

# From McFunerals to Meaningful Farewells



How to transform what  
customers accept into  
what they really want

The Transformation Architects

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## Executive summary

When crematorium group Pontes faced their largest ever capital investment, CEO Tom Wustenberghs, refused to simply upgrade facilities. Instead, he partnered with The Transformation Architects to reimagine death care from first principles.

Their systematic approach created innovative funeral formats. Two out of three customers preferred these over traditional ceremonies. This validated a method that breaks *the orange juice problem*, where entire industries deliver what's operationally convenient rather than what customers actually need.

This case shows how any industry can achieve transformation by combining deep human insight, global innovation scanning, and evidence-based experience design.

TOM WUSTENBERGHS,  
CEO, PONTES O.V.



Dying is not a medical event.

And it's not an AI event.

Dying is a human experience.

# Discovering what customers really want

## The Orange Juice Problem

"Will we spend the next 40 years doing exactly what we've been doing for the past 40?"

When faced with making the company's largest ever investment in a new farewell centre for Antwerp, Tom Wustenberghs, CEO of crematorium group Pontes, felt it was time to move beyond the tired music, bad videos and uninspiring traditionalism of his industry.

It wasn't a reasoned conclusion. It was the felt belief of an industry professional who knew in his heart: we're doing this wrong. And he recognised that the window to make genuine change wouldn't stay open forever.

The data seemed to contradict him. Net Promoter Scores consistently hit above 80%. Customer satisfaction surveys gave positive reviews.

Yet Tom sensed his industry had become complacent, delivering the same standardised ceremonies without imagination. While the metrics looked good, he felt people deserved more than routine farewells during life's most profound moments.

Tom had been exploring a radical idea. What if death care could learn from immersive experience design? What if we crafted farewells with the same sophistication as the world's most moving museums, theatres, and sacred spaces?

He wasn't looking for more evidence that something was broken. He, and those he spoke to, already knew that intuitively. What was missing was a credible alternative. He had the industry credentials and the budget approval to make things happen. What he lacked was the experience design expertise to translate that vision into reality.

## The Article That Changed Everything

For months, Tom had been looking for ways to combine human experience, immersive technology, ritual and design innovation. Then one of his team members stumbled across an article about reimagining death care by Transformation Architect Alain Thys, who had been exploring how immersive experience design principles could transform traditional industries. Here was someone asking the same uncomfortable questions Tom had been wrestling with, but with the experiential background to answer them.

Tom reached out for coffee.

## The Symphony Moment

Hours later, in Tom's Antwerp office, the conversation was still going.

"This is remarkable," Tom said, leaning back in his chair. "We aren't just singing from the same hymn sheet; we're writing the same symphony."

Alain had spent the past two years investigating ways to transform the funeral experience, exploring immersive technologies and having deep conversations with close to 100 griever across Europe and North America. What had started as a professional project had become a personal interest. Death gets under your skin.

Along the way, he had discovered that Gen X, a generation which would soon control €77 billion in annual funeral expenditure, had radically different expectations than what the industry provided. His findings validated Tom's instincts: the funeral industry was systematically delivering the wrong thing to the wrong generation at the wrong time.

But their collaboration would go deeper than research validation. As they were talking, a vision emerged of approaching death care like immersive experience designers. Combining cutting-edge technology with deep human insights and ancient ritual wisdom.

The goal: to deliver what humans really need, not what the industry was optimised to deliver.

## Breaking the Orange Juice Problem

When you know an entire industry is solving the wrong problem, how do you build the alternative? The first step is to confront what Alain called "the orange juice problem."

"Imagine you're a Coca-Cola drinker", he explained, "and you walk into a cafe that only serves Pepsi. Rather than finding another cafe, you order orange juice instead."

When a researcher asks about your satisfaction afterwards, Did you like the orange juice? Was the service good? you confirm everything was fine. The orange juice was good orange juice. The researcher leaves happy. The cafe thinks they've done well.

But everyone ignores that you never wanted orange juice. You wanted Coca-Cola."

When saying goodbye to loved ones, the problem is identical. Faced with emotional and logistical overwhelm, families lack the creative energy to challenge what's put in front of them. They accept what's offered. When asked later, they rate it satisfactory, partly because it met basic requirements, partly because no one wants the additional emotional pain of saying "actually, I wanted something completely different."

When pressed on this, one griever captured the disconnect perfectly. In spite of her earlier high satisfaction scores, at some point she sighed with the realisation: "He had such a rich life, which got reduced to a bad-quality video and a few songs on a crappy sound system."

## The Moonshot

Tom had the vision. Alain's team had the expertise. Together, they possessed something that somehow had never come together: the opportunity, capability, and budget to transform one of life's most profound moments into a meaningful, immersive experience. At scale.

So after a few more conversations, they decided on something bold: to reimagine death care not as a process, a McFuneral, but as a meaningful human experience delivering what griever actually need.

And because the new crematorium would be Pontes' largest capital investment to date, the outcome didn't just need to be visionary and humane. It had to be right first time.

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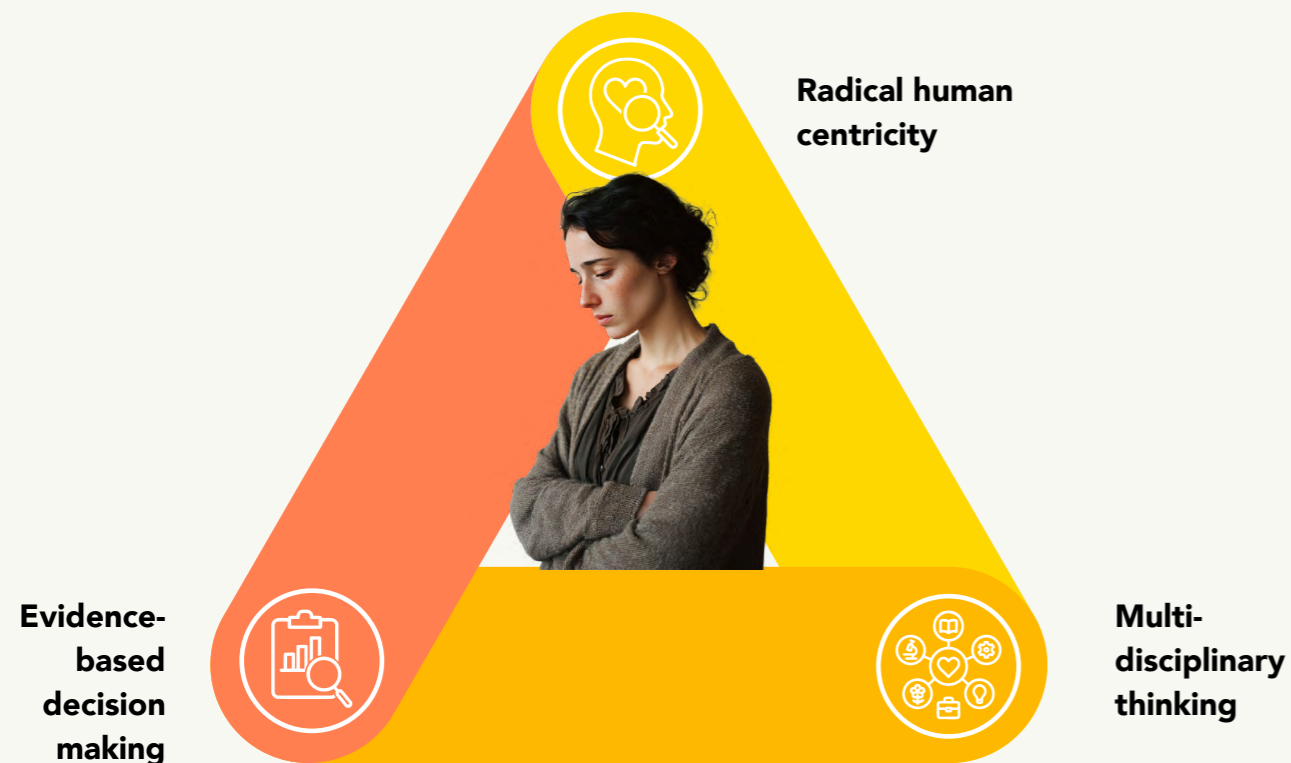
### **Mission: Impossible**

Going off the beaten path means introducing new methods. After all, by doing more of the same, you can't get a different result. So, it was clear that the experience design for the new crematorium would require a radically different approach.

In view of the financial stakes and Pontes' social responsibility, the outcome didn't just need to be visionary and humane. It had to be right first time and built to last for decades.

This meant that the usual route of adopting and improving industry best practices would fail to deliver. Because incrementally improving what's wrong doesn't necessarily build what's right.

**Illustration 1: A Different Lens for Every Decision**  
When the stakes are human, method matters.



### Three principles would guide every decision:

**Radical human-centricity:** Not simply interviewing or surveying griever, but diving deep into their pain through in-person conversations, anthropological observation, and online ethnography.

**Evidence-based decision making:** Opinion, expertise, and orthodoxy were declared inadmissible. Every choice and decision had to be based on customer research, science or experimentation.

**Multi-disciplinary thinking:** Moving into uncharted territory means no single expert has all the knowledge. The team would need scientists, ritual experts, business professionals, death care practitioners, researchers and others.

## Assembling the Impossible Team

Tom and Alain, through The Transformation Architects, assembled a team unlike any that had tackled this challenge: ethnographers, anthropologists, a ritual designer, a neuroscientist, an immersive theatre producer, experience designers, a data scientist, a next-generation undertaker, an experience economy expert, a futurist, an art curator, and a transformation specialist.

It wasn't just an impressive roster; it was the deepest bench ever assembled for a death care transformation.

Each expert was recruited not for availability, but for being among the best in their field, with a maverick streak that allowed them to venture off the beaten path and do what was necessary instead of what was safe.

They gave the team an impossible brief: *Combine 3,000-year-old ritual wisdom with cutting-edge neuroscience, scales from intimate gatherings to large celebrations, works across all cultures and beliefs, reduces complicated grief, and generates sustainable business returns.*

The brief wasn't just commercially ambitious; it carried human weight. Everyone realised that the work they would produce would have a tremendous human impact. For better, or for worse.

So, after digesting this reality for a moment, they went to work.

## A Clean Sheet

With the impossible brief accepted, Tom and Alain faced a new reality: assembling the world's best wasn't enough. These experts would need to work in ways they'd never worked before, on a timeline that left no room for do-overs.

This meant approaching the unknown from three different angles.

### Track 1: Shifting the Frame

While it was clear people didn't want McFunerals, it wasn't necessarily obvious what they wanted instead. Yet how do you research a topic so heavy that people may not have the words to talk about? And when they do speak, how do you ensure they don't revert to socially acceptable answers? Or frame their responses within the worldview they know, unfamiliar with alternative possibilities?





As a response, Trybes, a member of The Transformation Architects ecosystem, deployed a multi-method insight approach led by their proprietary *Taboo Topics Protocol*, a method designed to break through the social silences that surround death.

Anthropologists interviewed Gen X grievors and funeral operators, using projective techniques and immersive facilitation to reach what standard interviews couldn't: the emotions people didn't know how to express, or felt they shouldn't share.

It confirmed earlier instincts: The orange juice problem was real and widespread.

Trybes' insights revealed that while most people accepted standardised 45-minute ceremonies in generic venues, what they actually needed was customisation, storytelling, emotional resonance, and the ability to be seen in their grief. These findings weren't anecdotal; they were pattern-based, repeatable, and later reinforced through quantitative testing.

Beyond direct interviews, Trybes also launched a *Cultural Opinion Leaders* programme to extend the lens. This included:

- » mapping the digital behaviours of 65 death-related subcultures and trend communities (ranging from 1,000 to 2.8 million members)
- » identifying ten culturally relevant figures across the death care journey. From funeral operators to death doulas, grief counsellors, celebrants, religious leaders and hospice professionals
- » expanding the research to include Gen Z and Millennial consumers.

The resulting insights combined the voices of families, professionals, and cultural edge-thinkers. They exposed blind spots, challenged design assumptions and surfaced business model flaws the industry took for granted.

Some of the findings were painful to hear. But they made the disconnect impossible to ignore.

What families received was not what they needed. And the only way to close the gap, was fundamental change.

## Track 2: Hunting the Future

Meanwhile, The Transformation Architects' futurist Henry Coutinho-Mason pursued a different question: if better death care already existed somewhere in the world, where was it?

A global scan revealed that the future of death care wasn't missing; it was scattered across 50+ countries. From British natural burial sites to Japanese digital temples, from Māori community-centred farewells to Mexican Día de Muertos celebrations. Each offered pieces of what human-centred death care could become.

But lessons could also be learned beyond death care. From hospitality innovations creating profound emotional connections, museum experiences that transformed visitors' relationships with memory and meaning, theatre productions that helped audiences process loss and transition. Even some advertising campaigns featured.

The result was a carefully curated *Book of Inspiration* containing 150+ practices that proved better approaches already existed somewhere in the world. Each practice was selected not for novelty, but for human impact and validated against the outcomes of the Trybes' research.

### Track 3: Intuitive Exploration

For the third track, they embraced what couldn't be quantified. While customer insight and market foresight research gave the project its intellectual structure, the team knew real transformation wouldn't come from reports alone. They wouldn't change their deeply held beliefs through information alone. Change comes through experience.

So they stepped out of the analytic and into the intuitive. They didn't just talk progressive undertakers, immersive theatre directors, or VR experts. They stepped into their worlds.

The team attended immersive installations. Spoke with people building new forms of ritual. Walked through projection environments. Visited death-positive gatherings. Even sat in the audience at *Abba Voyage*, to feel what it means to celebrate lives through technology.

These weren't random inspirations. They were intentional provocations. If the industry was going to create new forms of farewell, it had to move beyond rational planning and into emotionally resonant design.

While the track didn't deliver frameworks or diagrams, this intuitive exploration revealed something crucial. The future of death care already existed in fragments across experiences and industries. What was missing was someone to bring it together.

### The Convergence

As the tracks progressed, they began reinforcing each other. Trybes' research revealed needs that Henry's global scan had found solutions for. The intuitive exploration provided context for why some innovations worked, while others didn't.

"At the start, I thought I knew what the new experience should be," Alain later admitted. "But as the insights came in, I realised I was designing from my own instincts, what I would want, not what people actually needed. The evidence changed everything. It turned me at least 90 degrees."

Tom and Alain realised they weren't just gathering research. They were building the foundation for something genuinely different.

I'd love to leave a message to my  
children in the future.

# Designing what doesn't exist

Customer insights, market foresight and intuition may be enlightening, yet they don't make an immersive experience. This requires a vision where interior designers, architects, ritual makers, content creators, technology providers, and funeral directors work as one team towards a common vision.

Yet such a cooperation comes with risk. With the best of intentions, vendors interpret according to their discipline. Compromises are made to fit the budget. And eventually, something that began with bold intentions becomes just another incremental improvement.

Better than before, yet not really what was required.

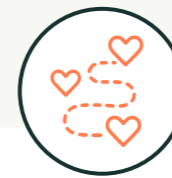
## The Pontes experience guide

To avoid this, tom asked the transformation architects to create the *pontes experience guide*: a strategic narrative and experience brief that would act as the emotional, operational and philosophical spine of the new development, providing creative direction and serving as a practical touchstone for all decision-making.

## Crafting the guide

The guide emerged through multiple collaborative streams:

Illustration 2: four pillars of experience design



**Emotional journey mapping:** working with emotion-driven experience design strategist Pigalle Tavakkoli, the team created a customer journey that moved beyond traditional observation to capture the emotional state at every stage of farewell and the underlying experience required.



**Ritual innovation:** ritual designer Tiu De Haan contributed fresh approaches to farewell rituals, whilst also creating a radically new perspective on resomation (water cremation).



**Immersive design principles:** immersive creator and producer Sheena Patel reviewed best practices in immersive theatre and experience design, helping to apply this thinking to funerals.



**Neuroaesthetic guidance:** neuroaesthetics expert Katherine Templar-Lewis advised on how building designs and environments could transform a typically sorrowful experience into one offering meaning and comfort.



### Resonance abounds

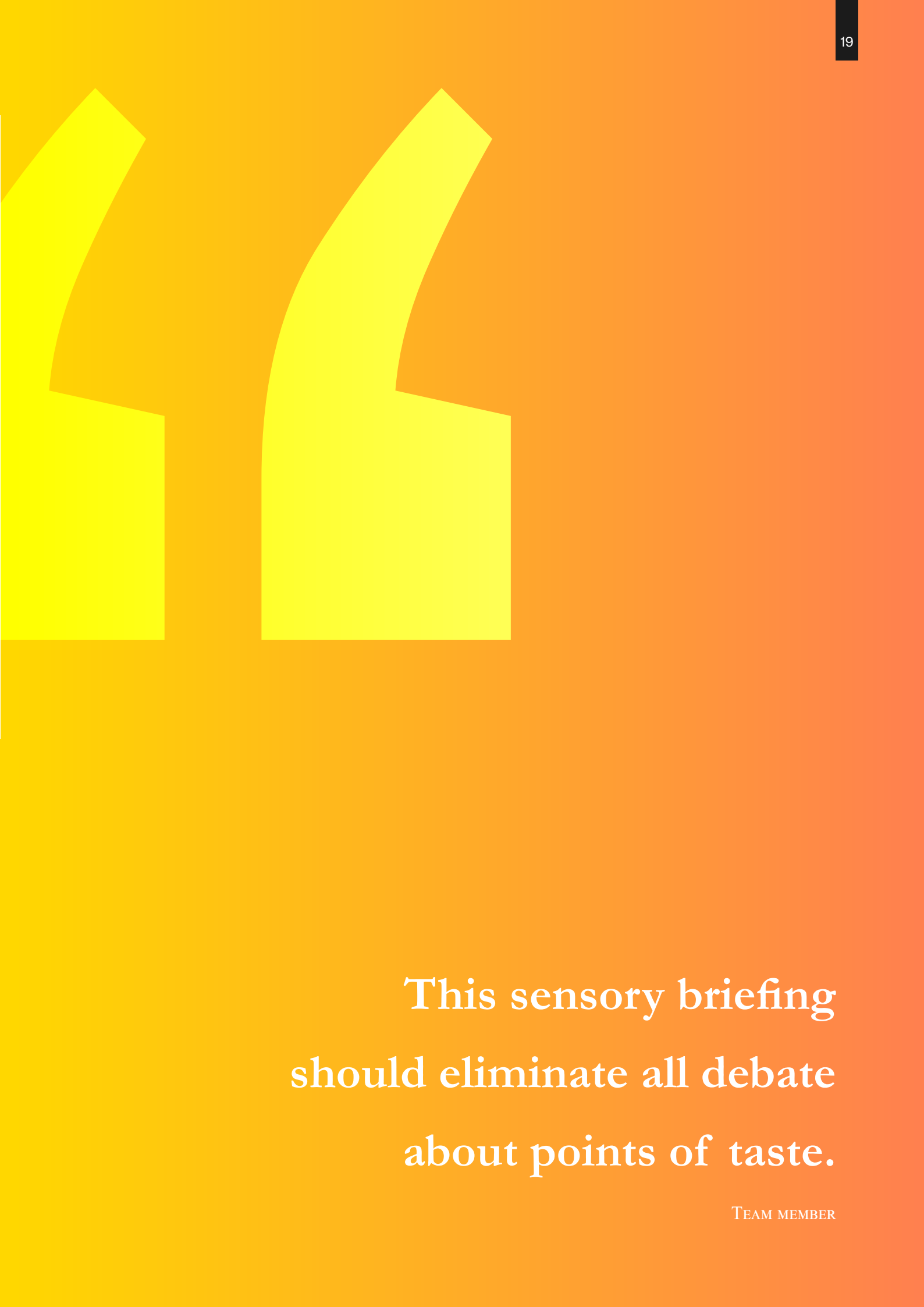
Alessia Clusini and her team at Trybes validated all elements through a highly representative quantitative survey of 250 respondents, stress-testing three farewell concepts and mapping willingness-to-pay, experience drivers, and unmet needs.

The resonance was remarkable: while one in three respondents still favoured traditional funeral options, 66% preferred the two innovative funeral formats that had been designed. The market appetite was equally compelling, with almost a third of respondents willing to pay premium rates of up to €750 for the new formats.

When researchers walked respondents through variations of these concepts, the response demonstrated universal resonance. The most common question wasn't, *would this work?* but *am I allowed to do this?* It revealed how the industry had conditioned people to accept limitations rather than possibilities.

This validation, combined with additional operational, practical, financial and other considerations, resulted in a 180-page document detailing the journey, space requirements, ritual elements, operational parameters, technology stack and design parameters for the future Pontes Experience.

Yet, as Tom and Alain discovered, even this comprehensive guide wasn't sufficient.



This sensory briefing  
should eliminate all debate  
about points of taste.

## The Sensory Briefing

When presenting the Experience Guide to the team of technology providers, project managers, architects and interior experts who would work on the new building, there was broad cohesion and understanding, yet a critical oversight was highlighted by one of the project partners.

“It’s really good work,” he said, “yet it also feels a little like an inkblot test. Each of us can still have our own interpretation of what it means. So the sum of our work may not add up to what you are imagining.”

The concern was confirmed by first conversations.

### Two critical decisions

So Tom hit the brakes and made two decisions:

- » **The first** was the creation of an additional 80-page Sensory Experience briefing, in which Alain worked with neuroscientist Katherine Templar-Lewis, immersive expert Sheena Patel, and experience designer Nancy Duncan to describe in exhaustive detail how every part of the new experience and building should look, feel, smell and sound.

Not based on opinion, but rooted in neuroaesthetic knowledge and human psychology. No stone, plant, pond, moment or surface was left unturned. Tom and Pontes’ Strategy Officer Johan Van Dooren helped

ensure the experience-led ambition remained grounded, offering ongoing guidance on what would be feasible in practice.

- » **The second** was a radical departure from the traditional crematorium construction process, where architects created a building, interior decorators furnished it, and technology providers augmented it. Instead, he implemented a process where an integrated project manager ensured all stakeholders were experience-led and collaborated as one multi-disciplinary team from concept through to operational design.

By doing this, Tom directly addressed the problem that traditional infrastructure projects often drift in interpretation as each discipline (architecture, design, service, operations) defaults to its own language. By anchoring every stakeholder to a unified emotional and sensory brief, this project reversed that dynamic.

As one recipient described it: “probably the most extensive briefing ever.” Another added, “this should eliminate all debate about points of taste.” Comments that weren’t intended as compliments, but as signs of alignment.

By being this explicit, the brief eliminated ambiguity. While creative friction still occurred, it provided a platform for cohesion that most projects can only aspire to.

Secularisation and the decline in church attendance will lead funeral enterprises to take up the new role of the church, where one will need to focus on meaning, spirituality, and community building.

## WHAT COMES NEXT

### From Vision, to Blueprint in Motion

On 20th June 2025, fifteen months after the first exploratory email, Tom and Alain found themselves in the Pontes meeting room for the formal handover of The Transformation Architects' final briefings. These had been further enhanced by workspace advisor UpSpace and project management agency BoPro, and were now passed to the immersive experience agency and architectural firm tasked with turning the vision into a built form.

What began as a question - *Can we do this differently?* - had become a shared conviction, supported by artefacts, methodologies, and multi-disciplinary processes. The next team now carries the design forward toward an opening in 2028.

Yet as the physical space enters development, the intellectual and emotional space expands in parallel.

### Celebrations Beyond Farewell

Tom's team has already begun exploring new applications for the Pontes spaces. Sparring with Alain and Transformation Architect and artistic director Dorothy Di Stefano, they're looking at opportunities for seasonal events, art installations, and community programmes that celebrate moments in life beyond death. For reflection, for meaning, and simply for fun.

After all, if death teaches us one thing, it is that life is for living.



Imagine a sacred garden where  
the water from resomation  
nourishes trees. That liquid was  
your father. Now it feeds life.

# Are your customers settling for “orange juice”?

Do your customers really want what you're offering, or are they just accepting what's available?

Transformation is possible for every industry, even death care. Our approach allows you to reimagine the customer value you offer for the next 4 to 40 years, by creating experiences that are more memorable, meaningful, and even transformative.

**We call it transformative experience design.**

## THE ORANGE JUICE PROBLEM IS EVERYWHERE

Every industry has practices that prioritise operational convenience over the customer's real needs.

- » **Healthcare** focuses on curing patients, while there's a desperate need for healing
- » **Education** focuses on teaching, while students need learning
- » **Accounting** focuses on compliance and numbers, while clients want financial growth
- » **Hospitality** delivers services, while travellers seek authentic experiences
- » **Retail** optimises transactions, while shoppers want discovery and personal expression

Meanwhile, no one seems look after the epidemics of loneliness, workplace stress, or infantilisation of the elderly.

## HOW TO GET IT RIGHT FOR YOUR INDUSTRY



### The outcome?

New profit. New meaning. In a way your competitors won't see coming.

## FOR DEATH CARE OPERATORS

**A year of research and development proves families want more meaningful farewells.** The question is whether you'll lead this transformation or watch competitors capture the €77 billion Gen X market shift.

### We support in four ways:



**Experience Touch-up** - Enhance what you have



**Build from Meaning** - Design from scratch



**Refurbish with Resonance** - Upgrade with meaning



**Ars Moriendi Executive Network** - Join us on [www.arsmoriendix.com](http://www.arsmoriendix.com)

# Shall we do this?

## Are you ready to deliver what your customers really want next?

Whether you're in death care or another field, we help reimagine customer value, your business and your industry.

Let's stop optimising for yesterday and start creating tomorrow.

Get in touch with our founder, Alain Thys:



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## Meet the team

Tom Wustenberghs, General Manager, Pontes <https://tinyurl.com/4thtb5nb>

Ruben De Nijs, former Policy Officer, Pontes

Johan Van Dooren, Strategy Officer, Pontes - <https://tinyurl.com/yudt4tr2>

## The Transformation Architects (in order of joining the project)

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Alessia Clusini, CEO Trybes - <https://tinyurl.com/yc424nkt>

Henry Coutinho-Mason, Futurist - <https://tinyurl.com/5dnrph5s>

Katherine Templar-Lewis, Neuroaesthetics Expert - <https://tinyurl.com/2uysjs7z>

Pigalle Tavakkoli, Experience Design Strategist - <https://tinyurl.com/37vzpmck>

Tiu de Haan, Ritual Designer - <https://tinyurl.com/bdfhhrsw>

Joe Pine, Experience Economy Expert - <https://tinyurl.com/ythz47fr>

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## Special thanks for contributions from

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Poppy Mardall, Founder & Chair at Poppy's - <https://tinyurl.com/3da5nyvp>

## As well as the research team

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Shirin Dias, Anthropologist - <https://tinyurl.com/bdhw96y2>

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Nadia Ivanova, Consumer recruiting strategist - <https://tinyurl.com/49mzufvd>

Prabhjot Singh, Survey design strategist



It is one of the most challenging  
and exciting trips I undertook in  
my career, but I hope our findings  
will help inspire transformation  
across our industry.

TOM WUSTENBERGHS

CEO, PONTES O.V.

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# The Transformation Architects

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