeral director of the nonprofit [People's Memorial Association](#), she tries to promote transparency, provide information about more affordable and eco-friendly

death-care options and combat predatory business practices. (She also has a sense of humor. From her bio: “Since death runs in her family, Nora decided to become a funeral director.”)

The Urban Death Project, she said, is a natural extension of that work, and Menkin thinks it could provide new, meaningful death rituals for the living.

Spade hopes so, too. She envisions loved ones carrying the deceased up a ramp wrapped around the Urban Death Project’s core for whatever kind of “laying-in” ceremony feels appropriate.

“People love to say, ‘Just cremate me, don’t make a fuss,’ ” she said. “I think human death is worth a fuss! I suspect that in this culture, we’re not that good at grieving ... we’re really good at denying that death exists.”



Death, Spade said, “can be beautiful.” When she first started working on the Urban Death Project, her grandmother — who also suffered from dementia — was dying. Spade stayed with her during the final days.

The experience of being with a dying person, she said, “is like someone giving birth. There’s a stoppage of time that happens: waiting for someone to go, like waiting for someone to arrive. Sometimes, the only thing to do is just be there.”

A few months later, Spade’s brother-in-law died. Her partner’s family drove his body to his childhood home in New Hampshire, where they put him on dry ice, built a coffin and shrine, then held a dayslong home funeral. “We sat, and cried, and laughed,” Spade said. “It was, again, stunningly beautiful.”

Spade imagines Seattle's first Urban Death Project handling 850 bodies a year, and her nonprofit licensing out its technology to other urban-death centers around the country — and, eventually, the world. But for now, she just wants to get people used to the idea.

She might be closer than she thinks. A few weeks ago, Menkin met with a rabbi. “She said, ‘I heard about this new thing where you can be composted,’ ” Menkin recalled. “I told her we’re working on it.”

The rabbi looked surprised. “Oh!” she said. “You mean we can’t do it yet?”

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