

**ARCHITECTURE FOR ETERNITY:
WOODLAWN RESEARCH PROJECT
COSTER MAUSOLEUM**



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1. Introduction

Architecture has always played a role in both life and death throughout history, taking on various forms across time and cultures. Funerary architecture, in particular, has manifested in diverse expressions around the world. Cemeteries reflect how societies conceptualize the milestone of death in human life. Different religions and cultures have shown us how they understand death and the meanings they assign to it. This has often been closely associated with both landscape and built form. From ephemeral structures to utopian projects like Étienne-Louis Boullée's cenotaph, there has always been an intention to evoke eternity and solemnity in these spaces.

The importance of Woodlawn Cemetery lies in its landscape design. It is laid out in such a way that many mausoleums are positioned in isolation on circular plots of land, resembling islands. This allows individuals to accompany their loved ones in a more private and intimate manner, without needing to enter an enclosed space. It is an open setting that emphasizes the presence of nature and its relationship with the built elements.

This report focuses on the research, documentation, and assessment of damage to the Coster Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery. One of the main challenges encountered was the lack of architectural documentation—such as plans or construction records—which made it difficult to understand structural details or identify the architect responsible for the design.

Nevertheless, this obstacle was seen as an opportunity to emphasize the value of architectural analysis in understanding the mausoleum's form, materiality, and detailing. What spatial and geometric relationships are present? Have similar design operations been executed elsewhere? The forthcoming analysis addresses these questions and more.

As for the individuals buried within the mausoleum, the report will also explore their origins and the motivations behind the construction of a monument that has stood for over 100 years.

2. Woodlawn and its connection to the landscape

Woodlawn Cemetery is a space designed to integrate and highlight the natural landscape in which it is located. The original layout plan was drawn up around 1865 and later modified in 1868 (published by R.E.K Whiting")¹ and this plan largely remains in place today.

The design reflects a particular way of understanding nature and its relationship with the experience of walking through the necropolis. Circular forms define the layout, enabling an open and varied path through the space and offering multiple perspectives. The mausoleums are arranged to be visible from different vantage points, with no visual obstructions between them. Trees serve as the main vertical elements, establishing a natural hierarchy within the space.

Some of the mausoleums inside the cemetery are located in circular areas, which contributes to a sense of isolation and prominence. There is also a lake, and the overall composition evokes an idyllic setting for eternal rest.



Figure 1: Location of the Coster Mausoleum, own elaboration based on de Lionel Pincus and Princess Fyril Map Division, The New York Public Library. "Map of Woodlawn Cemetery." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 28, 2025. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/9b1a0ac0-f948-0130-62cc-58d385a7b928>

¹ Avery Library, Drawings and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery publicado en Sylvan Cemetery. Architecture, Art and landscape at woodlawn. Page 33.

The Coster Mausoleum is located on one of the first plots of land acquired within the cemetery. It has an irregular shape, and its entrance faces east. Set on a generously sized plot, its isolated form and the surrounding trees make it clearly distinguishable within the landscape.

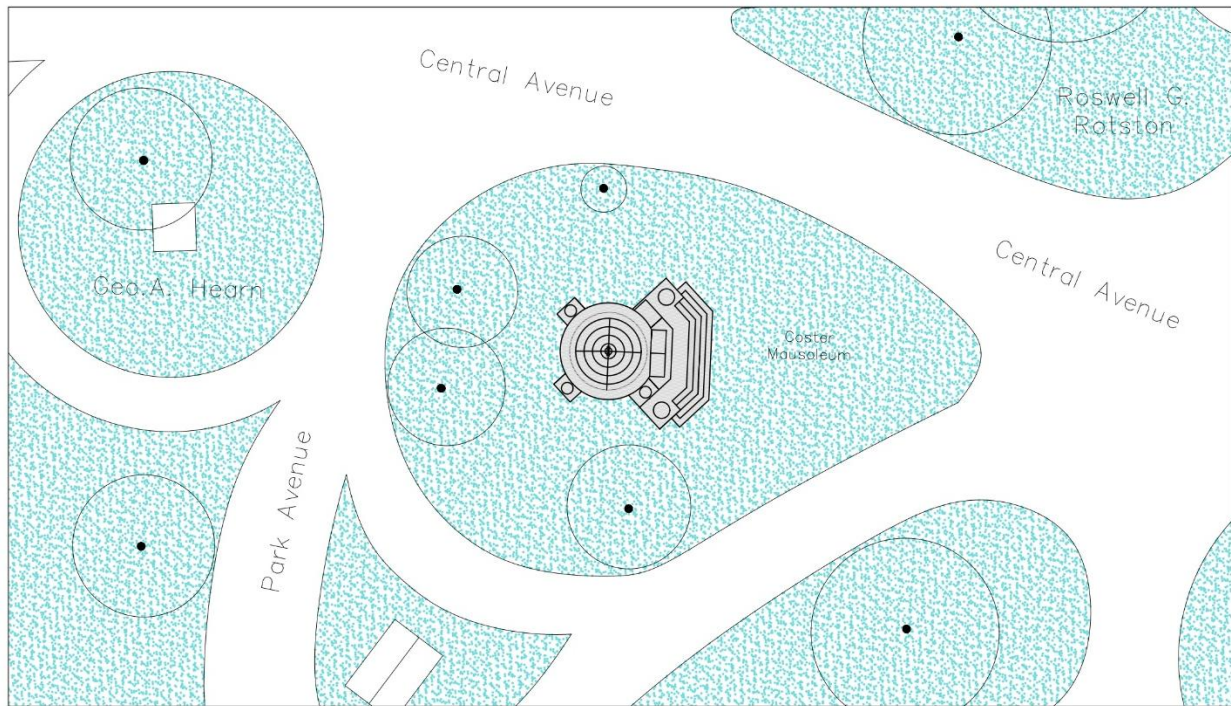


Figure 2: Site plane of Coster Mauseoleum. Own Elaboration.

3. Coster Family

A total of four individuals are interred in the mausoleum, corresponding to two married couples. The first couple is Cornelia Frances Coster and John Gerhard Coster; the second consists of Cornelia's parents, William G. Bresee and Adeline Bresee. William was born on March 26, 1815, and died on June 15, 1861, at the age of 46. Adeline was born on March 10, 1818, and died on July 26, 1880.

Cornelia and Gerhard were married at Calvary Church on April 27, 1866. After Gerhard's death, Cornelia requested the construction of the mausoleum. Her intention was to dedicate her entire fortune to its design and construction, as the couple had no children and she wished to create a lasting monument in his memory.

Cornelia was born on August 27, 1843, and died on April 1, 1894, at the age of 52. Gerhard was born on November 3, 1843, and died on May 12, 1889, at the age of 45.

Following Cornelia's death, a legal dispute arose among her distant relatives, as she had no immediate family. They contested her estate, which at the time amounted to a substantial sum of \$1,000,000 USD.

Cornelia Coster passed away at the Savoy Hotel in New York. Contemporary press accounts reported that she was attended by her physician and the hotel manager at the time of her death. Additionally, it was noted that Mrs. Coster's relatives sought to contest her mental capacity in court; however, this claim was ultimately dismissed in 1893.²

It can be established that the Coster family held a high social standing, as evidenced by the 1880 US census records (Figure 4), which list four servants among the household members. According to these records, John G. Coster, a physician, resided at 27 West 20th Street, Manhattan, New York, located three blocks from Madison Square Park.



Figure 3: Savoy Hotel, where Cornelia Coster died. Source: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Hotel Savoy, New York" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed October 2, 2025. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e8893060-c55d-012f-f28b-58d385a7bc34>

2. New York Tribune (1866-1899); New York, N.Y. Page 7. Publication date abr 7 1894. Publisher International New York Times. Place of publication New York, N.Y. Accessed October 2, 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/573932211?accountid=10226&sourcetype=Newspapers>

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 Supervisor's Dist. No. 1
 Enumeration Dist. No. 191

Note A.—The Census Year begins June 1, 1879, and ends May 31, 1880.

Note B.—All persons will be included in the Enumeration who were living on the 1st day of June, 1880. No others will. Children BORN SINCE June 1, 1880, will be OMITTED. Members of Families who have DIED SINCE June 1, 1880, will be INCLUDED.

Note C.—Questions Nos. 13, 14, 22 and 23 are not to be asked in respect to persons under 10 years of age.

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in New York, in the County of New York, State of New York
 enumerated by me on the Third day of June, 1880.

Ernest Barthe
 Enumerator

In Cities.			1	2	3	Personal Description.			7	8	Civil Condition.			13	14	Health.					Education.			Nativity.				
Name of Street.	House Number.	Dwelling house required in order of valuation.				Female required in order of valuation.	The Name of each Person whose place of abode, on 1st day of June, 1880, was in this family.	Color—White, W., Black, B., Indian, I., Chinese, C., Japanese, J., Other, O.			Sex—Male, M., Female, F.	Age—Last birthday prior to June 1, 1880. If under 1 year, give month and day of birth.	Relationship of each person to the head of this family—whether wife, son, daughter, servant, boarder, or other.			Single, S., Married, M., Widowed, W., Divorced, D., Married during Census year, /	Blind, /	Deaf and dumb, /	Idiotic, /	Insane, /	Stupid, /	Other, /	Attended school within the Census year, /	Current reader, /	Current writer, /	Place of Birth of the individual named in this Census year, /	Place of Birth of the individual named in this Census year, /	Place of Birth of the individual named in this Census year, /
	33	69	McNeill	Henry	W	B.	65	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
	31	70	Ogden	Joseph	W	M.	46	✓						retired														
			-d-	Charles	W	M.	37	✓	Son	/				Housewife														
			-d-	Louisa B.	W	F.	37	✓	daughter	/				at home														
			-d-	Charles	W	M.	6	✓	Grand son	/																		
			-d-	Henry B.	W	M.	5	✓	Grand daughter	/																		
			Donice	Thomas	W	M.	27	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Lowler	Caroline	W	F.	30	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Flansey	Samuel	W	M.	40	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Donice	John	W	M.	30	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
	29	39 71	Thompson	Thomas	W	M.	70	✓						House keeping	✓													
			-d-	Ellen	W	F.	36	✓	Daughter	/				House maker	✓													
			O'Brien	Seagie	W	M.	11	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Healy	Thomas	W	M.	36	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Baldwin	Charles	W	M.	37	✓	Servant	/				Off clerk	✓													
			Ocobe	James	W	M.	40	✓	Boarder	/				Off clerk	✓													
	27	40 72	Breese	Adeline	W	F.	61	✓						House keeping	✓													
			Coster	John G.	W	M.	36	✓	Son	/				Housekeeper	✓													
			-d-	Concha F.	W	F.	33	✓	Daughter	/				at home	✓													
			Freidle	Charles	W	M.	24	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Cockey	Frederic	W	M.	40	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Thompson	Ray	W	M.	28	✓	Servant	/				Servant	✓													
			Remum	William	W	M.	26	✓	Servant	/				Coachman	✓													
	35	41 73	Williams	William	W	M.	32	✓						Stock Breeder	✓													

Figure 4: Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Published in 2010. Lehi, UT, USA. Accessed October 2, 2025. https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/family-tree/person/tree/194814605/person/212544544441/facts?_phsrc=vAY49&_phstart=successSource

3. Influences of the Coster Mausoleum

As this mausoleum was constructed after Cornelia's death, there are no explicit records of her wishes regarding its design or intentions. However, it is possible to infer from her decision to allocate her entire fortune to the construction of a monument for herself, her husband, and her parents a sense of eternity and transcendence.

Within Woodlawn Cemetery, classical influences predominate, directly relating to the monumental nature of the term “mausoleum,” which originates from Mausolus, king of Caria, for whom his wife, Artemisia II of Caria, commissioned a grand burial monument.

In the case of the Coster Mausoleum, a notable feature is its architectural relationship with other historic buildings. Domes have long been used in significant temples such as Agrippa's Pantheon and Filippo Brunelleschi's remarkable dome of Santa Maria del Fiore.



Figure 5: Interior of Pantheon Rome. c 1734/ Giovanni Paolo Panini. Accessed October 2, 2025.
<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/165-interior-pantheon-rome>

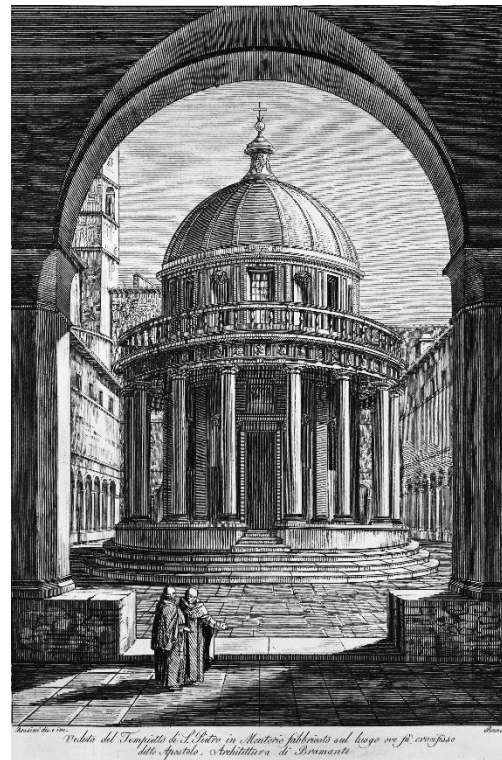


Figure 6: Luigi Rossini, Tempietto, engraving, 1818. Rossini, / *monumenti pi interessanti di Roma*. Photo courtesy of Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max-Planck-Institut fr Kunstgeschichte, Rome. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/bramantes-tempietto-the-roman-renaissance-and-the-spanish-crown/bramantes-christian-temple/4B9B505D89B600BCAE3B05AC81B1B918>

For a long time, there has been a close relationship between architectural forms and sacred spaces. In the case of the Coster Mausoleum, notable similarities can be observed with the *Tempietto* in Rome, which features a comparable dome and entrance. This design incorporates an intermediate access corridor, where the three-dimensionality and transparency of the columns function as a transitional element mediating between the interior and exterior spaces. Between these two works, the use of this element can be clearly seen not only as structural but also symbolic. Their domes also share an important similarity—both are hemispherical and have a drum.

Domes symbolize divine height and often represent an architectural interpretation of the heavens one aspires to reach after death. They also convey solemnity and transcendence through their verticality, serving not as functional spaces but as elements intended to elevate the spiritual experience within.

Furthermore, domes and their associated façades demonstrate how three-dimensionality shapes the perception of architecture, creating dynamic plays of light and shadow throughout the day. This effect is exemplified in the *Chiesa di Sant'Andrea al Quirinale*, where the pediment of the façade rises above other architectural elements and, similar to the *Tempietto*³, acts as a mediator between the building's interior and exterior.

Access is provided through stairways; in both cases, these structures shed the earthly realm and are inscribed within a circular plan.

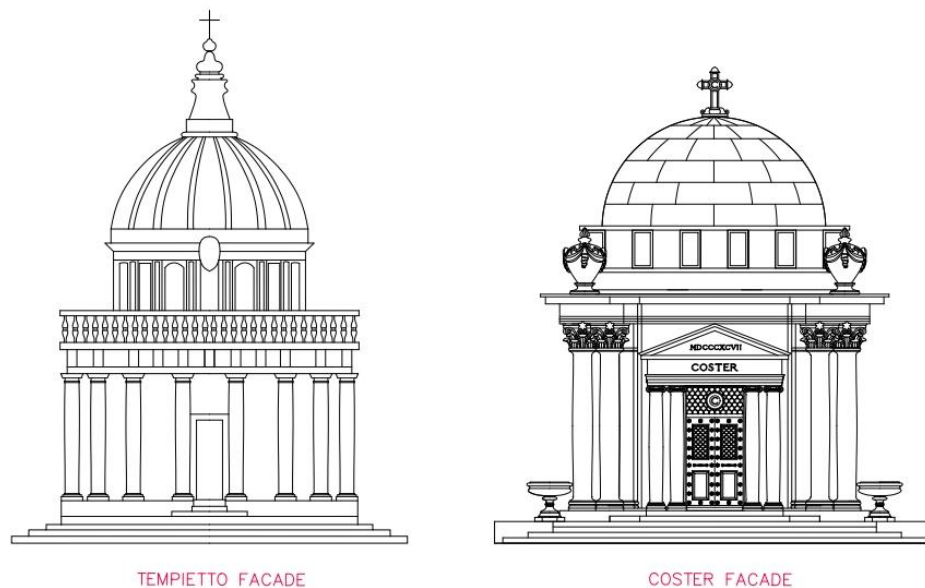


Figure 7 Comparison of the façades of the *Tempietto* and the *Coster*, at the same scale. Own work

³ For better understanding, the façade of the *Tempietto* has been produced based on the survey and study by Muhammed Burak

4. Attributes and identification Coster Mausoleum

The Coster Mausoleum features a significant implicit mathematical design, primarily based on the proportion and geometric division of all its elements. A central theme of ascension is evident throughout, forming a coherent narrative expressed through the architectural forms. Specifically, the level where the tombs are located is raised above ground level and accessed via a protruding pediment supported by two Tuscan granite columns, which frame the bronze entrance door at its center.

Regarding the secondary elements, the architect incorporated four volumetric projections across the façade, achieving a balanced composition. These volumes are articulated by taller Corinthian columns that direct the viewer's gaze upward toward the dome and the ornamental urns.

Inside the mausoleum, the color of the marble, the hues of the stained glass, and the mosaics complete the spatial experience. Above the stained glass windows, a composition featuring a torch flanked by flowers likely symbolizes a light shining into eternity. The dome serves as the crowning feature of the mausoleum, an idea reinforced by various architectural elements that guide the eye toward the center of the circular form.

This analysis of the geometric composition of the Coster Mausoleum highlights the crypt as the origin point and emphasizes the centrality of its forms. There are symmetrical divisions that radiate from the center of the circumference, where the Coster family coffins are located, emphasizing their position as the central element of the architecture of this mausoleum, as they represent its point of origin. Eight sections evenly distributed the mausoleum is composed with mathematical divisions that result in geometric harmony

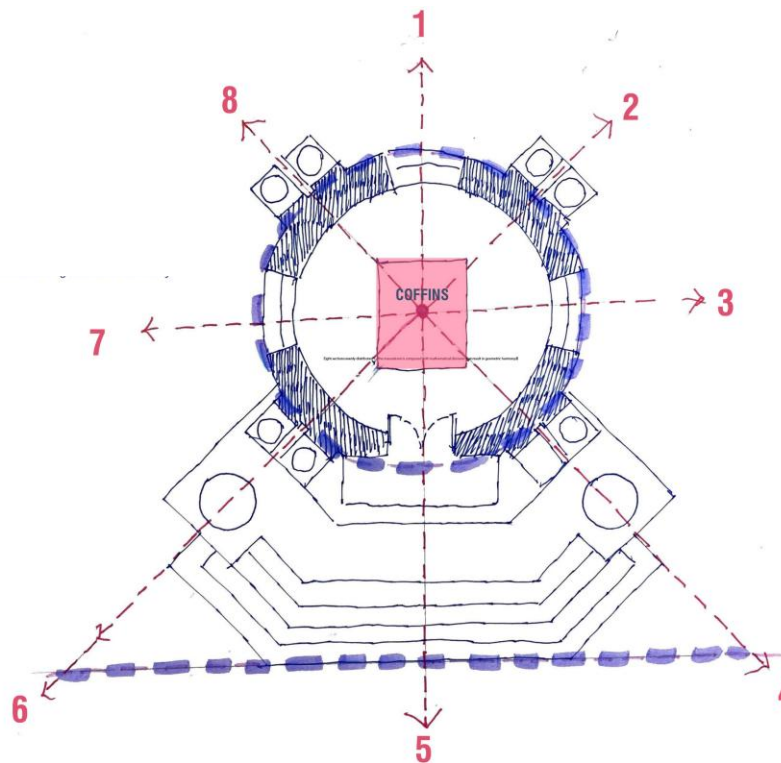


Figure 8: Analysis of the geometric composition of the Coster Mausoleum, highlighting the crypt as its point of origin and the centrality of its forms. Own work

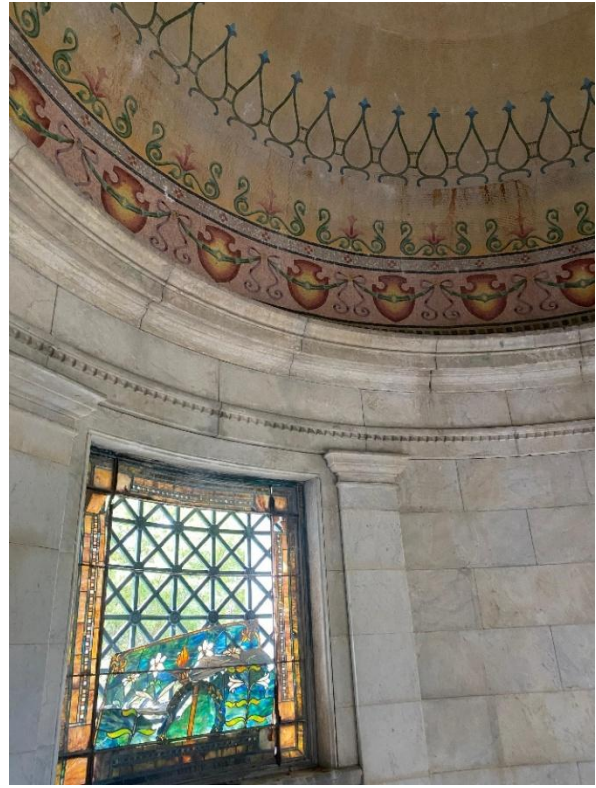


Figure 9: Details of the Coster Mausoleum. Own creation.

5. Damage identification

The observed damage in the mausoleum is primarily due to two broken stained glass windows, resulting in the direct loss of the original designs. Additionally, there is damage associated with the direct exposure of the mausoleum to weather conditions, particularly rain. The inability to maintain an airtight environment has led to moisture-related issues in several areas. The mosaic-finished flooring appears to have been affected, with significant portions of the surface now incomplete. Moisture traces are also clearly visible on the interior walls and on the dome.

On the exterior, these effects are particularly noticeable at the joints of the various façade elements, as well as on the access flooring. At the main entrance, the damage is primarily manifested as oxidation.

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