

Mayssa Jallad

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDIO 1 – FALL 2015

PROJECT 3: Field documentation and Visual Analysis

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### The Sonn Mausoleum



*South Façade of the Sonn Mausoleum*

Amidst the many neo-classical mausoleums of the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, the Sonn Mausoleum stands out with its monolithic tapered form, its pointed-arch door and window and its tangent curves. What is the relationship between the architecture of this peculiar Art -

Nouveau mausoleum and its owners? How does one inform the other? How did the Sonns go about building a home for their afterlife? A historical and visual analysis can feed this dialogue between a long-standing building and its long-gone occupants.

### Building Siting



The Sonn Mausoleum sits on the Clover plot, north of the Jerome Avenue entrance to the Woodlawn Cemetery. It is almost located on the crossroad between Filbert Avenue and Fern venue, but does not occupy a corner. Its location is more discreet, subdued by the corner-circle plot of the Robert A. Kennedy Mausoleum. Indeed, reaching it from the entrance through Filbert Avenue, one must curve exaggeratedly around the RAK Mausoleum, contouring half its diameter. The different points of view one can approach it from seem to emphasize its enclosure. The optimal view remains the frontal one, as the site plan shows: the facade was purposefully setback from the northern site limit (almost as deeply at the mausoleum itself)<sup>1</sup>. This is to provide space for the rounded steps at the entrance and to allow for the view of a

<sup>1</sup> The rest of the façades are surrounded by other mausoleums and monuments. The East facade has the second most comfortable view, as RAK's plot draws a full and comfortable circle. The West view is obstructed by a few high tombstones. The least favorable to view as a whole (but in my opinion a very interesting one to view in detail) is the South façade, since a neighboring mausoleum is 12 feet away, parallel to it and almost aligning with it.

wider façade from the limit of the plot. How do we explain the owners' choice of a discreet but central plot?

## History

There are four people interred in the Sonn mausoleum. Sidney H. Sonn (June 15 1888-September 25th 1930) occupies the most prominent catacomb directly under the window's marble counter, front and center. Sidney H. Sonn headed the realty and building firm H & S Sonn, Inc. Sidney built the Keith Theater in White Plains and was a director of the People's National Bank there. H & S Sonn established neighborhoods such as Sunny Ridge, Lake View Manor, Sun Haven and other Westchester properties. He was a native of New York, lived at 635 Park Avenue and had a country home in Harrison, N.Y.

His father Hyman Sonn, who founded the company, died in December 1929, less than a year before Sidney's death. Sidney had then inherited the company and a large amount from his father.<sup>2</sup> When Sidney H. Sonn passed away at only 42 years of age, the papers boasted about the huge fortune about to be shared with his family. The entire will of Sidney was disclosed in articles by the New York Times and the Herald Tribune. It contained specific beneficiaries as well as strict rules for inheritance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times [New York, N.Y.] 26 Sep 1930: 17.

<sup>3</sup> The beneficiaries and conditions to access Mr. Sonn's \$1,443,816 Fortune (today \$20,603,859) were the following: His wife Mildred E. Sonn: If she does not remarry she gets \$25,000 and a \$400,000 trust fund if she continues living at Milson Lodge, and life interest in half the residuary estate. If she remarries she receives a more modest \$50,000 outright and a life income of \$15,000. His three daughters Margaret, Helen and Sidney Sonn: They inherit the other half of the residuary estate, each gets one fourth of her principal at the age of 21 and \$50,000 outright in the event of her marriage before the age of 21. His aunt Miss Florence Childs gets \$7,500. Two employees of H & S Sonn: Joseph Koenigsberg gets \$10,000 and William D. Coen gets \$5,000 if they continue working for the company for at least 3 years. His nurse Miss Margaret Gallagher gets \$5,000. The Federation for

Two years after Sidney's death, Mildred chose to forgo the most profitable deal in her deceased husband's will and remarried to Harry A. Hatry<sup>4</sup>, the Vice president and merchandise director of Bloomingdales (1930-1942) who later became the president of the Jay Thorpe Inc. clothing company (1942-1957). Mildred and Harry both died in 1973 and were cremated. Their urns sit atop of the marble counter, above Sidney H. Sonn's catacomb. <sup>5</sup>

As you enter the mausoleum, the dominance of these three elements, especially the Sidney H. Sonn catacomb, makes you believe this mausoleum was built for him. In reality, the mausoleum was built in 1926, according to the construction documents<sup>6</sup>, a few months after Sidney and Mildred's only son passed away at the age of 4.<sup>7</sup> As discreet as the articles signaling his passing in the newspapers, and starkly contrasting with the headlines at his father's death, Stanley Eaton Sonn occupies the lowest catacomb on the eastern interior wall. The reason for sheltering this mausoleum could be the grief of his parents, who wanted to commemorate their son discretely and who, suddenly stricken with the advance of death envisioned a large resting

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the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies receives \$5,000. From *Sidney H. Sonn Estate Valued At \$1,443,816: Willow of Realty Dealer ...*, New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962); Aug 3, 1932; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune / Herald Tribune pg. 13

<sup>4</sup> Marriage Announcement 4 – No Title, New York Times (1923-Current file); May 6, 1931; ProQuest Historical, Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, pg. 29

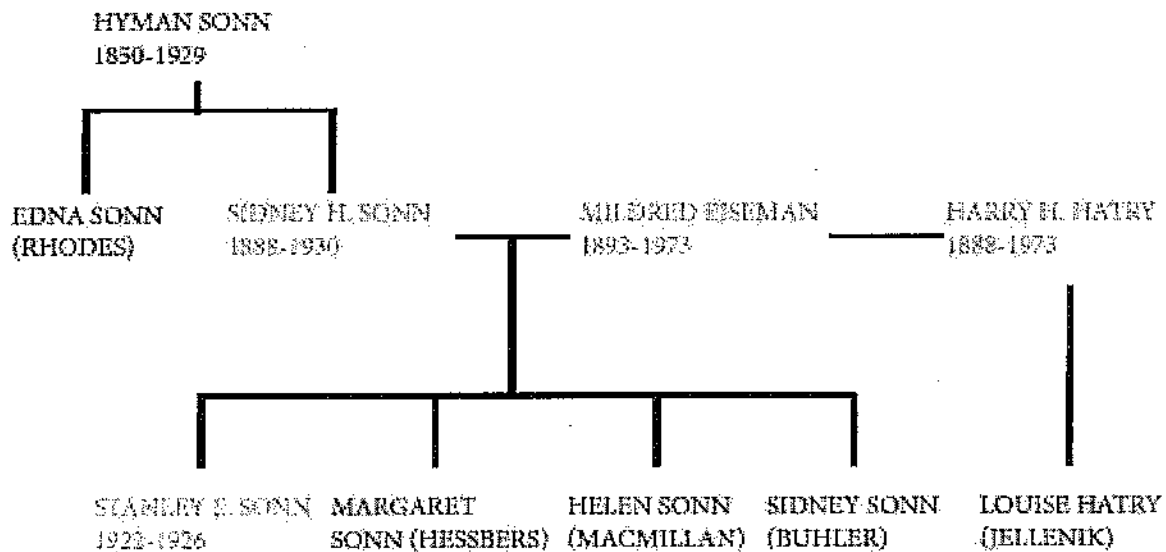
<sup>5</sup> It is not known why Mildred and Harry were not buried in the other catacombs of the mausoleum. But it is interesting to note that they took care of the maintenance of the Mausoleum, as witnessed by the correspondence with Woodlawn Cemetery, as if already intending to rest there.  
From Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Sonn Mausoleum

<sup>6</sup> Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Sonn Mausoleum

<sup>7</sup> The New York Herald, New York Tribune (1924-1926); Apr 13, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune / Herald Tribune pg. 23

place for the whole family to share with him. But the other catacombs today are empty: none of Sidney's 3 daughters occupies them.

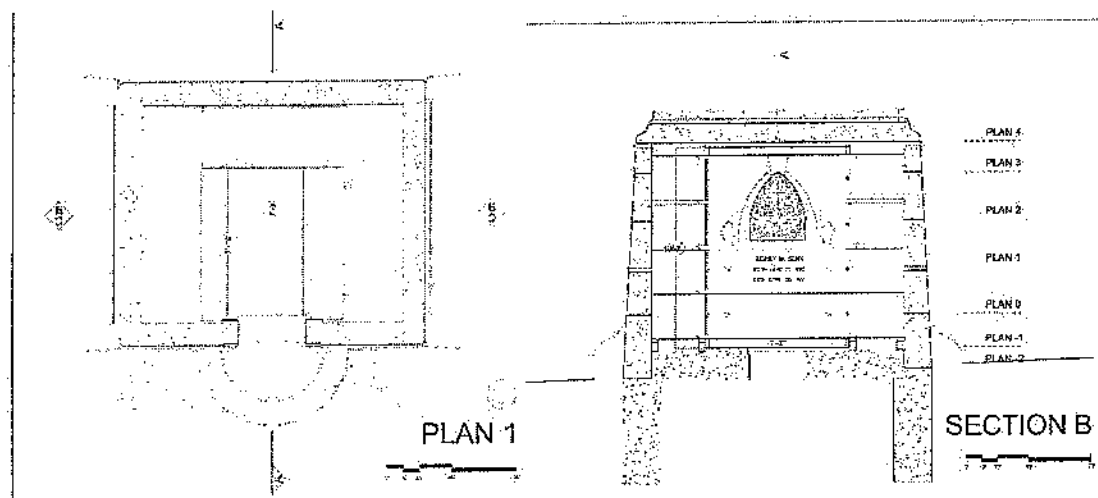
It is also a possibility that this Art-Nouveau contemporary style of mausoleum was chosen particularly because Stanley died too young to be buried in a neo-classical building. Art-Nouveau inspired dynamism and modernity, while a neo-classical mausoleum would have been more appropriate for a more mature death. Were the Sonns expressing their son's youth through the architecture of the mausoleum? We do not know, since there are so few of these Art Nouveau mausoleums to compare with. But we do know they were thinking of it as a common style for the whole family, as the mausoleum is quite large. It will host Stanley H. Sonn only 4 years after his son's death.



*The Sonn's family Tree. In blue, all those interred in the mausoleum.*

## Plan and Section Design

You enter the Sonn Mausoleum by going up two steps and opening the right door panel to the inside. Once you enter, you are surrounded by catacombs on three sides. Your reflex is to go towards the stained glass window in front of you, since its counter gives way to a less enclosed space. But the counter is too high to rest upon and was even difficult to measure. This is purposeful as the counter is meant to bring you light through the window but also cover two catacombs beneath it. The right and left marble walls are actually catacomb drawers to which are attached bronze knobs in the shape of rosettes<sup>8</sup>. Although this might seem to be a large mausoleum its space is mostly taken up by its 10 catacombs. It is meant for short visits by family in an intimate space.

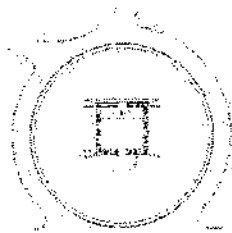


Because the outer walls of this building are tilting by the same angle, the cutting of granite block and the detailing is very precise. It is especially interesting how curved elements on the façade reach flat surfaces, such as at the feet or on the exterior window sill. Discrepancies in

<sup>8</sup> The rosette is detachable and can be replaced by a handle that can carry a small conical vase for flowers. These vases are only positioned at the Sidney H. Sonn and Stanley Eaton Sonn catacombs.

block cutting can surely ruin the design and the use of expensive and large blocks of granite, as the original specifications document indicates, could be very costly in case of mistakes.

The plan is symmetrical in the north-south axis but non symmetrical in the east-west axis due to the provision of catacombs on the interior north façade (one of which is Sidney H. Sonn's) and also accounting for the difference between the north exterior façade (with door) and south exterior façade (with window). It is mostly a compact and closed monolithic mausoleum. The sources of light are in the north-south axis, which lets in indirect sunlight through the door to the north and direct sunlight from the south around mid-day.



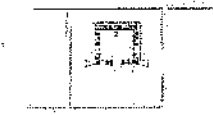
HOLME: 1/1 OCCUPANT



SONN: 4/10 OCCUPANTS



LANG: 4/8 OCCUPANTS +2 UG



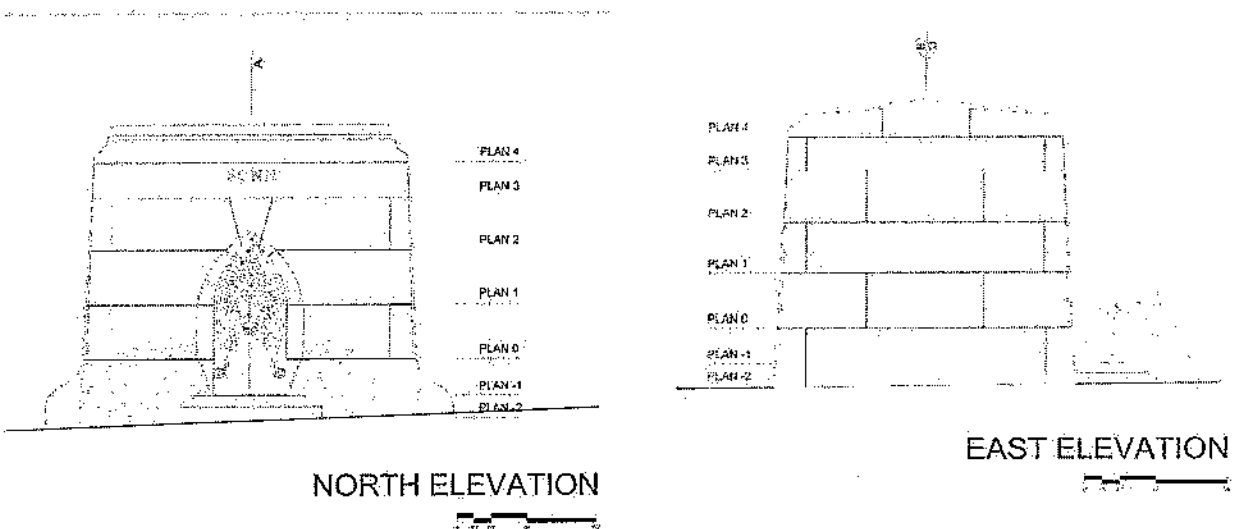
DYOTTE: 2/2 OCCUPANTS

*Plan comparison between the similar mausoleums at Woodlawn Cemetery*

Compared to the other buildings of its type at Woodlawn Cemetery, the plan of the Sonn Mausoleum is larger and has more space for catacombs. In terms of openings it follows the example of the Holme Mausoleum and is then followed by the Lang Mausoleum. This could mean that "Adler's"<sup>9</sup> the construction company for Sonn adapted the design of the Holme Mausoleum to fit the Sonn's needs: more space for more family. Little did the Sonns know that theirs would be the largest and least occupied of this type in Woodlawn. More will be discussed about the curious case of the Art-Nouveau Mausoleums of Woodlawn in the Design Precedents and antecedents section.

<sup>9</sup>Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Sonn Mausoleum

# Façade Design



The main design principles of the façade is symmetry based on a vertical axis that passes through the middle of each facade. The few exceptions to this symmetry include the “feet” which are the curvy pieces of granite that meet the sloping floor at the edges of the North and South facades, the 1<sup>st</sup> entrance step that similarly varies in height according to the slope of the terrain and the bronze lettering of SONN, which is independent from the façade’s symmetry.

The principal element of the North and South façades are the door and the window. These two elements are aligned at the center and present similar dimensions, except the window is cut short of course.



The principal element of the East and West facades is the granite itself. Apparent on the roof is a central piece of granite on the roof to prevent water penetration. The granite joints are all aligned with each other every other course, so that only the outer edge of facades are gridded non-orthogonally. You can understand from these blank facades that catacombs are positioned on their interior. The only openings are 8 inch ventilation gaps in the granite, which are covered with a bronze vent on the façade.

Also interesting in these facades are the corners, which are filleted to be able to reach the quadrant of the corner-curve of the roof.



#### *Volumetric Analysis*

#### **Design Precedents and Antecedents**

After careful research, we found out that the Sonn Mausoleum might not be as unique as it might seem. With the help of Susan Olsen and looking at precedent surveys of Historic Preservation students, we've identified 4 similar mausoleums in the cemetery, each built for a different client, in a different time and most strikingly by a different construction company.



*Holme (1916, Harrison Granite Construction Company), Sonn (1926, Adler's Monument and Granite Works), Lang (1930, Memorial Studios), Dyotte (1934, Frank T. Lang) at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx*

Each has its interesting differences: Holme's was built for one occupant and its "feet" are larger than the others'. Sonn is larger in scale, is planted with two bushes at the front and has copper lettering. Lang has a straight (not rounded) window sill. Dyotte's catacombs flank the whole wall opposite to the door, has two rectangular windows, one on each side façade, has rectangular entrance stairs and only has two front "feet". They all have similar pointed arch doors, inclined outer wall, and the "feet", which remain a mystery as to why they exist.

ADAPTATION OF L'ART NOUVEAU TO MAUSOLEUM DESIGN  
 The Art Nouveau style was introduced to the United States by the architect Joseph C. Goodwin in 1906. It was a reaction to the traditional styles of the past and was characterized by its flowing lines and organic forms. The style was particularly popular in the United States during the early 20th century.



*Whitney Mausoleum, 1906. Woodlawn Cemetery, Detroit.*

An early example of an Art-Nouveau style mausoleum in America is the Whitney Mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery, in Detroit. In this early picture from the magazine "Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening"<sup>10</sup>, the "feet" are used to frame a planter. Perhaps this was the initial intention of adding the feet but was misinterpreted as a stylistic element or was found unsound for the structure? Harrison Granite, which built the Whitney Mausoleum in 1906, also built the Holme Mausoleum in Woodlawn in the Bronx, but without incorporating the planter edge.

<sup>10</sup> ADAPTATION OF L'ART NOUVEAU TO MAUSOLEUM DESIGN, Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening (1900-1931); Dec 1, 1906; 16, 10; American Periodicals, pg. 207

Many other differences are observable, such as the stone rustication, the stone flowerpots at the entrance, thicker carved lines for the corner fillet and the recessed granite around the door. The roof might be the most significant difference though, as it is steeper and more pronounced. There are a few of these mausoleums in cemeteries all over the US, and Woodlawn is not the only place where copies of this model have been built. Is it fair to say that the Sonn, Lang and Dyotte mausoleums deliberately copied the Holme Mausoleum? A nationwide survey of these rare Art-Nouveau mausoleums could be an interesting project.

### **Conclusion**

The Sonn Mausoleum was designed to be a large but discreet structure, whose design was copied from an Art-Nouveau "model" in mausoleum design which started 20 years prior to its construction in the United States. Regardless of its non-pursuable copyright breach, its particularities relating to the site and the client's needs resulted in a well-proportioned mausoleum, with perfectly aligned joints, refined granite carved details and an impressive, but non-imposing, scale. If it was copied from the Holme mausoleum, it was definitely done with an upgrade: a higher ceiling, larger space and smaller "feet". Not to say that the building isn't in need of maintenance: the protective glass at the South façade is broken, and the marble ceilings are bending dangerously. Who does the Woodlawn Cemetery reach out to when the families disappear, but the buildings (and their style) are transmittable through generations?

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