



PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

The Morgue: Aesthetics of the Space and Thanato-Aesthetics of the Bodies

Kattamreddy Ananth Rupesh^{1,*}

¹*Assistant Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Andhra Medical College, Maharanieta, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh 530002*

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Mortuaries are often associated with dark, mysterious, ominous spaces, akin to dungeons, and evoke strong negative emotions in common people. The mere mention of a morgue or the sight of a dead body can trigger feelings of fear, aversion, and disgust, prompting a deep-seated instinct to recoil. This reaction is common across cultures, reflecting a universal discomfort with death and the spaces where the deceased are kept. In fact, discussing the idea of writing an article on this subject with peers and friends from different backgrounds has been a challenging experience for me. I have encountered significant resistance and scepticism, which has often made these conversations difficult.

In the Indian context, as forensic pathologists, our primary focus may not usually be on the aesthetics of the morgue or how bodies are presented for viewing. The design of a morgue typically falls under the expertise of architects, while the presentation of deceased bodies lies within the realm of thanato-aesthetics, often handled by funeral directors or funeral service providers (Such services are professionally organized in Western countries, whereas in our country, they exist in an informal or unorganized manner). However, as the custodians of facilities where public services are provided during times of grief and crisis, we play an essential role in maintaining an environment that respects both the deceased and their families. In many cases, relatives spend long hours in morgues, waiting for the release of the mortal remains of their departed family members. Nonetheless, we are responsible for ensuring that even dismembered or mutilated bodies are cosmetically presented with dignity.

*Corresponding Author: KA Rupesh
Email: ananth.kattam@gmail.com

The design and aesthetics of the morgue are important not only to prevent burnout and vicarious traumatization among those of us who work there but also to provide a space that supports the bereaved in reflecting on their memories and coping with their loss. In this context, attention to aesthetic details in morgue design and body presentation becomes a matter of importance for both the service providers and the grieving families.

Although there is some information available on the functional design of morgues [1], there is scant to no discourse on the aesthetics of morgue premises. A modern morgue typically includes a reception and intake area, body storage area, autopsy suite, virtual autopsy suite, toxicology and histopathology labs, viewing room, decontamination room, central reception and waiting area etc. While most areas in a morgue are seamlessly connected, access to certain spaces is restricted for the public. Staff often have designated areas, and there are sometimes separate entry and exit points for deceased bodies and relatives. [2]

Thanato-aesthetics is not merely about the beauty of the morgue or the proper presentation of the deceased for viewing; it is primarily about helping families confront the reality of their loss and fostering a sense of harmony amidst the ongoing crisis.

The aesthetics of space is about the design elements that make a physical environment visually appealing and comfortable to experience. It involves the way a space looks and feels, including the arrangement of furniture, choice of colours, lighting, textures, and materials, all of which drive together to create a certain atmosphere or mood. In the context of a morgue, the aesthetics of space are essential

not only for functionality but also for creating a respectful and calming environment for both staff and visitors.

To begin with, incorporating natural light wherever possible helps create a soothing and less oppressive environment. In places such as viewing rooms or waiting rooms, windows or skylights can lighten the mood of the next of kin (Despite handling large crowds and heavy caseloads at every center, this scenario can be organized more efficiently.) In areas where natural light is not possible, the use of warm, yellowish, or amber-hued adjustable lighting can make the space feel more inviting and less clinical. Similarly, all body-viewing spaces should feel open and impeccably connected to the larger environment. They should never be enclosing or isolating. In fact, the experience of viewing a dead body in a closed space intensifies emotions and may make the experience more overwhelming than it could be. The design needs to allow for openness and flow, creating a calm and less confining space that offers a better balance without intimidation for those coming to pay their respects.

Colours such as greens, peach, soft blues, and neutral tones tend to facilitate a relaxed and quiet environment [3]. These colours prove particularly effective in areas where families stay, such as while waiting or viewing. For functional areas, like the autopsy suite, light and clean tints such as white or pale grey are used often to emphasize cleanliness and ambience appeal.

A morgue should make use of heavy-duty but compelling materials that are easy to clean and maintain, such as stainless steel and ceramic tiles. Modern alternatives for morgues include epoxy resin flooring for seamless, durable surfaces; antimicrobial-coated stainless

steel for enhanced hygiene; and advanced composite panels for walls, combining ease of cleaning with durability and resistance to stains or chemicals. However, in non-clinical areas, textures like wood or fabric can create a warm and comforting atmosphere. Also, smooth, non-porous surfaces would not only be hygienic but also assure an orderly and neat appearance that is important in both functional and aesthetic terms.

Seating comfortably in the waiting areas and viewing rooms helps minimize the stress levels of the mourners. The design needs to provide for privacy and/or intimacy when needed, yet it should allow for an easy movement/navigation in order not to confuse and cause stressful situations for both staff and visitors. In addition, soundproofing is a common concern in morgues as the cascading effect of wailing heightens distressful moments. This quiet and peaceful ambiance is achieved through the use of sound-absorbing materials in the design, especially for family areas. A good acoustic design will also maintain privacy; thus, conversations in consultation rooms remain confidential and private.

A calm atmosphere can be created using art that reflects peace, nature, or abstract forms, especially in waiting areas and viewing rooms. Minimal decoration helps maintain a respectful and serene environment, avoiding clutter or distractions. Clear, logical pathways and proper zoning ensure the clinical and functional areas are distinct from spaces designed for visitors, preserving an appropriate atmosphere in each. The morgue's aesthetics should balance functionality with a calming environment that supports both staff and visiting families.

The *thanato-aesthetics* of the corpse refers to how the dead body has been treated, preserved, and presented, with a focus on both its appearance and its symbolic meaning. Embalming is one form of a thanatoaesthetic that is well known to all of us, yet there are many more advanced restorative techniques, such as tissue fillers, wax reconstruction, and airbrushing, enabling a *living* appearance to the *liminal* corpse. Thanatopraxy and postmortem cosmetology have evolved themselves as new branches in the field of death industry which are more concerned about presenting the corpse for viewing purposes while embalming is classically something associated with preservation [4].

Although the corpse has sometimes been viewed with abjection in various cultures and throughout history, it has never been regarded as something that does not deserve attention, especially in civilized societies [5]. Historically speaking, from ancient Egypt, where elaborate mummification processes were developed to preserve the body for the afterlife, to early embalming practices in other cultures, the way we treat the deceased has always been tied to beliefs about life, death, and the soul. These practices were not just about keeping the body intact, but also about making it look dignified or serene, reflecting the cultural importance placed on the body even after death.

In modern times, embalming has evolved with advanced techniques that aim to maintain a natural and peaceful appearance, markedly in funeral practices. The appearance of the body at a funeral can offer solace to the grieving, providing a sense of closure or a final moment of connection with the deceased. Thus, the corpse serves as the *aesthetic therapeutic* [4].

In conclusion, the aesthetics of morgue spaces and the bodies within them serve profound purposes. A thoughtful design of a mortuary fosters a calming environment, mitigating if not totally alleviating the trauma for both visitors and staff. Meanwhile, respectful and dignified body presentation honours the deceased and aids families in actualising their loss. These elements are not merely functional but deeply symbolic, bridging the gap between the practicalities of postmortem care and the emotional needs of the living. By embracing these principles, morgues in India can transform into spaces that uphold dignity, support grieving processes, and reflect the cultural importance of death and remembrance.

Statements and Declarations

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they do not have conflict of interest.

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