

FRANKLIN SIMON  
MAUSOLEUM  
Woodlawn Cemetery



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Entering Woodlawn Cemetery is like passing into another world. One forgets about New York City's chaos and noise and enters in a green, silent atmosphere that inspires peace. Immediately one walks with another pace through streets surrounded with green grass, trees and single white elements of different sizes standing lonely over the landscape.

As one walks through Filbert Avenue one is abstractly enclosed by a series of mausoleums and graves that are in line parallel to the street. Suddenly in front of us appears a tall and bold looking mausoleum, a single focus point that gets bigger as we move forward. From the crossing with Fern Avenue we can finally stand in front of it and read: Franklin Simon.

The white granite mausoleum is presented to the viewer as a heavy compact structure placed symmetrically on the grass plot. Its principal feature is a severe and massive wall that seems to strongly protect an intimate interior. The wall breaks on both sides equally with an angle, letting you see more than one side at once and immediately understand that it must have an octagonal plan.

Austerity is the first impression, since ornament is essential and subtle. The structure is evident in its composition: a base, a wall and a roof, but the encounters of these different parts seem to unite them all in one single and solid element. The wall is cut precisely in the center and frames a small entrance with a simple yet extremely elegant and delicate carving. The stone blocks are carved in a way that suggests continuity between every element and where minimum relief is used essentially for framing or unifying. It is bold and unpretentious. (fig.1)

The structure emerges from the ground with no pavement or encounter between the natural grass and the base of the structure. Only three steps lead us to the double bronze door, which, despite its dense floral motifs, looks like a dark simple and austere door. After passing through a short and low portal the visitor is surrounded by white marble in a clean, simple and high space that accentuates the sense of verticality. Once inside it's easy to understand that indeed, it is an octagonal plan and that the simple and unpretentious exterior is an honest reflection of the interior composition and use. The view is then focused

and divided towards two colorful painted-glass windows, each one on the two diagonal front walls as you enter. They show a colorful landscape in different seasons, with a peaceful river that gets lost in the horizon. Meanwhile, Franklin Simon and part of his family, rest quietly behind the marble walls. (fig.2)

Franklin Simon, known as the merchant of Fifth Avenue, was a visionary and hard working man. He was born in New York on February 7, 1865, and was son of Henri Simon, a cigar maker and Helene Scheler Simon. He started working as a cash boy in Stern Brother's Department store at the age of thirteen and during fifteen years he learned the business of fashion and apparel, and in 1902, he started his own business with his partner Herman Flurschein. Franklin Simon & Co. opened its doors in 414 Fifth Avenue, between 37<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> street which was at the time quite risky, since Fifth Avenue was a residential street with no shops above 34<sup>th</sup> street. Despite peoples' prejudice that his project would be a failure and two years of slow business, Franklin Simon & Co. developed into a successful chain specialty store for woman and children, with the latest designs from Paris at an accessible price. He was considered a passionate merchandising genius with a kind of sixth sense for anticipating what would be fashionable and good business and was also an admired leader among his colleagues and employees. He was a pioneer also in designing attractive store windows and using advertisement as merchandising tools.

Edward Necarsulmer was the architect responsible for the interior and exterior design of many of his stores, including the branch store in Greenwich and the alteration for the main store, which won the Fifth Avenue Association "Best alteration of the year" prize in 1922<sup>1</sup>,

In 1926 Franklin Simon assigned Edward Necarsulmer, associated with Lehlbach, to design his family Mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery. They had previously designed other structures in Woodlawn, most of them also characterized as massive and austere structures, though none with the presence and size that Simon's had.<sup>2</sup>

The architectural design is very simple and compact in its geometry. A series of concentric octagonal polygons that alternate regularly two lengths of sides, form the base and layers of the thick wall that hides the coffins. The form is also repeated on the marble paving and on the roof structure, accentuating the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Necarsulmer biography in The AIA Historical Directory of American Architects. <http://communities.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/Home.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Flurschein in 1915, William Chesebrough in 1917, Vitus Lambert in 1918, Constantin Wagner in 1918 and Martha Buhler in 1924. Inventory of Series II: Mausoleums and monument files, Woodlawn Cemetery Records. Avery Drawings and Archives, Columbia University.

compact and centralized composition (fig.3). Octagonal plans are found in classical Roman buildings such as the Tower of the Winds in Athens and interior rooms in Roman villas among many other types of buildings of varied origins. There are also other examples of classical octagonal plan mausoleums in Woodlawn, but none of them is an evident or definitive reference to Franklin Simon's Mausoleum. However the number eight is a traditional symbol of regeneration, rebirth and transition and in that sense the octagonal plan may be an architectural interpretation for the funerary use of the mausoleum.<sup>3</sup>

The original project was complemented with a landscape design for the plot made by Clifford H. Easton. The design accentuates the axis of symmetry of the mausoleum and the plot, by distributing equally the plants on each side of the granite structure (fig.4). The planting plan considered a mix of low and dense evergreen bushes, with colorful floral plants that blossom in spring, which made the site change throughout the seasons. These low plants seem to cover the base of the structure that makes it look as if this massive and heavy element is floating over delicate plants and flowers. The trees proposed clearly framed the mausoleum highlighting the austerity, formal simplicity and honesty of the architecture. On the other hand, from the rear façade and the sides, the mausoleum was surrounded and protected by plants and trees forming an intimate garden within the plot. Plants and stone were combined in a rational way as a symbolic union between life and death. (fig.5 & 6)

As we see it today, landscape and architecture have a totally different relation. In 1948, after Franklin Simon's death in 1934 and his wife Frances Carroll Simon's death in 1948, their son Arthur, advised by the cemetery director, ordered the removal of the evergreens from the plot because it was badly maintained. From there on, Franklin Simon's Mausoleum is shown essentially alone on its plot, accompanied with a few surviving *Ilex Crenata* bushes scattered on the plot with no evident order nor growth management, a Cedar that hides part of the granite structure, instead of framing it and other Cedars poorly maintained that barely survive on the plot. But the octagonal element is there, standing strongly in its place and acquiring a patina over the years, which reminds us that the stone and Franklin Simon's legacy have survived and will continue surviving the pass of time.

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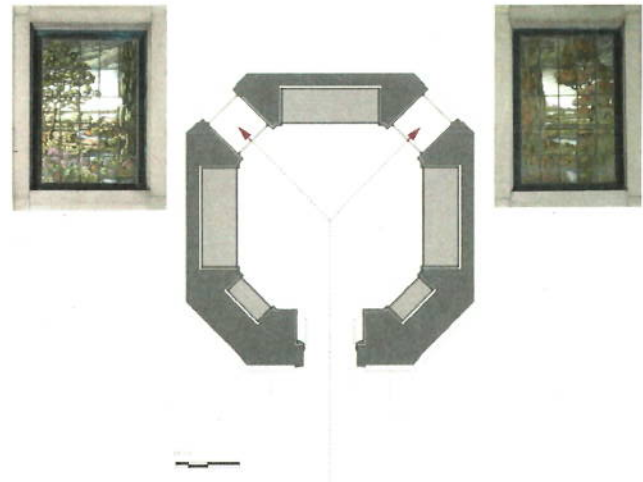
<sup>3</sup> Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*. London : Thames and Hudson, 1978. Page 122

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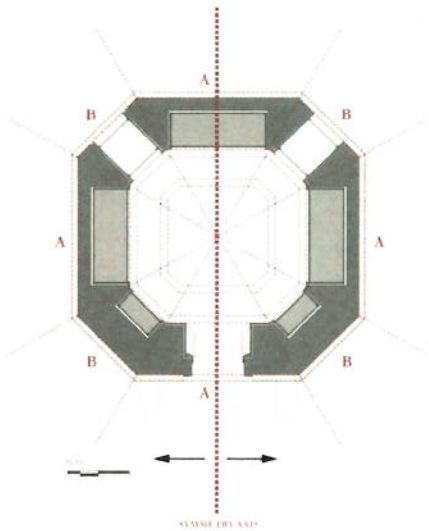
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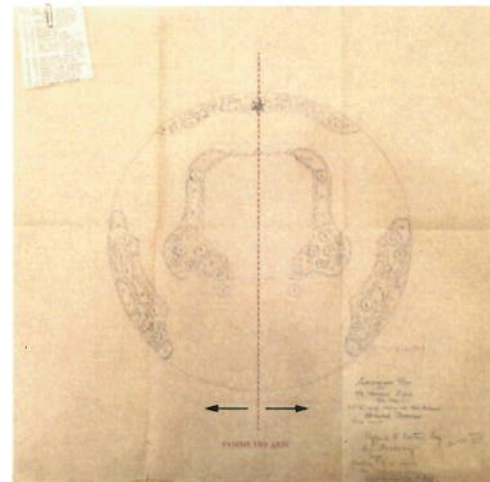
**Fig. 1:** Front elevation



**Fig. 2:** Plan and focus points to painted windows



**Fig. 3:** Symmetry Axis and concentric octagonals



**Fig. 4:** Original planting plan by Clifford H. Easton



**Fig. 5:** Recreation of original landscape Front elevation



**Fig. 6:** Recreation of original landscape. Rear elevation

