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Thalman Mausoleum

The Mausoleum was built for Ernst Thalman and his family by an architect named Ferdinand Prochazka in 1912 upon Ernst's death. The lot is owned by Ernst Thalman's wife, Anna Thalman, and his two sons Edward Ernst and Paul Ernst Thalman, who are all resting in the mausoleum, along with Paul's wife, Ruby Marshall Thalman, their adopted daughters, Margaret Thalman and Rene Baisier, and Clifford C. Cavanaugh, the husband of Margaret's sister Catherine.

Ernst Thalman was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1851, into a prominent merchant family. (Figure 1) He moved to the United States in 1867 in the age of sixteen and entered banking business shortly after his arrival.¹ He lived and died at his residence, 150 Central Park South. In 1876, he founded an investment banking firm called Ladenburg, Thalman & Co. with another German investment banker Adolph Ladenburg, and joined the Stock Exchange in 1879. Formerly located in the Broad Exchange Building, his firm was not only involved in international banking affairs between the United States and Europe, especially Germany, it was also known to have financed the growth of American industry, including railways, utilities, and various other emerging industries at the time. It was also the bank that Albert Einstein chose to invest 75% of his Nobel Prize money in. The firm still exists as Ladenburg Thalman Financial Services Inc.

With their extensive wealth, the Thalmans built a monumental structure on a rather predominant oval shaped lot located on a hillside. (Figure 2) The mausoleum is primarily approached from the front. Walking along Spruce Avenue, the mausoleum does not appear until you turn at the last corner. Even when approaching from its back from Golden Rod Avenue, the picturesque landscaping of the rocks and the cedar trees leads the viewer to the front, reinforcing the frontality of the monument. As soon as you turn the corner, a massive monolithic temple-like structure appears. The pronounced interplay of light and shadow created by the bright color of smooth Mt. Airy granite and the columns and recessed wall of the portico adds a sense of solemnity

¹ John W. Leonard, *History of the City of New York, 1609-1909*, (New York: The Journal of commerce and commercial bulletin, 1910), 531.

to the monument.

The structure is proportionally square and symmetrical in its form with reserved decorative details. (Figure 3) The front façade is tightly framed by the stepped roof, slightly tapered massive pillars on each side, and the steps leading towards the entrance level. The front portico is supported by four simple Doric style columns set in antis, two of which are set into the side walls on each side. These Doric columns with unfluted bottom can be referred back to the temple in Pompeii built in first century A.D.² The spacing of columns for the entrance draws the attention to the center. The verticality of the columns is balanced by series of horizontal lines of the front steps, the roof, and the moldings. The other façades are kept to a minimum. The tapered pillars still frame the façades, but the lack of depth differentiates them from the dramatic effect of the front façade, again, reinforcing the frontality of the building. Moreover, the rugged picturesque quality of the landscape in which the mausoleum is set emphasizes the simplicity of the structure.

The masculine rigidity of the exterior is in contrast to the character of in the interior space. (Figure 4, 5) Under the shallow mosaic arch ceiling, a double sarcophagus is set in the center at the round chapel with marble benches around the chapel, with catacombs on each side of the door. Natural light from three clear windows on each wall is reflected off the white marble surfaces and brightens the interior space. Similar to the exterior, no elaborate decorative details are found. However, sufficient light, curved lines, and quality of material together create “a shine of reflection, with everything symbolical of the sweetness of remembrance of those who have passed away forever,” as Ferdinand Prochazka, the architect, desired.³

The architect Ferdinand Prochazka, from Germany, lived in Westchester, with a young German window designer Carl Otto Flocke and his family.⁴ Although little is known about the architect, he is responsible for designing at least twelve other monuments in Woodlawn, the Thalmann Mausoleum being one of the largest, most of his designs in Woodlawn are smaller-scaled Classical style monuments. In his article on mausoleum construction, Prochazka suggests a number of elements required to create a clean bright space of commemoration, most of which are

² Robert Adam, *Classical Architecture : A Comprehensive Handbook to the Tradition of Classical Style* (New York: Abrams, 1991), 106.

³ Ferdinand Prochazka, “Problems of Mausoleum Construction,” *Architectural Review* (May, 1917), 100.

⁴ *U.S. Census of 1915*.

applied to the Thalmann mausoleum. Aside from the ventilation and drainage system, which are essential to mausoleum design, he strongly believed that the sufficient amount of light should be introduced not only to create a pleasant environment for the visitors but also to enhance the ventilation and temperature. The large clear windows in the Thalmann mausoleum, he claims, are effective in keeping the temperature to a desired degree in which the plants in the jardinières under each window were kept in good condition for three seasons.

Furthermore, the method of construction is a vital part of the mausoleum. According to Prochazka, how various units are put together contributes greatly to how the mausoleum is maintained. He argued, that using relatively larger units of materials and lap joints would make the structure more water-proof, stating that the Thalmann mausoleum is “absolutely safe stone construction, with very little consideration for any preconceived notion of architecture.”⁵ His effort to cover the upright joints is evident in the roof configuration. (Figure 6) However, while the exterior seems relatively intact, the marble surfaces in the interior have suffered from moisture and thermal effect, although further studies are needed to determine the cause of the deterioration. (Figure 7)

In short, the architect’s principal aim in this mausoleum, which lacks any elaborate details, is to create a pleasant and well-maintained place for the deceased and the family to cherish their memory. Although little architectural stylistic details are adapted by the architect, it is safe to say that Thalmann mausoleum’s sheer mass and simple, but elegant details are more than appropriate to commemorate the prominent banker and his family.

⁵ Ferdinand Prochazka, 103.

Appendix



Figure 1 Ernst Thalmann



Figure 2 Aerial view of Woodlawn cemetery

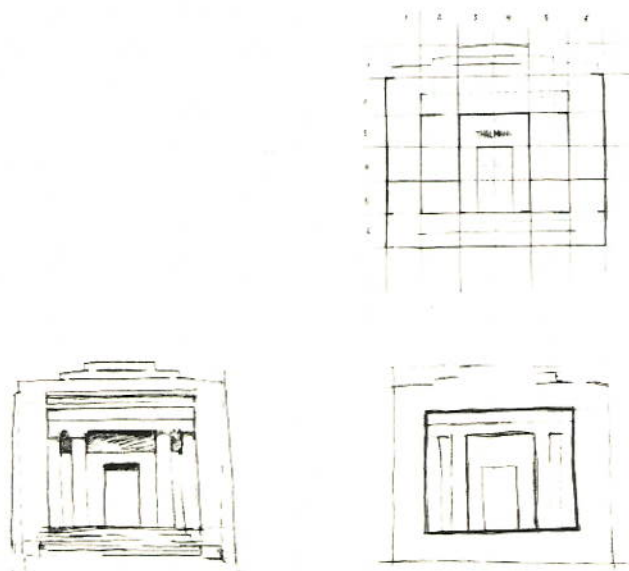


Figure 3 Proportional study sketch

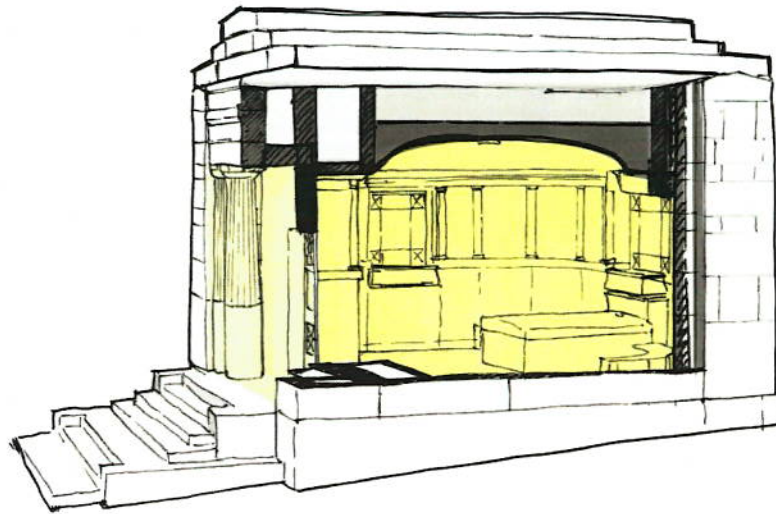


Figure 4 Relationship between Exterior and Interior

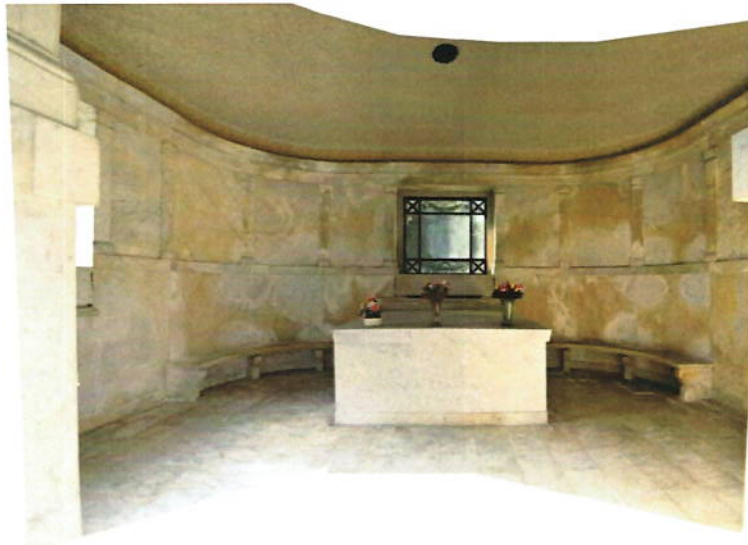


Figure 5 Interior Views



Figure 6 Roof joint detail



Figure 7 Deterioration of marble

