

Project 3 : Field Documentation and Formal Analysis

Visual Analysis – The Smith’s Mausoleum



The Smith mausoleum was designed in 1940s by a prominent-Boston based architectural practice Allen, Collen & Willis Architect. It was the only structure designed by the firm in Woodlawn Cemetery and it was a special commission by the last surviving daughter of The Smiths, Ms. Alice Smith.

The Smith family originally owned a lot on the Lake Plot, at the corner of Central and Observatory Avenue. However, in 1940, Ms. Alice Smith decided to buy a lot on the Knollwood Plot and move the family’s remains into a newly designed mausoleum. During the late 1930s, there was a trend away from using mausoleum buildings as the monument for the deceased to having heavily manicured landscaping on the lot as the monument itself and Knollwood Plot, the latest plot opened in Woodlawn at the time was sold based on this idea. When Alice bought her current lot on the plot, there were two landscaped mausoleums sited to the southeast of her lot, across an 8 feet walkway. These two lots, owned by The Kuhn and The Holmes families were already designed on the idea of landscaping as the mausoleum and there was a landscaped pond as the memorial to deceased.

Alice’s lot was not a flat empty lot; it had a gentle gradient going up from the main Whitewood Avenue to the walkway on the south side of her lot. There were four prominent trees whereby three of them were aligned and another was a bit off to the right of her lot. Taking advantage of the gradient of the site and the relationship that it has with the adjacent lots, as well as the three grown trees, the architect designed a cottage-like mausoleum in a simple gothic revival doorway for Alice. Because Knollwood Plot was sold on the idea of landscaped monuments, the

mausoleum was sited behind the lined trees, away from the main avenue so as to give the impression that the building was not as big, cleverly shaded behind the trees. The grading of the site also played an important role in making the building appear to be smaller than it actually is, masked behind the three main trees and some carefully planned landscaping. According to a 1951 aerial view of the cemetery, the lot to the west was adorned with big tree canopies while the lots to the north were heavily landscaped, making The Smith's lot hidden from the other avenues. However, the lavish tree canopies on the west side were cut in 1990 when a massive communal mausoleum building was built right next to the site.

The architect's design intention, through his sketches was very clear. He wanted to mask the building from dominating the street view, hence his decision to site the building at the rear of the lot. He was not concerned with having a birch tree right in the middle of the lot because he believed the mausoleum could be viewed in perspective. He had an initial design for a walkway from the center of the lot that will bring visitors straight to the door of the mausoleum, but the idea was abandoned and using the birch tree as the datum, visitors can approach the building freely from either side and they are not restricted with a formal pathway. This gives a less formal appearance to the whole setting of the mausoleum. Today, the birch tree that used to stand in the middle of the lot has been removed and so the anticipating experience of viewing the building in perspective. The planned landscape that was supposed to mask the mass of the front facade had also been removed. However, because of the clever siting of the building on the higher ground of the rear of the site, the mausoleum, despite its size, doesn't feel intimidating to the visitor. Although the experience of viewing the building in framed perspectives is no longer there, the experience of walking up to the building from the lower ground accompanied with the fact that the visitors are free to choose their own pathway instead of being dictated to use a certain route are still very much present.

The building appears to have a long rectangular facade with a trapezoid-like block protruding from the centre of the facade. The overall size appears to be very domestic, with the highest part of the building being in the middle of the protruding gable end section. The walls are made of limestone with granite base and topped with simple carved limestone corbel right below the roof overhang. On either side of the inset wall, there are a couple of ventilation grilles set right above the granite base and below the limestone cornice. A modest granite step brings the visitor closer to the door that is inset from the facade. There is a bronze gothic arched door in the middle of the gable end section that dominates the whole front facade of the building. There is a grilled glass in the middle of the door, at eye level, allowing visitor to peek into the mausoleum. On a sunny day, one can see beautiful light coming from a colored glass window on the southern side of the facade, cleverly positioned there to take advantage of the southern sun. The gothic door is embellished with gothic moulding around the doorway, a simplified but similar style of moulding details found at the Riverside Church, also designed by the same architect. The moulding is the most intricate stone decoration found on the building. The side facades are very plain with the exception of a couple of ventilation vents on either side of it. The rear facade, having a protruding section with gable end is adorned with a beautiful gothic coloured glass window with a cross in the middle of it. The window is divided into two parts, a fixed upper part with the cross in the middle of it and an openable lower part.

Stepping into the mausoleum, visitors will be pleasantly surprised to be welcomed by two intersecting vaults on the inside, something that was not expected from the outside. The vaults which were a special commission from the Guastavino company, was made up of two intersecting vaults with the higher vaults laid in the center of the mausoleum, spanning from the door to the window and the lower vault running in perpendicular covering the whole space. Although the interior space feels large, the visitor could only access the middle part which was designed for circulation, to go in and out of the mausoleum, almost acting like an axis to the space. Three marble catacombs were laid next to each other on each side of the axis and was covered and at the end of the corridor, there is a marble finished bench for visitor to sit on while praying for the deceased. There were marble head stones embedded into the wall at the end of each catacombs. These head stones were the original monuments that were moved from the old plot. Because the interior is very plain, the intricately carved head stones can be considered the only decorative feature on the interior. The decision to place it into the wall was very clever as it sends out a message that they were valuable and the visitor could only appreciate it from a distance and not touch them. It is also a personal affair since all of the Smiths' girls were not married, Alice could have been aware that there would be no descendent to visit the mausoleum, hence, placing the most valuable feature of the mausoleum far from reach. The walls are lime stone and the vaults are made of tiles that appear to look like lime stone. When the sun shine brightly, the colourful light from the colored glass window fill in the space that is otherwise dull and buff.

If we look at the landscape plan carefully, the vegetation were designed in such a way that it was placed on either side of the protruding section, reading as if they were not intended to mask the middle section of the front and rear section. Both the protruding section of the gable ends were addressing their respective facades cleverly; the front facade to make a statement of entrance and welcoming the visitors into the mausoleum while the rear, adorned with the colored glass is inviting the passerby on the pathway to admire the modesty of this building.

The building took cues from the Riverside Church; having the same architect that used the same architectural language, only in a different scale. Quoting the architect, Charles Collen, "We have had a long time to outgrow Gothic but when it comes to a kind of architecture that will make people pray, we have not outgrown Gothic. This is the plain fact of the matter." A mausoleum could also be associated with religion and the architect's decision to use Gothic for this particular mausoleum was a cue that he was thinking of the ritual of praying for the deceased.

The mausoleum is nothing like the others in the Woodlawn Cemetery. It appeared to look deceptively simple, yet it has one of the most intricate construction details. One would imagine that it was built using lime stone, but the detail drawings showed that there was a mix of materials used for the building, modern and traditional. This goes back to the architect's intention for architecture for prayer, but one that was adapt into the modern day's construction technology. The architect's choice to use slate for the roofing was also an interesting decision as it made the building appear to be vernacular and at home, set among the many trees around it. The building's modesty, to the point of not having the family's name on any part of the exterior of the building, being set in its setting of trees is what makes it significantly different from any other mausoleum in the cemetery.