A4510: HP Studio I: Reading Buildings
Project 3: Field Documentation and Formal Analysis

Matthew J. Kuhnert
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Many trends in the field of memorial design are chronicled in the discipline's major trade journals, such as *American Art in Stone*, *Monument Builder News*, *Monumental News-Review*, and its successor, *Stone in America*. In the decades following the Second World War, numerous articles discussed the principal business challenges that confronted monument makers. One of the industry's greatest concerns was the growing popularity of memorial parks, with their small granite or bronze markers flush to the ground, which, according to one scholar, repudiated longstanding traditions of memorialization—including upright headstones and large family monuments—and rendered the services of monument makers and dealers all but unnecessary. Memorials were also increasingly designed not by architects but by amateur or vocational craftsmen who were employed by quarries or dealers in stone.[1] Responding to this pressure and perceived threats from the growing commercialization of memorial design, William Henry Deacy, Jr., a New York architect, led a small group of designers to found the American Institute of Commemorative Architecture (AICA) in 1951. At the organization's first annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, the assembled membership dedicated itself to the promotion of design excellence and the maintenance of higher standards of craftsmanship within the profession. As they deliberated, the design of one of Mr. Deacy's recent commissions, a mausoleum for Eugene Higgins at Woodlawn Cemetery in New York, was much discussed. In fact, it so impressed the membership that they voted to use the sculpted bas-relief on its façade as the logo for their new organization.[2] This short paper attempts to examine the physical nature of this mausoleum as built in order to determine how it was a suitable model for the standards of design excellence that the AICA aimed to establish.

William Henry Deacy, Jr., was the son of an engineer and was raised in Ossining-on-Hudson, New York. He graduated with a degree in architecture from Columbia University in 1909.[3] After a brief stint as a draftsman for the National Submarine Defense Board during the First World War,[4] by 1919, Deacy was the chief architect for the W.W. Leland Studios, a New York firm that specialized in the design of memorials and funerary monuments.[5] In 1920, the Leland Studios merged with the Presbrey-Coykendall Company to form the Presbrey-Leland Company, Inc., which brought together two former competitors and create one of the nation's largest monument builders. A full-page advertisement in one industry magazine announced that the "paramount policy" of the new company was "the awakening of a national interest in the Cemetery Beautiful,"[6] and also indicated that Deacy was appointed Director of Design for the new enterprise, an opportunity for which he could not have been better suited.

Deacy's career as a designer of commemorative architecture was extremely prolific and he came to design many public memorials in addition to numerous private commissions throughout the United States.[7] During his long tenure at Presbrey-Leland, Deacy taught a course in commemorative art at Columbia University's School of Architecture from 1925-26, and these lectures became the basis for *The Book of Presbrey-Leland Memorials*, a popular and widely-disseminated trade publication that was first printed in 1925 and later re-printed in three further

editions.[8] In this and other books, Deacy attempted to establish principles of design for the building of memorials and monuments and to elevate design standards in a field that he perceived was dominated by craftsmen who were neither academically trained, nor knowledgeable of architectural theory or classical models. He also keenly wished to make good design accessible to a wider and more general audience. Much as Ramsey and Sleeper's *Architectural Graphic Standards* (1932) created a definitive technical reference during a period of great professional transition for architects, Deacy wished to professionalize and establish best (or merely better) practices for the specialty of memorial-making.[9] In the preface to his book *Memorials To-day for To-morrow* (1929), he writes:

> At a glance the trained observer could see that while much laborious effort and often much sincere labor had been spent on cemetery memorials they were for the most part entirely lacking in good taste or the rudiments of architectural design. . . . [T]o my knowledge there has been no volume available . . . which attempts to give the prospective client or patron ideas and suggestions embodying the spirit of symbolism and aesthetic heritage. . . . I seek to give some thought or suggestion to prospective builders that they may be guided in their ultimate decision.[10]

William Deacy's commission for the design of a mausoleum for Eugene Higgins presented an ideal opportunity for the architect to embody his design principles in built form. Eugene Higgins was a wealthy bachelor and bon vivant who was a fixture in New York's affluent circles. Born in 1860, he was the son of Emma Louise and Elias S. Higgins, a prominent carpet manufacturer and inventor. Heir to his father's fortune, Eugene Higgins sold his interest in the family business to the Hartford Carpet Company in 1889 to concentrate his resources in pursuit of various leisure activities.[11] His obituary in *The New York Times* acerbically describes the society pages that this gilded life once graced: "Columns and columns of newspaper space were devoted, before the turn of the century, to the Higgins establishments, his horses, his dogs, and his schemes for entertaining the idle rich."[12] In 1896, Higgins commissioned the Watson shipyard in Glasgow, Scotland, to build for him the fastest—and at $500,000 the most costly—private yacht ever built.[13]

Based upon a survey of federal income tax returns from 1924, one scholar ranks the Higgins fortune among the top 60 of the great industrial fortunes in the United States.[14] This great wealth was further enhanced by shrewd investments in New York real estate that garnered a reputed income of $7,000/day.[15] As befitting a man of great wealth, Eugene Higgins was also a generous, if idiosyncratic, philanthropist and patron of the sciences. In 1921, through the popular journal, *Scientific American*, he offered a prize of $3,000 to the writer of the best essay that could explain Einstein's new theory of relativity "in plain, vernacular language using 3,000 words or less."[16] Upon his death in 1948, Higgins willed the bulk of his $40 million estate for the creation of a trust that would promote the advancement and promotion of scientific research at Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale Universities.[17]

In 1950, one year prior to the first annual meeting of AICA, the Estate of Eugene Higgins set aside $100,000 for the design and construction of the Woodlawn mausoleum for the interment of the deceased philanthropist.[18] With the

commission of the Higgins mausoleum, William Deacy had an architect's dream: ample resources to create a design statement that suited his mind exactly and a client who was dead. The building is located on a small plot on the north side of Whitewood Avenue within New York's grand Woodlawn Cemetery. Set along a modest avenue of private memorials, the building is centered between its neighbors to the east and west, and, like them, is set back 20' from the road and faces south. It is surrounded by careful planting: lush groups of azalea and cypress shrubs frame the main façade and surround the side elevations, while a row of four, tall, specimen yew trees line the northern boundary of the site and shield the building from a public walkway.

The mausoleum is a powerful statement of restrained but monumental classicism in the modern manner. The most important element in its design is its use of materials and scale, and, indeed, it is in the material selection and disposition Deacy hoped to create a work of enduring beauty, private memorialization, and public display. He writes, "[t]he experienced designer so combines his forms and so utilizes his material that the finished result appeals though the eye of the beholder is untrained."[19] The Higgins mausoleum is a load-bearing, trabeated structure comprised of granite, the stones of which hold their face size the full thickness of the wall. For the exterior, Deacy chose Light Barre and Mount Airy White Granite and left very detailed instructions with the builders describing how the blocks were to be pointed, grouted, and finished.[20] Square in plan, the main body of the mausoleum is raised above a low, stepped platform. The building is symmetrical and each façade is framed by massive, battered piers that are articulated by thick pilasters, which can almost be read as engaged, square columns because of how they fold around the corners of the mausoleum. The piers support a thick lintel that spans the full width of the front elevation. Above this is a zone defined by a deep projecting cornice and ogee crown molding. The roof itself is slightly sloped and is stepped back from the cornice to meet the angle of the battered piers that rise from below. "The element of nobility and dignity, in architecture, is best expressed by impressive scale and monolithic construction," the architect explains.[21]

The massiveness of these structural elements provides a powerful sense of monumentality that in contrast with the very human scale of the entry sequence. From Whitewood Avenue, the visitor's eye is, just like the imagination of membership of the AICA was, immediately captured by Albert Wein's stylized bas-relief sculpture of Memory holding her symbolic lamp of remembrance. She is centered in the square created between the piers and the lintel within a circular panel or roundel. The visitor's approach into the building is via a wide, but shallow series of three steps, the top of which is an extension of the platform upon which the mausoleum rests. In effect, the platform literally reaches out into the landscape to elevate and welcome, but not overwhelm, the visitor. The only entrance is through a sculpted bronze and glass portal that is set between the piers and framed by a thick architrave of shallow moldings—and which offers a seductive glimpse of the lavish interior within. Designed by Deacy himself, the door is a remarkable example of finely proportioned craftsmanship. The building specifications indicate that Deacy created "special" full-sized, detail drawings of the door and insisted that "the contractor's working drawings [from which the casts for the bronze would be made] *must be approved* by the architect before proceeding with the work." Deacy also stipulated that "the door must not be duplicated in Woodlawn Cemetery at any time."[22]

In contrast to the square plan of the exterior, an eight-sided room—effectively the square plan of the exterior rotated 45 degrees and with the corners trimmed—comprises the interior of the mausoleum. This shape is evocative of the Tower of the Winds, an octagonal Pentelic marble tower from antiquity that is commonly referenced in funerary architecture.[23] In addition to the plan, the materials used in the interior offer another rich and surprising contrast with the light granite of the exterior: the walls are lined with dark green marble from Vermont, the ceiling is lined with enormous matched sheets of Westland green-veined marble, and the floor is made up of one large piece of highly polished and luxurious Andes black granite.[24] All of the joints are seamlessly matched to the selected materials. Tall, thin windows of yellow art glass puncture the center of the sidewalls—their sills beginning over 6' from the floor. They illuminate the main the sarcophagus of Eugene Higgins, which is carved from pure, white, Rutland marble. Altar-like, the sarcophagus rests on an elevated platform of Aztec black granite and takes the form of a monumental Greek tomb decorated with running bands of anthemion and egg-and-dart molding and crowned by elaborately-worked acanthus leaf-decoration and acroteria.

The progression of movement that Deacy creates does not end when one enters the mausoleum. After contemplating Higgins's tomb, enshrined within the sarcophagus, one's eye is drawn to the empty roundel that is placed above it, which is in direct line with the slit windows on the sidewalls and also with the sculpture of Memory on the front elevation. These four elements—the sculpture of Memory, the two windows, and the empty roundel—all occupy the most important nodes of the building, and, thus complete the architect's formal program. The timeless, human desire for a permanent place for sepulture is linked in Deacy's mind to connotations of hope and resurrection: "The tomb or mausoleum has ever been associated with the resurrection—hope to meet again. . . . Thus, the modern mausoleum represents the experience of countless centuries in construction and it embraces every period of style in design."[25] If one investigates the geometric relationships that inform the proportions of the mausoleum's elevations, one soon realizes that there is a mathematical foundation for where these four elements are found. Deacy lays out a geometric system that is based on the golden section to determine their placement—each element is, in fact, found at the exact center of the golden rectangle that is created by using the dimension of the width of the mausoleum's platform as a base measurement. Connecting these four elements in one horizontal plane, Deacy juxtaposes talismans of memory and remembrance, physical as well as metaphorical illumination, and the empty roundel, perhaps a powerful signifier for the empty tomb found in Christian symbolism—and thus a reminder of the eternal life that may await us after death.

After close examination, it is clear that the physical nature of the Higgins mausoleum is formally organized around a sophisticated design program with a dual intent. On one level, William Henry Deacy, Jr. wished to inspire and elevate visitors to the mausoleum and produce a lasting and monumental legacy for the heirs of Eugene Higgins. At the same time, he also wished to raise the professional standards of memorial design in the United States and create a durable and permanent monument to his vision of and a model for the power of thoughtful architecture. In his

effort to battle encroaching crass commercialism and careless design, William Deacy created an enduring testament to the power and beauty that can be created by a disciplined architectural mind.

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[1] Hamscher, Albert N. "Pictorial Headstones: Business, Culture, and the Expression of Individuality in the Contemporary Cemetery." *Markers* (2006; Vol. 23), p. 6-35.
[2] "AICA Annual Meeting Held at Congress Hotel, Chicago, Ill." *American Art in Stone* (1951, Vol. 51), p. 21-24.
[3] Columbia College Class Book, 1909. CTR F09. University Archives, Columbia University, New York. See also Obituary, "William Deacy, 77, Retired Architect." *The New York Times* (March 7, 1967), p. 41.
[4] Brief mention of Deacy's role in designing camouflage for the war effort can be found in Deacy, Jr., William H. Alumni Federation Cards, Box 9. University Archives, Columbia University, New York. See also, Skerrett, Robert G. "How We Put It Over on the Periscope," *The Rudder*. Vol. 35, No. 3 (March 1919), p. 101.
[5] "Best Cemetery Monuments of the Year," *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening*. Vol. 28, No. 11 (January 1919), p. 243.
[6] "Announcing the Presbrey-Leland Company, Inc., Designers and Workers in Stone," *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening*. Vol. 30, No. 6 (August 1920), p. 207.
[7] A partial listing of important commissions can be found in Bowker, R.R. *American Architects Directory* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects, 1962), p. 158. See also Sprague, Elmer. *Brooklyn Public Monuments: Sculpture for Civic Memory and Urban Pride* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2008), p. 29-30; and Northrup, A. Dale. *Detroit's Woodlawn Cemetery*. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), p. 55, 73.
[8] Presbrey-Leland Studios. *The Book of Presbrey-Leland Memorials* (New York: Presbrey-Leland Studios, 1925). Avery Library, Columbia University has editions printed in 1929, 1932, and 1952.
[9] For a discussion of Ramsey and Sleeper, see Johnston, George Barnett. *Drafting Culture: A Social History of "Architectural Graphic Standards"*. (Boston: MIT Press, 2008).
[10] Deacy, Jr., William Henry. *Memorials To-day for To-Morrow*. (Tate, Georgia: The Georgia Marble Company, 1928), p. x-xi.
[11] "Eugene Higgins Dies." *The Hartford Courant* (June 30, 1948), p. 19.
[12] "Eugene Higgins, Host to Society, Son of Carpet Manufacturer, Once 'Wealthiest Bachelor in New York,' Dies Abroad." *The New York Times* (June 30, 1948), p. 17.
[13] "Eugene Higgins' $500,000 Yacht *Varuna*, Building at Glasgow." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 6, 1896), p. 35.
[14] Dye, Thomas R. and Zeigler, Harmon. *The Irony of Democracy: Am Uncommon Introduction to American Politics*. (Boston: Wadsworth Centage Learning, 2009), p. 61.
[15] "Higgins Fund Provides for Scientific Research." *The Harvard Crimson* (November 9, 1950). It was the liquidation of these vast real estate holdings that provided the equity for Higgins' later bequests. The bond sale of 116 individual lots was widely documented in the newspaper accounts of the time, e.g., see "Wide Bidding Seen for Higgins Bonds." *The New York Times* (May 21, 1949), p. 19 and "Higgins Bond Awarded." *The New York Times* (May 26, 1949), p. 50.
[16] "Explaining Einstein to the Man on the Street." *The Hartford Courant* (May 29, 1921), p. X4. Several of the submitted essays were collected in Bird, J. Malcom. *Einstein's Theories of Relativity and Gravitation* (New York: Scientific American Publishing Company, 1921).
[17] "40,000,000 Science Fund Willed to Four Universities." *The New York Times* (August 21, 1948), p. 1. "Net Higgins Estate Valued at $40,111,999." *The New York Times* (July 15, 1953), p. 13.
[18] Specification sheet. Correspondence file for Eugene Higgins mausoleum. Oct. 6, 1950. Woodlawn Cemetery Records, 2006.009. Avery Architectural Archive and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York.
[19] Deacy, p. 7.
[20] Specifications for a Mausoleum for the Estate of Eugene Higgins, p. 2. Woodlawn Cemetery Records, 2006.009. Avery Architectural Archive and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York.
[21] Deacy, p. 19.
[22] Specifications for a Mausoleum for the Estate of Eugene Higgins, op. cit., p. 3.
[23] Deacy uses Horace Trumbauer's design for a mausoleum for Edward J. Berwind as an example of how to adapt the form of the Tower of the Winds in Presbrey-Leland Studios, p. 7.
[24] Specifications for a Mausoleum for the Estate of Eugene Higgins, op. cit., p. 2.
[25] Deacy, p. 7.