

Documentation and Formal Analysis: Wagner Mausoleum

A Brief History

The mausoleum was built in 1918 for William H. Chesebrough, a prominent New York City developer. Born in 1866, by the age of thirty-four Chesebrough was involved in New York City real estate development. He owned the Battery Place Realty Company with his father, Robert A. Chesebrough, the inventor of Vaseline Petroleum Jelly. The Realty Company was critical in the development of Lower Manhattan as a business center and built many skyscrapers near Battery Park, including the extant Broad Exchange Building (1900) and the Whitehall Building (1904).¹ Chesebrough died on December 3, 1917 at the age of 51; he left an estate worth \$500,000.² His wife, Nanette W. Chesebrough purchased the plot at Woodlawn Cemetery three days after her husband's death; the mausoleum was not constructed until the next year.³ Chesebrough's body was removed in 1932 and placed in another mausoleum; the plot was then sold to Constantin Wagner, Sr. only three days later.⁴

Constantin Wagner, Sr. was a German-born glass manufacturer and real estate developer from the Bronx. He owned the Bronx-based Wagner Glass Works, which manufactured equipment for the dairy industry.⁵ Wagner died in 1955 at the age of eighty-six, twenty-three years after he purchased the Chesebrough mausoleum. Wagner's wife (Dorothy), son (Constantin, Jr.), and daughter-in-law (Thelma) also have catacombs in the mausoleum. Constantin, Jr. carried on his father's real estate business and developed and operated the Art Deco Wagner Building on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx; he died in 1956 at the age of fifty-eight.⁶

The architect of the mausoleum was Edward Necarsulmer, a New York City-based architect practicing as part of the firm Necarsulmer & Lehlbach.⁷ He received an architecture degree from Columbia University and another degree from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.⁸ Necarsulmer primarily designed commercial architecture in New York City, although he also designed several mausoleums at Woodlawn, all of which are similar in overall form and share many of the same details; Necarsulmer worked closely with Adler's Monument and Granite Works, which provided the granite, marble and stone-carving services for the mausoleum.⁹

Formal Analysis

Situated on a plot facing a narrow path running between two streets, the mausoleum is the largest of those immediately surrounding it- several smaller mausoleums and many gravestones are present. Although trees obstruct much of the building, its strong form nevertheless makes a statement. The seventeen-foot tall mausoleum is constructed of an entirely granite (Deer Isle) exterior with a marble (Alabama and Italian) interior. Its form is largely rectangular and was designed in an abstracted Greek Revival style. The front façade has a central entryway with recessed carving around the doorframe; it is crowned by a cornice and pediment. The entry is accessed via three stairs flanked by two large urns. The walls are slightly battered and the flatness of the structure is relieved only by the detail around the door.

The un-polished granite forming the mausoleum's exterior creates a very flat, monotone, yet natural appearance. When combined with the immense size of the stone blocks, the structure takes on a colossal form, especially when compared to its surroundings. A sense of strength, durability and longevity results that in turn emphasizes the mausoleum's purpose- to forever protect those that lay inside. The mausoleum's interior is based largely on the same principles, although interpreted differently. The use of white marble provides an earthly experience, although this time it is varied through the use of three types of marble (Alabama for the catacombs, veined Italian for the walls and ceiling, un-veined Italian for the floor). Although the marble panels are large, the lightness of color and the visually more delicate material provide a calming quality to the space.

Typical of mausoleum design, this structure has a strong central axis leading from the doorway to the window at the rear, flanked by four catacombs. This axis provides a sightline through the building that can be experienced up close and at a distance; the view of the window through the door pulls a visitor into the structure while the interior comes back out via the door. Contrary to many other mausoleums, however, is the presence of a longitudinal axis provided by two additional windows. Theoretically, this axis provides relief from the confined space created by the catacombs, yet the catacomb height is great enough that only a portion of this relief is really felt. Instead, the windows provide light and space while keeping the visitor focused on why he/she has entered the

mausoleum in the first place. The rear, west-facing window receives the light of the setting sun, emphasizing the “end”; the light coming through the door reminds even a passerby that the purpose of the mausoleum is to house the dead.

The structure can be divided into four main forms: the base, body, cornice and pediment. The base raises the structure, elevating the body and providing solidity and strength for what lies above it; the body serves as the crucial element, containing the entrance into the structure, the catacombs, and on three facades the windows allowing light to stream into the structure; the cornice weighs down the structure, protecting what is inside the main space; and the pediment acts to ensure that the mausoleum remains stable and grounded. The forms are so large that they appear to have been dropped in place, not constructed piece by piece. This idea reinforces the straightforwardness of the building: its large form, its simplicity, is what is so striking, once again evoking ideas of heaviness, stability and durability; longevity and eternity not only for the structure itself, but for who remains within it.

A push and pull of the pediment is also evident in the structure. This pediment both weighs the structure down and raises it up- the heaviness of the form keeps the rest of the structure grounded, reinforcing the idea of stability and durability, but the angled roofline culminating in a point (on an otherwise vertical/horizontally-based building) leads the eye upward, adding a sense of verticality to the structure. The vertical molding around the doorway and the slight battering of the walls reinforce this idea of looking upward to the sky, to the heavens, in an otherwise substantial, boxy structure.

Finally, the elevated entrance, accessed by a set of stairs, invokes the idea of a separation between what lies within the mausoleum and what remains outside of it. The stairway acts as a processional space, slowly leading a visitor from the “profane” ground surrounding the structure into the “sacred” space that lies just within the doorway. This visual and physical elevation of the mausoleum connects it to the ancient Greek temples from which it derives its form.

¹ Landmarks Preservation Commission, *The Whitehall Building*, Landmarks Preservation Commission Landmark Designation Report, October 17, 2000.

² "W.H. Chesebrough Left \$500,000," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1917.

³ *Chesebrough Files*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Constantin Wagner Sr.," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1955.

⁶ "Constantin Wagner, Real Estate Man, 58," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1956.

⁷ "Plans," *Chesebrough Files*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University.

⁸ "Edward Necarsulmer," *The AIA Historical Directory of American Architects*.

⁹ "Plans," *Chesebrough Files*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University.

