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Reading Buildings
Problem 3: Woodlawn Cemetery
Due: October 15th, 2012

Straus Family Memorial

The Straus family memorial, or tomb as it is often referred to, is a unique example of mausoleum architecture unlike the majority of classical memorials found within the famous cemetery, the family entombed within it has an equally unique and notable history.

The most notable attributes of this renowned family is their involvement and ownership of R.H. Macy & Co. and Isidor and Ida's untimely death on the RMS Titanic in 1912. Isidor and his brother Nathan became a part of the Macy's company in 1874 when they merged their crockery business, L. Straus & Son, with the large department store. Over time they worked their way up in the ranks of the company until they acquired majority control in 1895.ⁱ Isidor's sons, Jesse, Percy and Herbert all were involved in the company from a young age and were bequeathed partial ownership upon Isidor's death.ⁱⁱ

The death of Isidor and Ida is a well-known story. Refusing a spot on a lifeboat, Ida chose to stay with her husband on the deck of the Titanic shortly before it sank.ⁱⁱⁱ Isidor's body was recovered by the *Mackay-Bennett* in May 1912 but Ida's body was never found.^{iv,v} A large public memorial was held in New York City after which Isidor was interred at Beth-el Cemetery in Brooklyn until the private mausoleum was constructed in Woodlawn Cemetery in 1928 by Jesse Straus.^{vi} The Straus's were highly involved in many different charities and causes and have several memorials throughout New York City.

The tomb, designed by James Gamble Rogers in 1928 is a prime example of the art deco style popular in the 1920's and 30's across America.^{vii} It is unlike any of the many notable buildings designed by Rogers both before and after its completion. Its roots in Egyptian architecture as well as representing the first truly American style of architecture made it a perfect choice for the design of the Straus Memorial. Art Deco, which symbolized the good life and modernity in an optimistic post-a WWI America brought together a hybrid of modern and historical references.

The historical Egyptian references not only represent the popularity of the style in the 20's due to the discovery of King Tut's tomb but could be indicative of the family's strong Jewish background evident in the etchings on the front piers by the entrance gates of a Torah on a tapestry. The paradox with the symbol of modernity associated with art deco could be indicative of the family's prosperity as well and their journey and growth into one of the most prominent families in America. While the structure is a fairly simple example of the generally highly ornamented art deco style the materials, the expensive dolomitic Mankato limestone from Minnesota of which the mausoleum is constructed serves as a background for the highly ornamented custom metal monel doors, a specialized nickel alloy, and gates by prominent metal worker, Samuel Yellin, whose work can be found in many prestigious buildings around the country.

The structure, which appears upon approach as one continuous U shape building with a gated off courtyard is actually a compound of three identical rectangular buildings connected by flanking walls stepped down from the roof line. Each of three buildings is dedicated to and

owned by one of the three sons of Isidor and Ida's family; Jesse, Percy and Herbert. This 3 way ownership is evident in the property lines of the large plot. The inner courtyard is formed by two half walls that extend out from Herbert and Percy's structures and meet in a large 12ft art deco-Egyptian funerary barge that serves as a memory to Ida and Isidor and is designated as joint ownership on the plot plan. What seems like a unified structure is actually very divided.

Overall the layout is indicative of a public building. The allusion of a main central building with protruding wings to either side is a form used since the Roman Empire in their imposing public structures. While the form of the Mausoleum appears to be inspired from public structures its function and other aspects creates a paradox which drives a visitor away. The seemingly public courtyard is blocked by locked gates, there are no benches or any indication of benches of in the original design on which to stay and contemplate, and the engravings on the boat tomb and cenotaph of Ida and Isidor can only be seen from a vantage point within the mausoleum. The interiors of the individual tombs are small square spaces with 6 cabinets on each of the two walls adjacent to the entrance and small window as well as space in the floor for two other people. All in all there are 13 people interred at this memorial, the most recent being buried in 2004, there is space enough for 43 people, 14/structure.

The form of the mausoleum is one unlike any other mausoleum in Woodlawn. Representing a prominent family its monumentality and aesthetics are befitting of a family unlike any other in New York City.

¹ **Some of the Notable Passengers Who Were on Board the Titanic.** *The New York Times*, April 16, 1912; Proquest Historical Newspapers; The New York Times.

ⁱⁱ **ISIDOR STRAUS'S WILL GIVES ALL TO CHILDREN.** *New - York Tribune (1911-1922)*; May 18, 1912; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune (1841-1922) pg. 16

ⁱⁱⁱ **MRS. ISIDOR STRAUS.** *The Washington Post (1877-1922)*; Apr 21, 1912; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1995) pg. ES4

^{iv} "Mr Isidor Straus." *Encyclopedia Titanica*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic-victim/isidor-straus.html>>.

^v **Body of Isador Straus.** *The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945)*; May 3, 1912; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution (1868-1945) pg. 7

^{vi} "ISIDOR STRAUS BURIED IN BETH EL CEMETERY." *Encyclopedia Titanica*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/isidor-straus-buried-in-beth-el-cemetery-18677.html>>.

^{vii} Woodlawn Archives. Straus Mausoleum Folders

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Woodlawn Archives. Straus Mausoleum Folders