

## **Memento mori**

**The once taboo subject of death seems to be moving into mainstream conversation, changing the way we view the end of life. From online tributes to eco-funerals, alternative memorials are gaining popularity, and more people are thinking about their final farewells in advance. Let's look at some of the latest developments in the after-life industry.**

As I hold the bright blue aluminium and steel sphere, I have to remind myself that I am not in a contemporary art gallery or design shop – at least not in a traditional sense. I am in the atelier of Thomas Schär, alias "cosmicball", director and producer of URNE.CH, and the object I have in my hands is a funeral urn.

“The urns are more than simple containers,” says cosmicball, as he shows me his collection. “They are objects of remembrance as well as an expression of a particular attitude to life. People buying these urns are interested in art; they are urban, cosmopolitan and open-minded.”

Cosmicball Thomas Schär came up with the idea for his handmade urns in 1996, after coming home from Art Basel and, by chance, spying some particularly unattractive urns in an undertaker's shop window. “I joked with my colleague, ‘Could you imagine ending up like this?’ Traditional urn design is frightening, boring or tasteless, and doesn't express the time we live in.”

Schär's urns range from his signature Cosmicball spheres, and cubes fashioned out of pear tree wood, to ceramic forms with bold designs – all of which can be personalised with engravings of names, dates, or the coordinates of ashes. Prices start at SFr 240 for hand-size stainless steel containers, while the largest and most intricate designs sell for thousands. According to cosmicball, “The urns appeal to everyone who is looking for an individual, unique and dignified way to tend the memory and spirit of a loved one.”

### **Contemporary attitudes**

While cosmicball's product may be unique, his modern approach to remembrance is part of a worldwide trend: more and more people are taking an active interest in contemporary funeral planning and legacy management, both for their loved ones and themselves.

The demographic realities of an ageing population, combined with people's increased environmental awareness and technological capabilities, has created a market of sophisticated, educated consumers who are interested in exploring funeral options that are more in line with their modern beliefs and lifestyles.

Thankfully, most residents of Switzerland won't have to confront their own until quite late in life (the United Nations ranks Switzerland fourth in the world for average life expectancy – its inhabitants live for longer than people in any other country in continental Europe), but that isn't stopping a growing number of people from planning ahead and exploring some more unusual options.

Cemeteries are traditional resting places, but space in Switzerland is at a premium: After a number of years (as specified by the particular canton), relatives of the deceased are required to clear away the gravestone, so the plot can be re-used. Other land use concerns – including those from environmental groups who contend that casket burial contaminates water and soil – have led people to seek out more eco-friendly alternatives, including cremation.

Cremation in Switzerland dates back to 1889, when the first crematorium (the third such facility in Europe) was built, and today it is a popular alternative to burial: The Swiss opt to be cremated 75 per cent of the time. Families must then decide what to do with the ashes. (...)

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**More information**

Contemporary funeral urns by cosmicball Thomas Schär: [www.urne.ch](http://www.urne.ch)