# Tick Tock

We must interrogate norms, rituals, and spatial ideas regarding death.

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BRINGING DEATH TO LIGHT

Written By Jack Riemer

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## Abstract

Death in the United States is exile—removal from the domestic spaces of care and love that are so cherished in life, to spend eternity among strangers and stones. This study challenges the discrepancy between domesticity and the spatialized idea of death, specifically reflecting on home rituals that once characterized early funerary norms. Embodying a critical perspective of the current state of funerary affairs, this work—its methodology, artifacts, and prototypical final proposal—contends that design can enable death's reinhabitation of the home. The final creative proposal is the design of a familiar object, transfigured to facilitate accessible confrontation with death and closer proximity with loved ones who have passed.

# OVER-

Perhaps the phrase should be, "Home is where the beating heart is," at least for those with the distinct fate of dying in the United States of America. Home is the centerpiece of American life: it is at the core of our capitalistic function, our social tendencies, our relationships, and we have–perhaps unknowingly–decided that it is only a place for the living. This is not to say that memory and love do not persist within the home after the death of a loved one. Conversations affirm that they do, just like photographs, old notes, and unchanged bedrooms; rather, the home is not typically a place for the body of the deceased, in any form, to "live" amongst its residents as an agent of the domestic space.

The consequence of this is an undeniable societal separation from death, from its familiarity, and from the dead themselves. While it may seem like a fact of American life that the dead be removed from the home, this was certainly not always the case. Nor is this tendency ubiquitous, as countless examples of alternative burial methods live on in other cultures still. Religious, social, governmental, and economic forces have all contributed to shaping the norms of funerary traditions today, but these norms–just like any other–should be interrogated. The ways we live, and the ways we die, have consequences that implicate each of us and the world at large.

**Bastienne Schmidt and Philippe Cheng, "Requiems, Remembrance and Mourning"**

# VIEW

As such, it is critical to understand both these consequences and the potential for alternative methods, especially where the methods might have the capacity to respond to them. In the contemporary context, there are abundant emerging methods for bodily processing in the United States outside of traditional norms. Many are inspired by various cultural and religious traditions other than those that shaped the standard.[2] The spatialization of these methods, though, remains far removed from daily life. In many ways, they are simply the next step in the lineage of stubborn funerary practices, only perpetuating existing relationships with death.

Design has been inextricably related to the state of funerary affairs, and it should be considered as a tool to bring death back into the domestic spaces of care and love in which we live. To exist in these spaces within the contemporary social context, design regarding death should promote opportunity for accessible engagement; it should be adaptable enough to accommodate specific ritual needs; it should be confrontational. The creative work in this study adopts these considerations in both its methodological process and in the creation of the final prototypical object, a proposal that intends to provoke new ideas about conceptual and spatial relationships with death.

**Calvary Cemetary, Queens**

# CHAPTER ONE - CONTEXT

This study confronts the distance from death in American life; to understand how this distance has ingrained, the historical influences that shaped American funerary traditions must be interrogated. In the contemporary American context, the funeral is a remote and ritualistic affair. It is typically made up of two parts: the wake and the burial. The first is a social event and involves the display of a treated body to those invited to share in the event–usually extended family and friends. Importantly, the wake typically takes place in a funeral home, after the body has been prepared by mortuary professionals. The latter is traditionally more morose, a ceremony in the cemetery often only attended by the immediate family and very close friends of the deceased. There is some reference for these events in most of the documented history of American funerals, though they have looked very different throughout time; the wake, for instance, was once primarily a drinking affair during the mostly Puritan colonial era.[4] Acquaintances of the deceased would come into the home and engage in a very lively "viewing" of the body. Once concluded, the burial would follow, equally as disparate from the ceremony seen in the U.S. today–the body remained at home to be processed and was at last buried immediately nearby, typically on the very property of the family.[6]

This home-burial method persisted in the early days of the country and faced its inadequacies for the first time during the Civil War. The war brought death in massive quantities, and far from home; deceased soldiers required a means of preservation in order to make it back to their homes and families.[13] Thus, embalming emerged, the practice of injecting chemicals into the body to avoid its decomposition. President Lincoln was embalmed after his death to sustain his body during his funerary parade, and the country took notice of his impressive appearance—so marked the transition of deathcare into a more institutional practice, with many others adopting this new treatment in death.[15]

Before the Civil War, those who were not buried at home were typically buried in Christian churchyards, perhaps the first reference for the rural graveyard typology. The war brought with it the emergence of the National Cemetery System in 1862, which established a more secular identity for a large, rural cemetery. These sites were often built near the locations of major battles, like the Gettysburg National Cemetery.[11] One might consider these gravesites a transition moment in public focus regarding death; with national cemeteries, service to the country could be argued to have superseded religious tradition.

After the end of the war, too, more rural cemeteries began to populate the American landscape. Suburbanization and outbreaks of diseases further magnified their frequency, as new burial policies began to prohibit home burial as a deathcare option. These policies demanded that Americans who died in or around cities—which constituted a large majority of the population—all be systematically removed from the domestic sphere in their death.[10]

**Justin Crowe, "Nourish Tableware"**

**Allie Yang, "Human Composting"**

**Common Accounts, "Three Ordinary Funerals"**

Returning once more to the contemporary context, it is evident that the popular condition of death care, burial, and death's spatial consequences have changed little since these developments. However, several new ideas about the treatment of death are beginning to emerge: design proposals for eco-burials[18] and bone ash tableware[12] are just two examples in the American discourse, both drawing from cultural practices outside of the normalized in-ground burial and its specific religious inspirations. Many architects and other designers are beginning to direct their energies toward the potential applications of design in the navigation of a new reality, contributing ideas in technology, philosophy, and aesthetics. Similar to the proposal for bone ash tableware, this study argues that the home, once the facilitator of death care, should once again become the stage for such experimentation. However, it offers an additional perspective: a bridge between these two worlds should be confrontational and provoke contemplation regarding death at large.

# CHAPTER TWO - CONSEQUENCES

The traditional burial methods established throughout American history may have changed little, but their breadth of consequences has magnified alongside social and economic development. Practical implications of these processes are many: for one, they occupy spaces dedicated only to death and its ritual. Land is a finite resource, and growing cities especially require open space for vital programming–like housing where there is a shortage.[7] Moreover, the spaces for these death rituals, namely the funeral home and the cemetery, are consumers of significant resources and employers of wasteful methods. Reference, for instance, the process of making a single headstone; from the sourcing of the stone, to its transportation, to its carving and polishing, to its lettering, painting, and/or engraving, and finally, to its transportation once more–often involving small cranes–to its final position in the cemetery.[1]

This process is, of course, exponentiated in the case of larger mausoleum-type commemorative objects, which elicit a separate line of questioning: who has access to the traditional in-ground burial? A wealthy family might be able to afford a mausoleum for their loved ones, and perhaps a middle-class family can afford a more typical in-ground burial and headstone. But even the normative funerary ritual, with all its parts, costs nearly $10,000 on average.[8] The funeral is the final exacerbator of wealth inequality in the capitalistic systems of life and death that define the United States today.

Moreover, it has been mentioned that the specificities of burial today come largely from Christian influences, and further inputs from other monotheistic religious practices only served to solidify in-ground burial methodology.[16] Americans, however, are becoming increasingly secularized, and there are countless other religious observations not facilitated by normative funerary methods.[17] Insofar as these methods continue as they have, they will become further removed from the social and religious direction of the American people.

**-TheGravestonePros- North Country Memorials, fabricating a headstone**

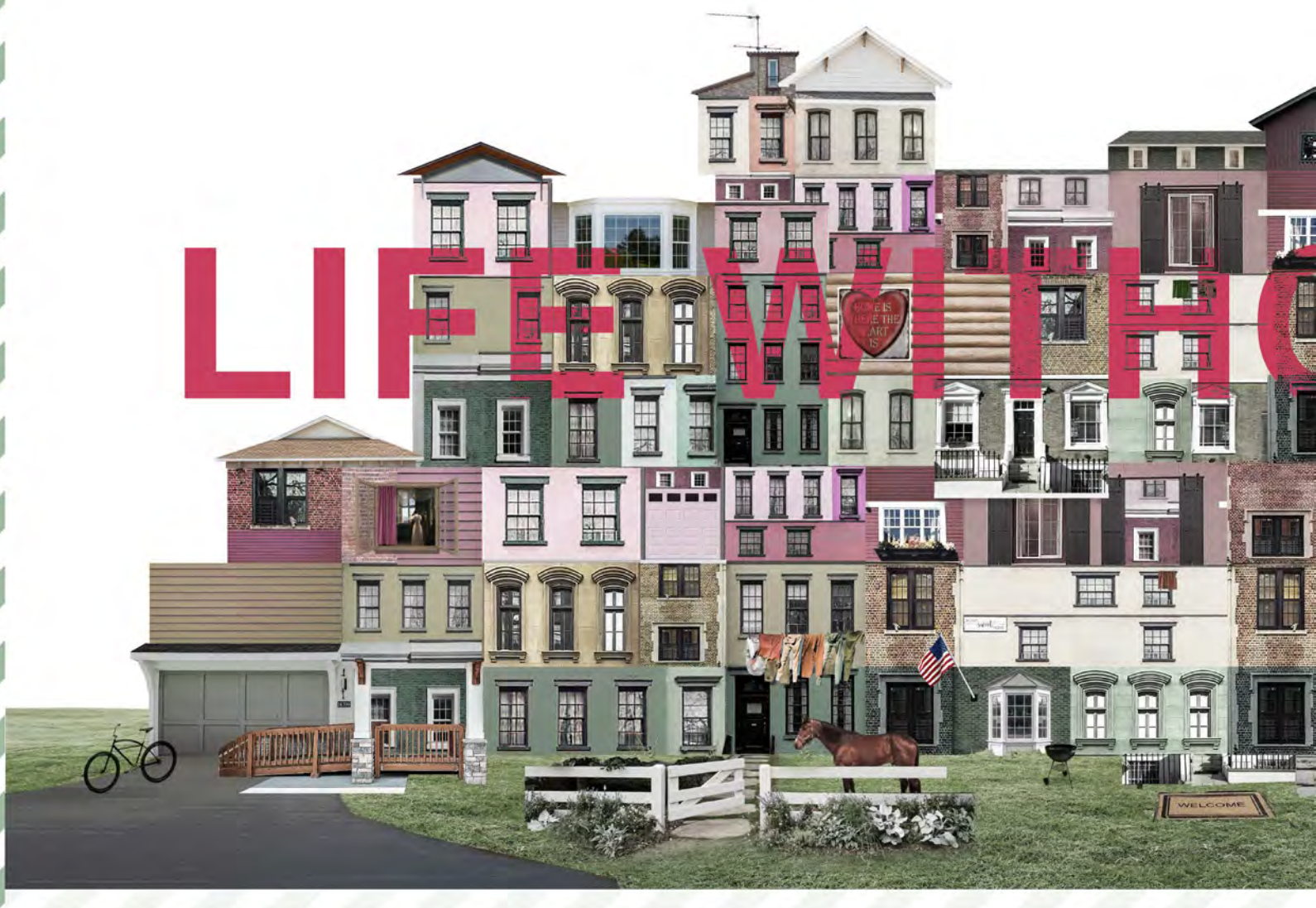
Perhaps the most universally felt consequence of death's treatment today is the growing distance from it. Death has been placed far away from the activities of daily life, boxed out of sight and away from the home and family of the deceased (see fig. 1). Paired with the increasing average lifespan of the population, death, the dead, and the idea of dying are of less immediate concern in public thought.[9]

The contemporary methods that define deathcare and burial inadequately respond to the environmental, economic, social, and religious particulars of the United States. A proposal for a new relationship with death, then, should start with a body processing method that is more accessible, equitable, and engaging.

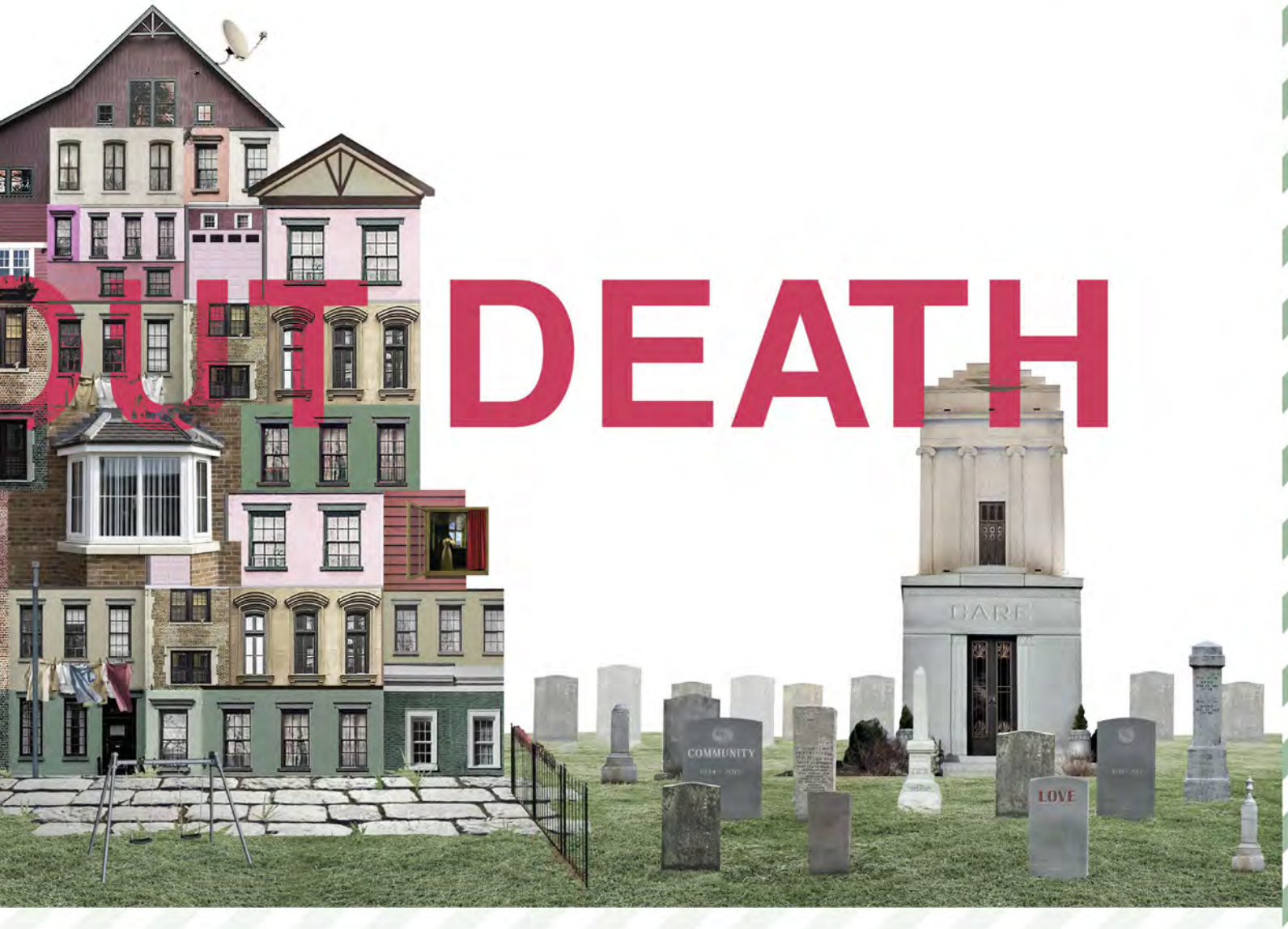
Several such methods are emerging as alternatives to the norm; this study begins with cremation as a potentially universal approach, at least for those whose religious traditions allow it. As a starting point, cremation provides a tangible object of memory for engagement as a part of a ritual. This object, typically an urn full of the ashes of the deceased, is also a domestic one and therefore encourages death's reinhabitation of the home.

**"The funeral is the final exacerbator of wealth inequality in the capitalistic systems of life and death that define the United States today."**

Figure 1. “Life Without Death.”



**“Death has been placed far away from the activities of daily life, boxed out of sight and away from the home and family of the deceased.”**



# CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

With cremation as the chosen bodily processing method, this study begins the process of designing a prototypical object to hold the urn and occupy the home. To arrive at the final object, several design experiments are carried out at various scales.

Cemeteries, the spatial officiant of death, are the product of design; as such, they carry with them a specific set of design implications. Almost every American cemetery is a public space, facilitating visitation during defined hours to any person–not just those with buried loved ones. Moreover, when buried, deceased people are placed alongside strangers, whether immediately adjacent in the case of most burials, or at least in close proximity in the case of mausoleums or more expensive grave options. Once again, it is important to note the spatialization of wealth even in death: those with more money can afford for a more private visitation experience.

Though cemeteries are public, their use is–of course–incredibly intimate and can reasonably be described as private. Visitors who come to see deceased family or friends would most typically spend their time next to that individual's grave, both because of the emotional potential of physical proximity and because other graves might seem like another group's private domain. The cemetery at large, then, can be imagined as a collection of private spaces, assembled together in a tensioned public setting.

The home is a very different place than the cemetery. It carries with it different form, function, use, users, atmosphere, material, and just about every architectural qualifier. It is for this reason that this study begins its design process–towards the reintegration of deathcare in the home–with an interrogation of the repulsion between these two typologies. The first two designed artifacts take the shape of the prototypical living room and cemetery, which are positioned in forced dialogue with one another through a series of actions documented as "Spatial Collisions Between the Domains of the Living and the Dead." To reduce variables, these artifacts are considered as immaterial, analyzing collisions only as they arise between the "ideals" of each of these two spaces. They are made of white paper and are intended to depict the lowest discernable resolution of their respective spaces (see fig. 2).

**“The cemetery at large, then, can be imagined as a collection of private spaces, assembled together in a tensioned public setting.”**


**Figure 2. “Spatial Collisions Between the Domains of the Living and the Dead.”**

1. The first action is the movement of a simple living chair from the home into the cemetery. It is immediately apparent that some of these collisions might not be as confrontational as anticipated, as this appears to be a familiar action; one can easily imagine moving a chair–though perhaps more typically a folding chair–in-to the cemetery in order to comfortably engage with the space of burial (see fig. 3).

**Figure 3. Moving the chair into the cemetery.**

2. The second action, however, evokes a more unusual relationship by moving the sofa into the cemetery. The implication of such an action would be a more social potential for engagement with the dead, but either for this reason or purely the impracticality of this decision, the action feels unfamiliar.
3. The third action is the translation of two individual chairs and a small table, which indicates a scene where the grave is not the focus, but the setting; two people might be sharing a meal, or playing a game, and they are choosing to do so near the grave. This image is also a familiar one–two family members sharing a beer and playing cards close to their deceased loved one does not seem out of the ordinary.
4. The fourth action is the movement of the same chairs and a larger table. Again, this feels unfamiliar, perhaps because of the logistical challenge of moving the larger table. However, a larger table also indicates a more formal dining setting, which is a domestic function that seems further removed from the space of death than a casual gathering.
5. The fifth action is the movement of a cross, a flower, a favorite food, or any other object brought into the cemetery as a part of a ritual engagement with the grave of a loved one. These are objects of life and are meant to bring a living energy into the otherwise stagnant spaces of death. Moving them from the home to the cemetery or from the cemetery to the home both feel uncontroversial and unprovocative.
6. The sixth and final action is the most radical: the mausoleum is moved from the cemetery into the home (see fig. 4). The consequences of this collision are many–for one, the action creates a separate domain for death within the domestic space of the home. For the purpose of this study, an object with this capacity is called a spatial agent, something with the ability to shape a space and not just to occupy it. Such an action also has the consequence of bringing death to the front of the room's focus, turning the mausoleum into a kind of hearth for death. The presence of the mausoleum in the room also appears to preserve the hierarchy that the object holds in its natural setting of the cemetery; bringing an object of death into a domestic space does not detach it from its connotations outside of the home. It does, however, change the setting to a private one, which means that only the residents of the home are now able to engage with the deceased. This seems problematic, as there are others outside of the home of one's immediate family who might wish for a ritual of their own with the deceased.

**Figure 4. Moving the mausoleum into the home.**

The sixth action seems to tell the most: a single object can redefine domestic space as a shared domain with death and make its conceptualization unavoidable. In order to accomplish the same impact, but with significantly more sensitivity to the nuances of context, this creative study pursues the design of a standalone object–a prototype–with several criteria of intentions. Many of these guidelines are derived from the findings of the spatial collision tests. These are as follows:

- The object should be intimate, private, and adaptable within the home. It should facilitate various ritual needs.
- It should have an interface with the public to preserve the existing publicness of death and to enable engagement from those outside of the home. Intimate domestic objects can still engage outsiders; take, for instance, a Christmas tree, which holds years of memory but is often displayed to the street at night, when its lights are visible.
- The object should be a spatial agent in itself and not just an object occupying a space.
- It should have a place to sit–sitting promotes reflection and intentionality.
- The object should be indicative of a domestic object, not a cemetery object; it is not possible to detach the object from its connotations. If the object reflects something domestic, that domestic thing should be intentionally chosen. The object should also look different and should evoke a kind of "weirdness" that forces an encounter with the idea of death (see fig. 5).

**"A single object can redefine domestic space as a shared domain with death and make its conceptualization unavoidable."**

**Figure 5. "The Home as an Encounter with Death."**

In addition to the takeaways from these tests, it is critical that the final prototypical object responds to the inadequacies of existing funerary methods. Thus, it should have an additional set of criteria, which is as follows:

- The object should be accessible; it should be relatively cheap to manufacture and easy to assemble at home. In this way, it acts not unlike a mass DIY furniture product from companies like IKEA.
- It should be recyclable, compostable, or otherwise not significantly impact the environment in the way that current death rituals do.
- It should be a secular object, though ethereal enough to remind users to engage with death through whichever religious rituals they might practice.
- It should, again, resist the growing separation between daily activity and contemplation of death.

# CHAPTER FOUR - PROTO-TYPE

With all preceding considerations in mind, the first attempt at the final domestic object is called, "A Peculiar Wardrobe" (see fig 6). It is a freestanding wardrobe with a compartment for cremation ashes, and it takes the familiar shape of a coffin with atypical materiality. The function of the wardrobe is both practical and metaphoric; to fully use the object, one must enter inside of it to see his/her reflection and the outfit chosen for the day (see fig. 7).

**Figure 6. "A Peculiar Wardrobe."**

**Figure 7. Inhabiting "A Peculiar Wardrobe."**

Where the wardrobe falls short is in its explicit function, which is too specific to a certain location in the house. It fails to adapt to the various domestic and funerary rituals of different users. Moreover, the aesthetic presence of the object, while intended to provoke contemplation, is too vivid; the form is too connotated, and the material choice renders it an unclear statement about death itself.

After the conclusion of this first trial, the study arrives at last at its final prototype: "[Tick Tock] Clock" (see figs. 8 and 9).

# "[TICK TOCK] CLOCK"

Figure 8. "[Tick Tock] Clock."

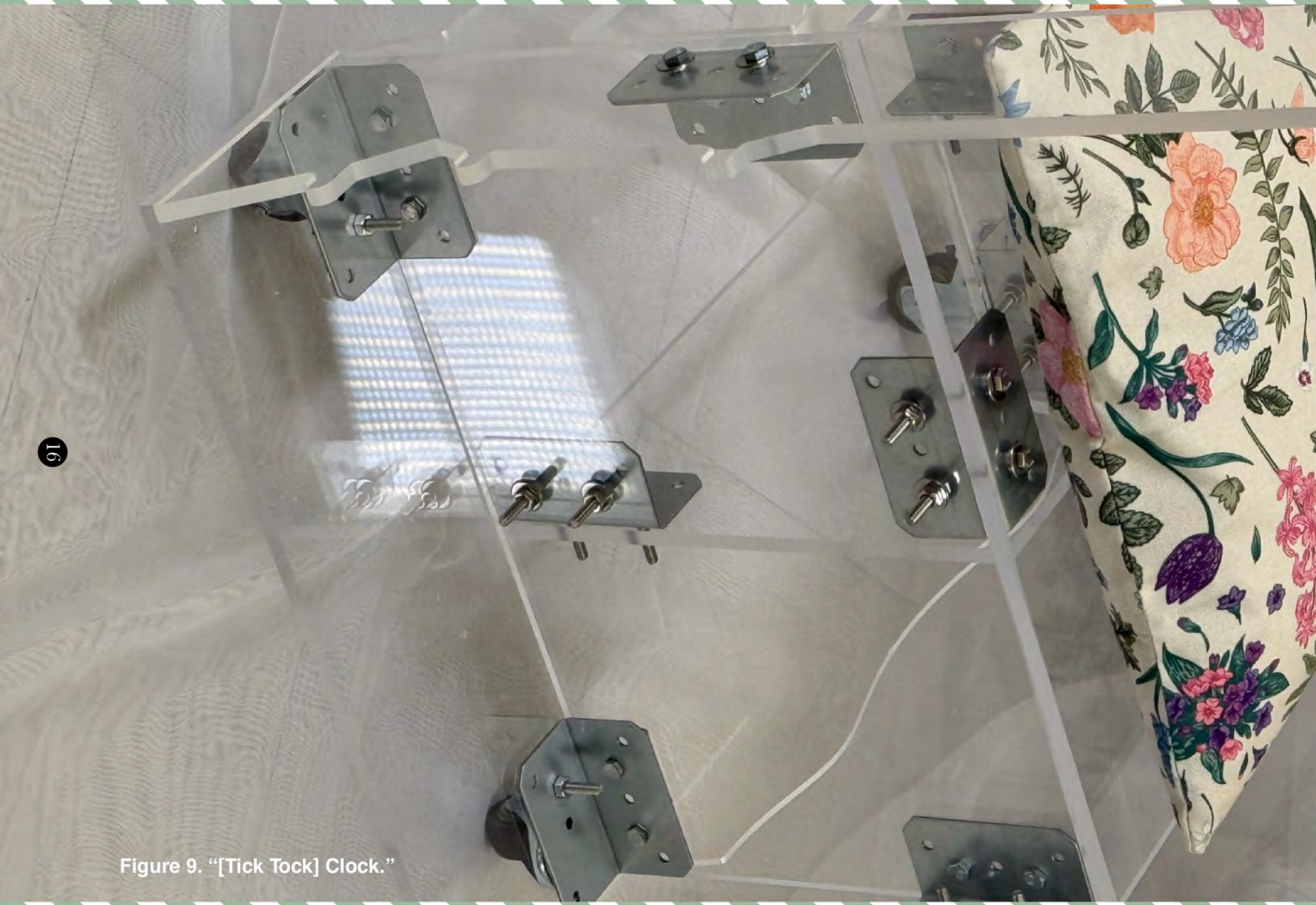


Figure 9. “[Tick Tock] Clock.”

Like any prototype, this is a bespoke object intended to be understood as a proposal for replication at scale. It is an unusual grandfather clock, covered with an operable veil and with a place to sit inside of its body: it is a spatial agent. The body also holds a cable upon which to hang a reflective urn–included with the clock–and can therefore act as a direct interface with the physical memory of a loved one. A clock is an innately charged domestic object, specifically chosen for its visible relationship to the perpetual passage of time. To subvert the "normalcy" of the imagery of a grandfather clock, the prototype is rendered entirely in recyclable clear acrylic with steel connections (see fig. 10), a decision which has obvious poetic and practical consequences; a clear clock, veiled with translucent fabric, may challenge static or indifferent notions regarding one's own time. The pillow upon which a user can sit is familiar and floral-patterned, an artifact of unadulterated domesticity within an otherwise provocative object. Flowers, however, also hold subliminal connotations with death. Other than the body, connections, and pillow, the only other materials are those which define the clock: mirrored surface for the face, and a bright pink plastic for the hands. The material relationship between the clock and the urn is highly intentional, a final reminder to consider oneself just as one might consider their late loved one.

The grandfather clock sits on casters and is intended to be located anywhere in the home, placed according to the specific demands of each user and moved at will. Every family, group, or individual user has a unique relationship with death. The adaptability of the clock as a domestic object can accommodate these nuances within different daily life patterns and ensure a more universal application within various religious and funerary rituals (see fig. 11).

**Figure 10. Closeup of "[Tick Tock] Clock."**

Figure 11. “[Tick Tock] Clock” as a part of different rituals.

Even if a religious tradition requires an in-ground burial or any other form of bodily processing outside of cremation, the clock becomes, at least, a reminder to engage with that tradition and the deceased.

The entire form is built from individual pieces, which arrive soft-packed in a box typical of "ready-to-assemble" furniture items. It can be assembled by one user and disassembled whenever necessary. A home is rarely permanent, so the capacity to bring the clock with you during a move is crucial for an adaptable ritual object. The clock also has one very important interface object, establishing a particular relationship with observers both within and outside of the home: a motion-activated light, which activates only when the object is inhabited or otherwise in use.

For the family inside the home, the light enables the functionality of the clock. It becomes a place to sit and spend time, perhaps to read or simply reflect. When in use, especially by someone who covers themselves with the translucent veil, it becomes a character whose activities are visible but not easily understood. This is especially relevant as it pertains to the perception of the clock from outside of the home; recall that death is currently a public spatial force, with engagement made possible to those outside of the immediate family of those who have passed. To preserve this condition, the clock–should it be positioned near a window or other public interface in the home–becomes visible to passers-by when activated.

**In summary, [Tick Tock] Clock is a carefully considered, confrontational bridge between the current state of funerary affairs and the necessary re-integration of death into domestic space.**

# CRITICAL STATE-MENT

Death is a part of life. It is not a separate reality from the one that we experience daily–it is sensitive, but it is an inevitability and cannot be avoided. Love and care do not disappear in death, so death should not disappear in spaces and rituals of life. The question of how to bring death back into the home is a design question, and this study offers one possible answer within the field of emerging voices. The final prototype, the "[Tick Tock] Clock," challenges the isolated condition of death by reimagining a domestic object as its spatial agent—a clear, mobile, ritual-ready heirloom that invites reflection and remembrance without prescribing a single mode of engagement. It is a call to confront death not in fear or distance, but with intimacy, curiosity, and care.

Architects and designers have posited many ideas about the potential for new collisions between death and the home. The most directly relevant to this body of work are those that deal with death's objectification, not to reduce its importance but to facilitate its cohabitation with spaces of life. This study has been inspired significantly by these works, but also by art, music, and creative efforts regarding death throughout various histories.

Some of the most noteworthy references are as follows:

- The French Ambassadors, by Hans Holbein; this painting is loaded with experimental representation of the phenomenon of death.[14]
- Vanitas genre of still life, by various contemporary and historical artists; this assemblage of works depict imagery related to death alongside daily objects, therefore directly challenging its familiarity.[3]
- The Death Report, by Common Accounts; The Death Report is a collection of works by Common Accounts, a research-focused architecture firm whose work relating to death lives at the edge of technology and design.[5]
- This study's greatest deviation from other similar research and creative pursuits may perhaps be its lack of definition; as an object, "[Tick Tock] Clock" is a clear statement, but that much of that statement remains the decision of its user.
- One concession must be made regarding the final design proposal of this study; digital interfaces are increasingly becoming a primary tool for connection and memorialization, and limitations regarding fabrication capabilities prevented this study from pursuing these avenues. Future research will likely include the integration of these technologies into the analog object.


This work is intended to provoke the static and problematic ideas regarding death in the United States. It is not a solution, but a projective possible future. How can we rethink our methods and our norms to become more conscious about their impacts, in life and even in death?
TICK
TOCK

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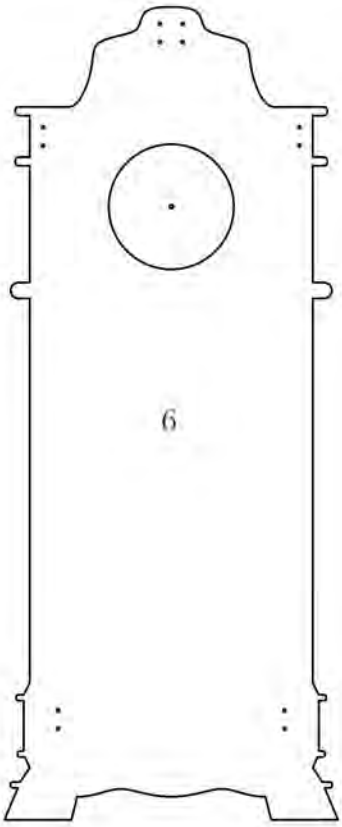
# US
# MAN

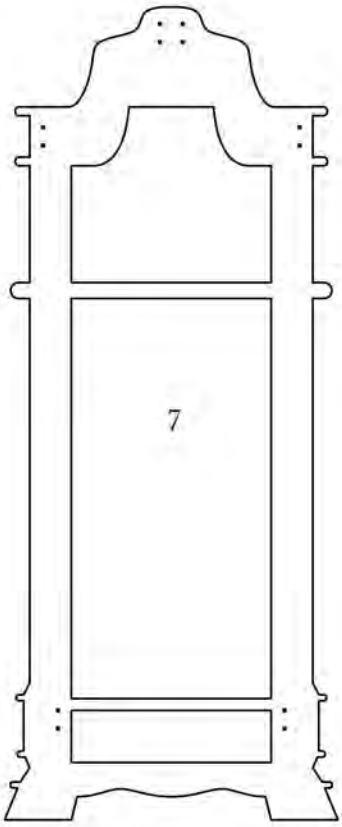
Please enjo[illegible] yo[illegible]
new “[Tick Tock]
Clock.” We hope
that this clock
can help facilitate
your continuing
relationship with
your loved ones and
remind you not to
let a single second
slip by.

# ER
# UAL

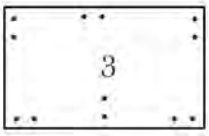
## [TICK TOCK]
## CLOCK

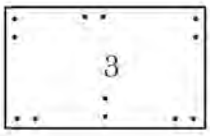
# [Tick Tock] Clock
# Included Pieces



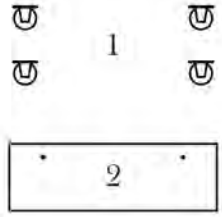



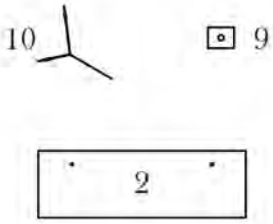






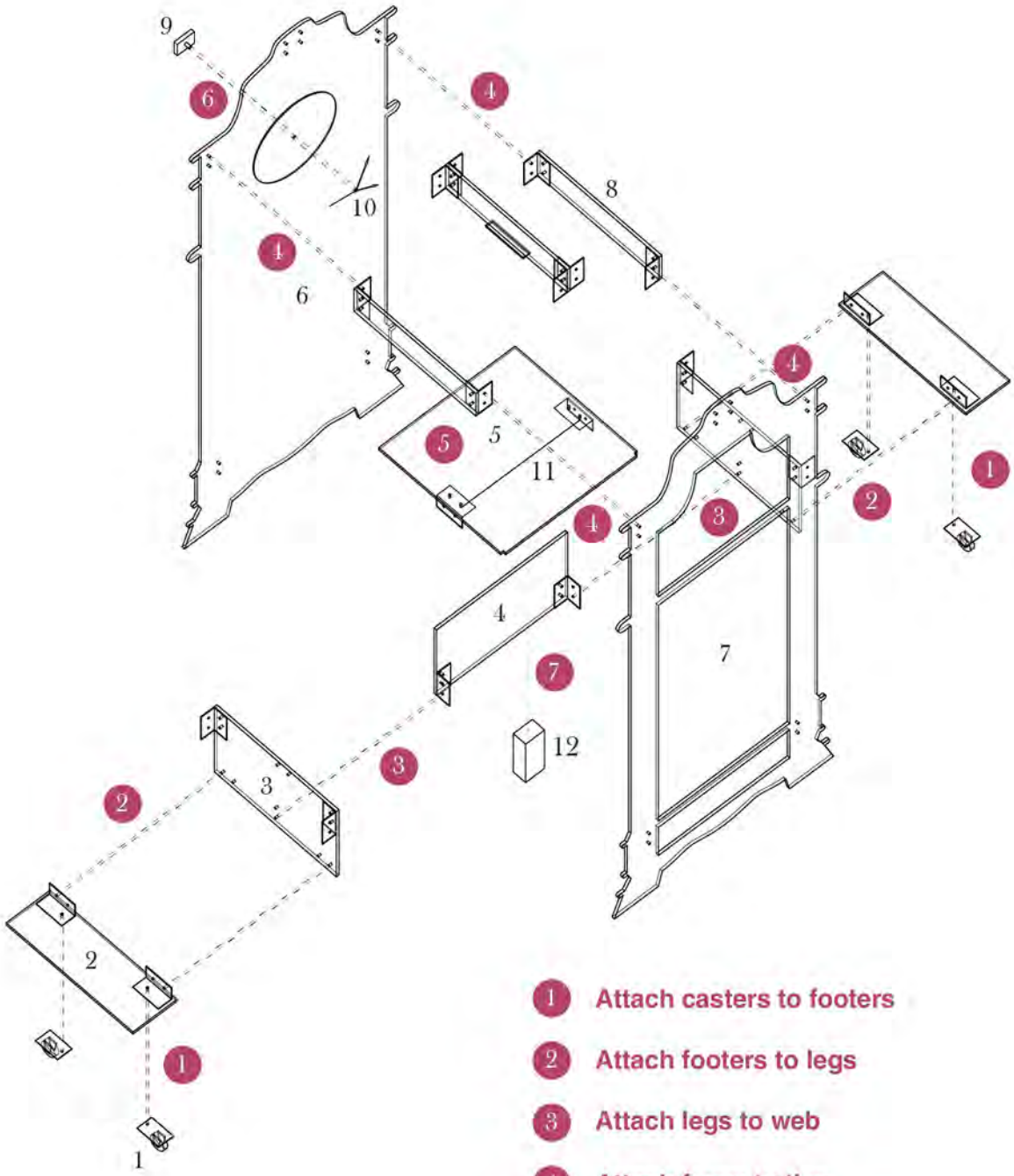


Urn


Cable

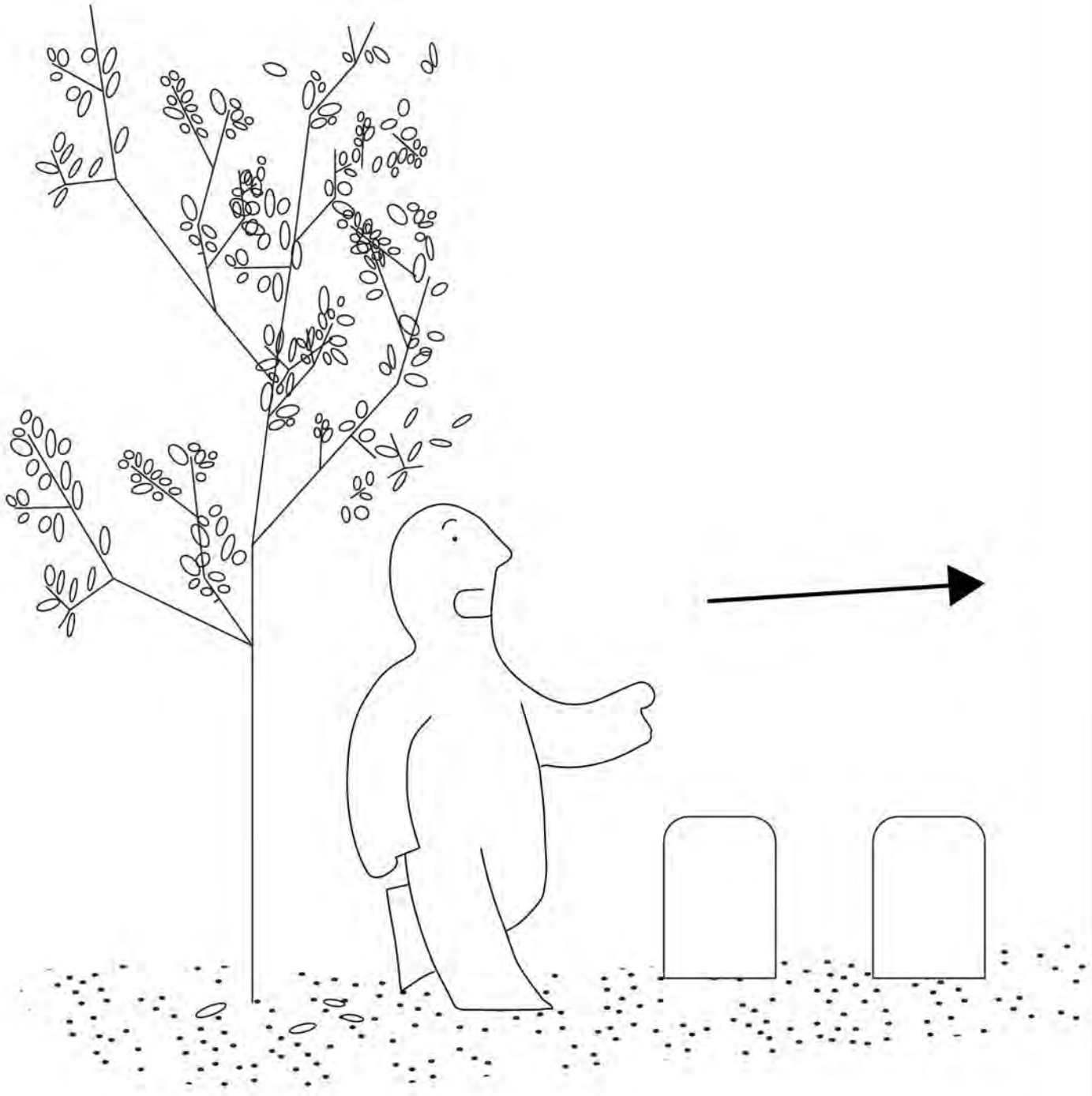
Nuts and Bolts (72 Pieces)

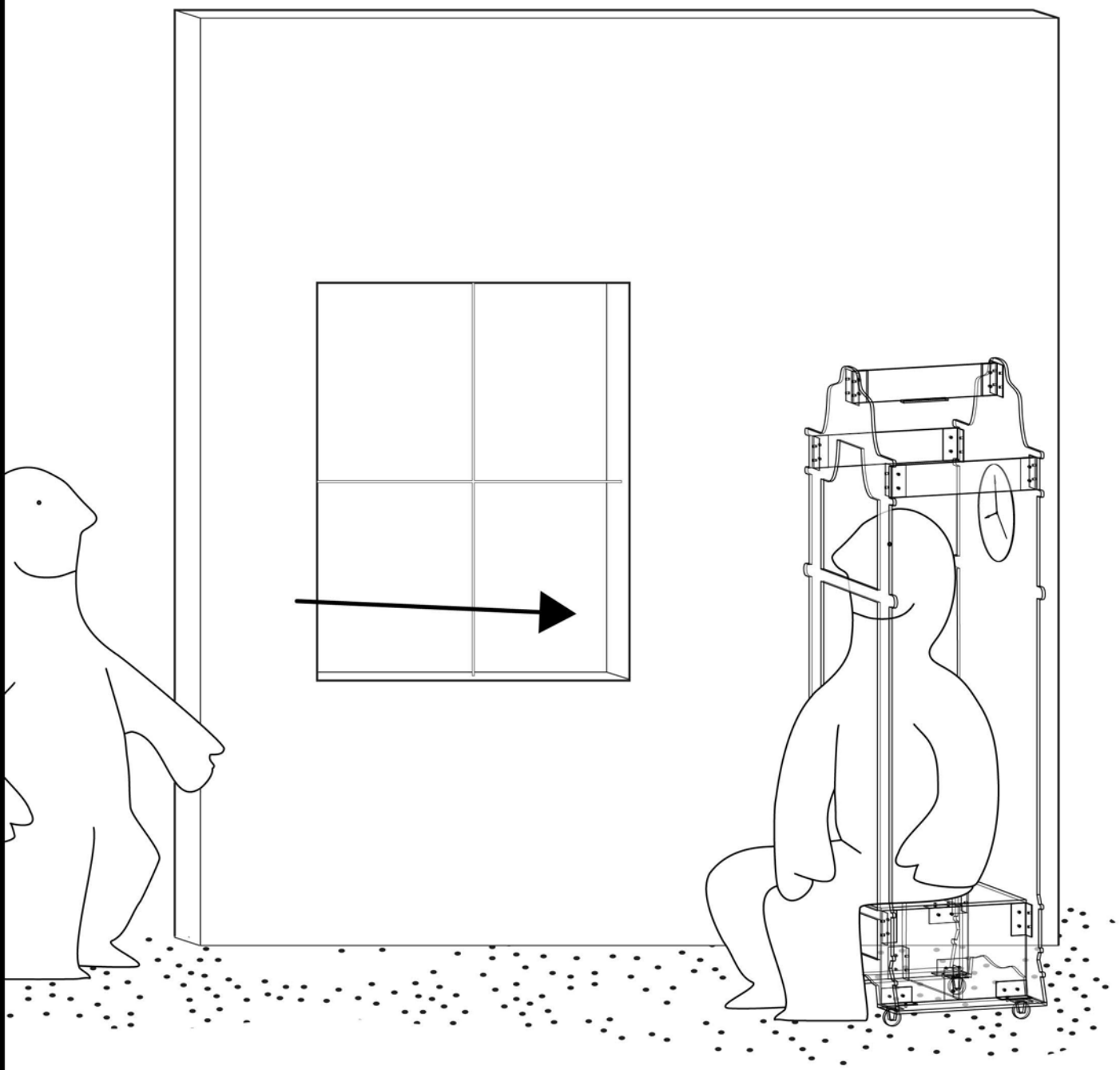
# [Tick Tock] Clock Assembly Guide




1. Attach casters to footers
2. Attach footers to legs
3. Attach legs to web
4. Attach faces to ties
5. Install seat
6. Install clock mechanism
7. Install urn

# How to use “[Tick Tock] Clock”





# BRINGING DEATH TO LIGHT

Directed Research with Marcos Parga and Omar Ali