

PROBLEM 3: Field Documentation and Visual Analysis
Frederick Gerken's Mausoleum

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WOODLAWN
CEMETERY
WISTARIA

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When choosing my building to measure among a pile of files, I spotted the Gerken's mausoleum and was attracted by its generous look and welcoming benches, which seemed inviting rather than intimidating (Figure 1). Among the historical mausoleums that I have visited in China, there is nothing like it. In my mind, mausoleums have always been solely solemn and awe-inspiring. And yet Mr. Gerken's exhibits, something other than the sublime, an image that is outgoing and friendly.

ABOUT THE OWNER

As a matter of fact, this kind of social and open look resided in the original intention of the builders, and it applied appropriately to its owner, Mr. Fredrick Gerken, who managed to make himself a successful businessman, a public figure and left behind a considerable amount of wealth on Nov. 23 1919, the day he passed away.

As a German immigrant, Mr. Gerken came to New York when he was 14. He first lived in Brooklyn and served as a clerk¹. He then married with Charlotte Gerken and had two children, both of whom died as infant. In 1892, the Gerken's gave birth to a pair of twins, Florence and Frederick, and, four years later, their youngest daughter, Irene, was born.

It was not a long time before Mr. Gerken devoted himself to real estate and the restaurant business. According to the New York Times, he sold a house for 115,000

¹ 1880 census shows Fredrick Gerken came to New York in 1871 and as a clerk, he lived in Brooklyn as a boarder.

in 1895 at the south corner of Madison Avenue and 27th Street². According to the 1900 Census, he had moved to an upper west Manhattan house that accommodated not only his family with three children but also four servants. With his remarkable business acumen, he soon gained public attention in New York. His name frequently appeared in the press in conjunction with his steam yachting, horse-racing ventures. He was instrumental in organizing the Empire City Trotting Association of New York and had been of the best-known amateur drivers of trotting horses³. What is more, his fame could also be ascribed to his real estate investment. In 1896, Harding & Gooch was commissioned by Mr. Gerken to build an eleven-story office building, the Gerken Building, at 90 West Broadway. Later, he built another office building, the Irving building, right across the street. Mr. Gerken, with his family, was increasingly socially involved, as he became the director of building in Deal Beach, New Jersey. As the chairman of the building committee at Deal Beach, Mr. Gerken built a casino in 1907 and presented his youngest daughter, Irene Gerken, at the dedication ceremony, which, no doubt, was an item of note on the local newspapers. The next year, Irene was adopted by the Samuel Clemens, as one of his "granddaughters". And by that time, his family was associated with a relatively wealthy and prominent social circle. Their son, Frederick Gerken, Jr was sent to Yale for education. Apart from his family business, he also turned to writing as an avocation⁴. Also, both of their daughters were married into even more prominent families.

ABOUT THE DESIGN

After his death, his wife, Mrs. Charlotte Gerken, shouldered the responsibility of his interment. At that time, lawn-park cemetery like Woodlawn Cemetery was very popular. Mrs. Gerken authorized collaboration between Woodlawn cemetery and Harrison Granite Company, featuring its professionalism in funeral architectures, to

² December 11th 1895, The New York Times published a passage about Mr. Gerken selling a house for 115,000.

³ Mark Twain Angelfish Roster: <http://www.twainquotes.com/angelfish/angelfish.html>

⁴ November 20, 1951 Obituary in the New York Times

accomplish this job. In fact, back to that time, Harrison Granite Company had just published its catalog of memorials and monuments. And the one Mrs. Gerken chose for her husband is exactly John Butler's mausoleum, the first mausoleum listed, under the title of "Egyptian Style" (Figure 2). Other than the welcoming gesture that the design boasts, the sublime and eternity that Egyptian forms conveyed was also, in my opinion, the reasons for Charlotte's decision.

An interesting factor is that John Butler's mausoleum is also located in Woodlawn Cemetery. Although sharing the same elevation design and layout, the two mausoleums still have many differences. The main difference of these two designs lies in their surroundings. The Butler mausoleum occupies a corner of one plot and is in close contact with 4 roads. This location is a more prominent one compared with a lot that is inside or on the edge of a plot. It is a lot easier for people to spot and admire the design, which then adds to its importance. With circular arms of benches as wings, the Butler mausoleum is inviting them to take a seat and enjoy the view. To make the experience more comfortable, urns and plantings were also integrated into the design of the mausoleum. (Figure 3)

Clearly, Mrs. Gerken aimed at this outgoing character but put it on a totally different lot. Smaller than the Butler lot, the site for Gerken's is on one edge of wisteria, which is a delta. As a result, the mausoleum is facing a road instead of an intersection. The lot is in a shape that was left over from two round lots that sandwiched it, with its boundary curving outside to the front. When taking the first glance at the site plan, one would have the impression that it was placed too close to its rear property line. This situation partly owes to the intention of lining up with the left and right neighbors. On the other hand, the designers were choosing the most suitable position, where the front façade of the mausoleum is located on the narrowest part of the land. With carefully designed landscaping, it is easy to frame an enclosed space in front of the structure and make it control over the land (Figure 4). Though borrowed directly from the catalog, this design goes well with its own surroundings.

An aspect that ensured the quality and status of Woodlawn cemetery is that it required individual architect and the contractor to cooperate with the professional team in Woodlawn so that they would ensure the quality of the individual landscape and the picturesque environment as a whole. And letters were there between the cemetery and Harrison Granite to discuss the exact location to build this structure. These documents serve as an important witness of the effort of those professionals.

Another point that can back up the statement is that the professionals at Woodlawn kept asking Harrison Granite to raise the roof joint to rise up a bit and cap it with lead. Here effort is paid to ensure the duration and maybe maintenance of the mausoleums.

Compare with the imposing looking outside, the inside is pretty modest, featuring no ornamentation. The walls, ceiling and floors are all constructed with pink Tennessee marble. In the wall that facing the door, there is a stain glass window with an image of two angels flying towards the sun. The pinky color along with the bright colored stain glass window presents a warm feeling.

ABOUT THE STYLE

Back to the catalog, where Harrison granite lists this design as the first of the two mausoleums. In fact, Egyptian was then a popular form for funeral architecture. Actually, back to the beginning of the twenties, the Egyptian revival form is sweeping over the continent. And a certain amount of Egyptian mausoleums were built at Woodlawn is around the 1920s, which coincident with the discovery of the temple of Tutankhamun. The Egyptian Revival in America was characterized by many public buildings as well as funeral architecture adopting Egyptian elements. Starting with obelisks and pyramids, Egyptian forms are always sought after for the evocation of the sublime and eternity. In this case, the idea comes from temples and Mastabas from Egypt. The Egyptian motifs are cavetto cornice, battered walls, bell columns capitals and doors decorated with papyrus (Figure 5).

These are characteristics shared by almost every Egyptian style mausoleums in Woodlawn. However, the horizontality is not. If referring to the space structure inside the mausoleum, it would be easy to find that the central bay is wider than most of the examples for the central bay is also designed to arrange coffins. Nonetheless, Egyptian form goes well with this elongated façade (Figure 6). References can be found in original Egyptian architecture as well as the Egyptian revival form in the United States. What is also not shared by most of the mausoleums in the Egyptian revival style is the curved bench-and-urn design, which also contributes to the horizontality of the building. Then if more attention is paid, it is not difficult to find that these elements actually come from the classical language. In fact, a very important aspect of Egyptian revival is that of the “Egyptian motif adding to a classical core”. Here is definitely a good example. The basic form of the mausoleum is similar to classic temple with three bays wide, portico and cella arrangement and in-antis columns. What is more, the curved bench-and-urn is left from the Palladian language to control the site and landscape, and is commonly adopted in classical monuments in the cemetery. In other words, this is a classic design wrapped with the Egyptianisms.

In fact, this design does not stand alone. There are several cases in Woodlawn, where Egyptian mausoleums are framed with benches and urns. What is more interesting is that they all come from Harrison Granite and an individual architect called Frank T. Lang (Figure 7). This situation might serve as a hint that this eclectic design, though not completely classical or Egyptian, is widely accepted for its reasonable combination. Although as an Egyptian Revival building, Mr. Gerken’s mausoleum does not share with others the ornamental characteristics. This austerity is in accordance with the “eternity” of Egyptian form and a pursuit for long lasting mausoleums. As a matter of fact, the wall of the mausoleum is constructed with a whole piece of granite instead of stone combinations.

To conclude, the mausoleum belonging to Mr. Fredrick Gerken is appropriately applied to his figure and his life and well incorporated to the lot. The eclectic style is a precise witness of that period and serves as a vivid history teller with its timeless intention.

Bibliography:

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3. David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991)
4. Richard G. Carrott, *The Egyptian revival : its sources, monuments, and meaning, 1808-1858* (Berkeley : University of California Press, c1978)

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1, Frederick Gerken's Mausoleum

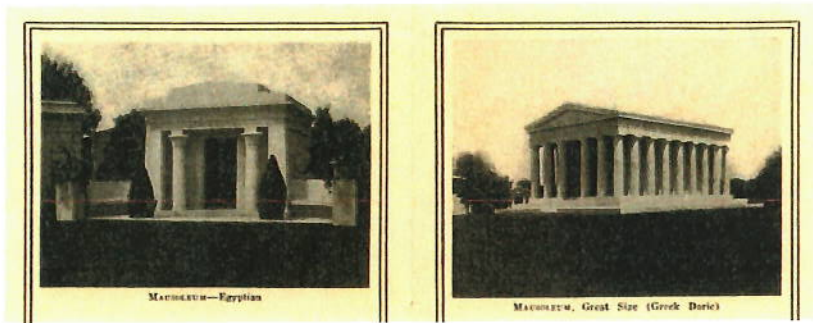


Figure 2, Harrison Granite Catalog

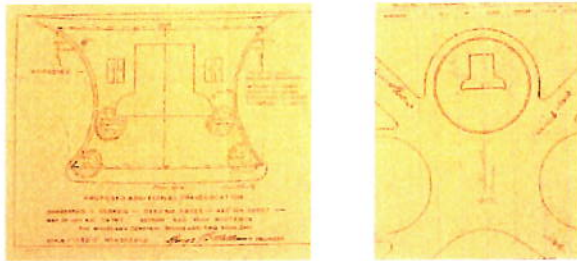


Figure 3, the compare of Gerken's and Butler's

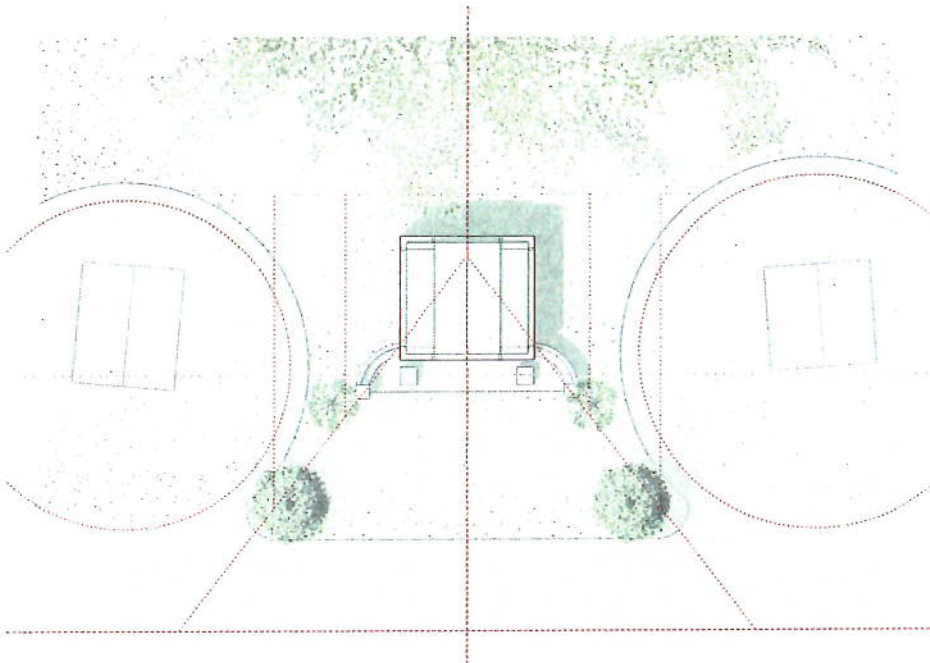


Figure 4, the master-plan design of Gerken Mausoleum



Figure 5, Egyptian Revival appearance

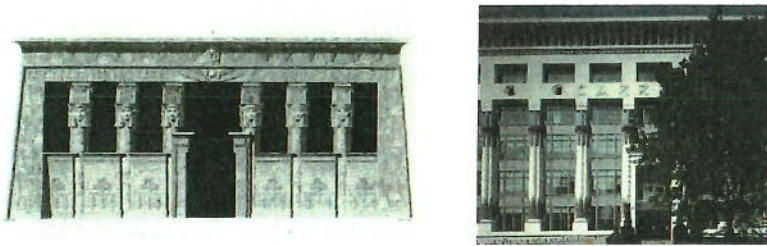


Figure 6, examples of horizontality of Egyptian Revival



Figure 7, examples of other design that share similarity with Gerken's done by Harrison Granite and Frank T. Lang