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Reading Buildings

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Project Three: Woodlawn Cemetery

John A. Harriss MD Mausoleum

The mausoleum of John A. Harriss in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx is a small free-standing building standing 15'-2" high, 18' wide, and 16' deep. A walkway and urns extending 15' make the site 31' deep. Located in the Fairview section of the cemetery, the plot is near the Jerome Avenue gates. The granite mausoleum serves as the final resting place for John Harriss and his first of three wives, Valeria Lamar. The Harriss mausoleum is a classically styled temple-front building with an Ionic colonnade and heavily patinated bronze doors. The death of Harriss' wife in 1916 was the catalyst for the mausoleum, it being commissioned within a couple of days of her death. Harriss himself did not die until 1938.

The condition of the mausoleum is fairly good. There is a great deal of biological growth on the building, oxide discoloration, and some stone deterioration. At some of the joints, expansion is beginning to disfigure the mausoleum structurally. The interior leaks quite a bit, as seen in marble streaking, moderate pooling of water on the floor, and black sludge leaking out of some of the catacombs. A site visit that involved a torrential downpour was somewhat alarming as the rain ran into the building.

A monochromatic Barre granite building, it is punctuated with patinated bronze doors, a window grate, and several small vents. The interior is blue-veined Carrara marble, broken only by the stained glass window and small bronze rosettes on the tablets. The interior floor is granite. Articulation is achieved through geometric massing and details. The colonnade is Ionic with the capitals and fluting that provide visual stimulation through light, shadow, and texture. The doors and the urns carry a dialogue through a Passionflower motif, tying together the two exterior materials and offering coherence.

Designed on a vertical axis, the Harriss mausoleum facade persistently draws the eye upward through long narrow doors with extremely elongated Latin crosses which in turn draw the eye up to the pediment apex with a finial ever drawing the eye heavenward. Columns flanking the door produce verticality and their finials at the base of the pediment achieve the aforementioned skyward momentum. Three columns on the side elevations create the same effect. An absolutely symmetrical building, the geometry is largely rectangular with the triangular pediment and finials to balance and stabilize the structure. Circles appear only in the columns and the urns.

Side elevations reveal the grade and the building articulates its struggle to rise from the earth through a rusticated base. The rear elevation is a marked contrast from the façade with rustication yielding to large blocks of stone, uninterrupted by the columns that the other elevations carry. The columns flank the building at the rear,

but they are not continuous as in the façade. The rear elevation is blocky and muscular, almost vault-like. The columns take on the form of sinews or tendons, tying together the massing of the base and the simple entablature.

A stained glass window that Harriss insisted be appropriate, but no more than \$300.00 betrays the client's thrift obstinately into eternity. Considering the clumsy painting, the huge came, and the absolutely acrid sulphur-methane cloud the Virgin Mary and Jesus are helplessly enveloped in, this is definitely where Harriss cut corners. Fortunately, it is not visible from the outside due to the window grate.

Harriss was trained to be a doctor in Montreal, but never practiced medicine professionally. He was almost infamous through his insistence, as Special Deputy Traffic Commissioner, on myriad motor vehicle traffic schemes. Some we have inherited and seem almost a given, such as traffic signals and one-way streets. Others did not take off, but have fired the imagination for decades. Multi-story highways, draining the East River to reduce traffic congestion by building roadbed in its place, limiting the number of people who could have driver's licenses at any given time to 10,000—were all proposed by Harriss. The abandoned medical career path and traffic zealot would not have yielded much money, so the mausoleum expense puzzled me until I found in my research that he stealthily bought and sold Manhattan real estate, at great profit.

The mausoleum is entirely successful in its mission to present Harriss into perpetuity as learned, civilized, and wealthy. It is dignified without being ostentatious or oversized. The building speaks eloquently of both its classical form and its fortress-like massing. Only on the interior is there any evidence of unfinished business through six empty catacombs (presumably to remain that way) and the stained glass window. I suspect I am one of the very few people to enter the mausoleum in many, many years however, and their secret is safe with me.