

Design Analysis and Biographical Research of James M. Bell Mausoleum



Figure 1: Overall view of mausoleum in its site context

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Oct. 12, 2021 FALL 2021 HP STUDIO I

Design of the Mausoleum

This mausoleum was designed by a famous company called Presbery - Coykendall, located at 198 Broadway in New York City. The mausoleum is named by its owner: James M Bell. The reason why this mausoleum is so unique is that it's full of curved shapes. Its high and polished dome attracted people's attention at first sight. Curved elements are the central part of the design aspect of this mausoleum, and the article will discuss why the curve element runs through the entire building from the following elements.

First, as for the site plan, the location of this mausoleum is unique. Its location is on the edge of a triangular plot and very close to a rounded corner. According to the original map provided by the Woodlawn Cemetery office, the plan of this plot corner is defined perfectly by a circle. It is possible that when the architect saw this site, they wanted to design a building that respected and echoed this particular site. Also, the symmetrical site helped the mausoleum to be in a symmetrical shape as well. The rounded staircase and curved dome fit this round corner site very well.

As we get closer to the mausoleum, people can realize that its primary material is granite. However, different parts of the mausoleum have different textures. At the entrance elevation, the surface of the columns is polished. The staircases and entrance hall eaves just look like ordinary granite stone, which is roughly polished. Still, the bearing wall is made of rusticated granite rock. The rooftop dome is the same as the columns so that people can see a sequence of materiality through different patterns of granite stone.

When people walk around the mausoleum and observe it at a certain distance, they may realize it has more than one layer of eaves. The gradually offset form gives the building a humble attitude towards the nearby nature and visitors who visit passed away relatives.

Looking more closely at the details on the facade of the mausoleum, the bronze ornament on the doors would attract the visitor's eye. The bronze door mainly consists of three parts of the decoration. The upper part has a lion head in the middle of very dense plant leaves. The middle part is door handles surrounded by a ring made by a thick bunch of leaves. The bottom part is the most interesting one. It cleverly blends three letters(J, M, and B, which represent James M Bell) into the graphics, making it a kind of cipher decoration that only belongs to this specific mausoleum. In terms of other details like column capitals, they all represent leaves and fruits in different ways.

Therefore, we could speculate from the design of Bell's mausoleum that the designer Presbery - Coykendall got a lot of inspiration from nature and its nearby environment. The existence of this mausoleum helps to create a new harmonious order in this specific site.

Interior of the Mausoleum

Compared to other mausoleums in the Woodlawn Cemetery, Bell's mausoleum is not a crowded one. There are only two tombs inside of the building. One is for James M Bell, and the other is for his wife: Eva May Bell. According to the Record of Interments of Woodlawn cemetery, he specifically emphasized the graveyard for the exclusive interment of himself and his wife. The tombs and ceilings are made of white marble, but the materials for the wall and floor could not be determined at first. However, the letters between Bell's family and Woodlawn Cemetery in Avery Archive library clearly stated the materials used for the mausoleum. The letter between

Mr. Kennelly Woody and Dudley Clarke, Woodlawn manager, and Bell's cousin, talked about the "theft of bronze ornaments from the mausoleum steps." It shows from the side that these decorative materials are made of bronze.

What's more, another letter from "the Schacht Williams Marble Company" stated that they decided to propose to furnish and deliver the pieces of marble required to repair the interior part of the mausoleum. It also increases the possibility that the material in the interior is made of marble.

Material and Degradation Condition Analysis

The primary material of this mausoleum is granite. However, some parts of ornament elements, such as doors and window railings, are bronze. Therefore, there are three kinds of degradation conditions in terms of these two materials.

As for the granite, the biological growth and washout degradation are pronounced. Especially for the north-facing elevation, washout degradation is a significant problem, and it caused the color of the whole wall to darken a lot. At the same time, biological growth also became severe due to the humid environment created by washout degradation.

Except for some degradation situations, some cracks also occurred on the bottom part of columns. Cracks in the columns will reduce the structural stability of the mausoleum and therefore induce various problems in other parts of the mausoleum. So the cause of the damages should be found as soon as possible to preserve it well.

What's more, some cortical degradation is generally regarded as patina, also found on the doors and windows railings of the mausoleum. In this case, Woodlawn Cemetery would better take action to apply anti-rust paint to these materials soon.

Biographical information of James M. Bell

As the name of this mausoleum suggests, the owner's name is James M Bell. He died on March 19, 1918, and his date of internment was four days after he died. The name of the plot for his mausoleum is called Pansy.

His wife is called Eva May Bell. She died on Nov 15, 1914, which was earlier than James. Because James bought the plot and constructed the mausoleum around 1910, Eva could be buried in this tomb after she died.

According to the interment sheet of Woodlawn Cemetery, they lived at 16 West 83rd Street before they died¹. What's more, quoting from New York City census records in 1905, James and Eva did live in this rowhouse. According to the occupation column, James' job is in wine and liquor, and his wife mainly did some housework.

Considering the location of their apartment was near Central Park West, it's a famous historic district. Quoting from "Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Repor," it was typical for the building in 7-21 West 83rd Street to build rooftop additions for assembly rooms, classrooms, and offices². In this case, it seems that James Bell is very likely to be a wholesaler, and that's why he is so rich that afford such a lovely house and a fancy mausoleum.

¹ *New York City Census, 1905*

² *Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Upper West Side / Central Park West Historic District", 1990*



Figure 2: Overall view of mausoleum in its site context



Figure 3: Side Elevation



Figure 4: Entrance Elevation



Figure 5: Back Elevation