

The Arents Mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery



In 1918, George Arents, Jr. commissioned Lewis Colt Albro to design a mausoleum for his family's plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, located on Central Avenue, the main road through the cemetery from the Jerome Avenue Entrance. George Arents Sr. had recently been interred on the site in a small Egyptian style mausoleum, built in 1904.¹ Perhaps his father's death two years previously brought the threat of impending mortality to George Arents, Jr., encouraging him to dedicate a portion of his wealth to constructing a new family Mausoleum. Arents, Jr., worked with the American Tobacco Company, as

his father and grandfather had as well, and founded the American Machine & Foundry Company and the International Cigar Machinery Company. He had patented a cigar rolling machine that was eventually to produce two thirds of the cigars made in America which, combined with a healthy family inheritance, afforded him the wealth to construct an impressive monument. He became a philanthropist later in life, serving as a trustee to the New York Public Library and chairing the board of trustees at Syracuse University.ⁱⁱ

The architect Lewis Colt Albro had previously designed Arents, Jr.'s estate in Rye, New York, in 1918. Albro attended the Metropolitan Museum's Art School in New York around 1894 and began working for the firm of McKim, Mead & White around 1896.ⁱⁱⁱ During his time with McKim, Mead & White, Albro was associated with the designs of the Carnegie libraries, the Charles Dana Gibson House and Columbia University, which he attended for his undergraduate work.^{iv} Design elements that appear in these buildings, such as the simplified columns of the Gibson House's portico and smooth linear plane of the Carnegie Libraries' facades could be considered antecedent to the design of the Arents Mausoleum in Woodlawn.^v

Presenting a flat, rectilinear expanse of Knoxville pink marble blocks towards the street, Albro's design for the Arents Mausoleum dominates its plot, centered between the property lines with the front façade parallel to the road.^{vi} Softening what could be an overpowering positioning on such a small lot, a large oak tree and many smaller but dense bushes mitigate the angles of the structure and create the illusion that the building is further removed from the street than it is in reality. In accordance to Albro's original landscaping design, two boxwood trees grow on either side of the entrance stairs, shielding the doorway and creating a small niche of privacy from the street. Albro also specified that two elm trees be planted at the road, symmetrically spaced on either side of the mausoleum. High conifers and laurel bushes were intended to create a dense backdrop of vegetation behind the structure. Although the

foliage in the rear of the building is not as dense and some of the plant materials have been changed from Albro's plan, the verdant background is present and the intent of Albro's design is visible.

The front facade is composed of three masses: a central rectilinear volume balanced by the equal masses of the pyramidal roof above and the platform below.^{vii} The main central mass is broken into three bays, the center slightly wider than the sides emphasizing the vertical axis through the entrance. Analysis of the mausoleum's proportions and layout show that Albro adhered to classical design conventions. In the plan, he utilizes the golden ratio to determine the width and depth of the building, as well as the placement of the stairs. The golden ratio is also used to set the height of the roof and the projecting carved banding.

The ornamentation is quite restrained, limited to muted low relief carvings above the door and on the frieze and string courses that run around the entirety of the building. A rhythm of pilasters projecting one and a half inches from the vertical plane of the marble walls, topped with modest Doric capitals, circle the building as well. On the front facade, the textures of the wreath and figure carving, balance with that of the pilaster bases and stairs, bringing the eye towards the entrance. The mausoleum presents an elegantly simple facade, demure in its details and succinctly reflecting the philosophies on design stated by Albro and his partner, Harrie Lindeberg, in their publication, Domestic Architecture:

"The design of a proper dwelling is based upon structural integrity and honesty of expression; on right proportion and simplicity of outline. It follows no whimsical fashion; it apes no popular style. It is neither fantastic in outline nor frivolous in detail. It pretends to be nothing but what it is, and it therefore contains no qualities which detract from simple dignity."^{viii}

Just before the construction of the mausoleum, Albro designed a residence and secondary buildings for George Arents, Jr. in Rye, New York.^{ix} While the two structures do not relate stylistically, they both display Albro's sophisticatedly restrained aesthetic. They have a smooth facades broken by

subtle details--delicate brick texturing in the case of the residence and shallow pilasters on the mausoleum. Both buildings are integrated into the landscape through the vegetation surrounding them and the entrances are flush with the front facade, the doors emphasized by a symmetry in the massings on either side. The description of the residence in an article written shortly after its construction could aptly describe both buildings: "One cannot admire the high technical skill displayed in it without taking even more satisfaction in the subordination of the skill to the conception of quiet harmony and richness that has been the main impulse of the design in all the details...What impresses one is the whole--a remarkable rendering, freely and boldly executed."^x

The mausoleum commissioned by George Arents, Jr., of Lewis Colt Albro is a monumental structure, massive in scale relative to its lot and to the memorials nearby. While a building of this size could easily overwhelm its context, the delicate use of details, rhythm, massing and surface create an elegant building, eloquent in its simplicity.

ⁱ The Egyptian mausoleum was approximately one third the volume of the mausoleum Albro designed. Although Egyptian motifs, such as the obelisk and pyramid, have a well recognized foundation in funerary traditions in the United States, they were not particularly fashionable by the time the Egyptian mausoleum was built. (See Joy M. Giguère, "'The Dead Shall Be Raised': The Egyptian Revival and 19th Century American Commemorative Culture" (PhD diss., University of Maine, 2009) 27). However, it is unclear why Arents, Jr. decided to construct a new Mausoleum.

ⁱⁱ *Woodlawn Cemetery - New York City, New York: George Arents*, <http://www.museumplanet.com/tour.php/nyc/wc/37> (Oct 2010)

ⁱⁱⁱ Jay Shockley, "Mary Hale Cunningham House," Landmarks Preservation Commission, May 1, 2001.

^{iv} *Long Island Country Houses and Their Architects, 1860-1940*, Ed. by Robert B. MacKay, Anthony K. Baker and Carol A. Traynor (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 40.

^v Although it is unknown whether Albro assisted McKim with the development of the Morgan Library, he was with the firm during the time of the Morgan Library's design and a comparison between the two structures show a great deal of similarity in the use of material, massing and rhythm.

^{vi} Lewis Colt Albro, "Specification for Labor and Materials Required for The Erection and Completion of A Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery, Woodlawn, New York for The Estate of George Arents," June 1918, Woodlawn Cemetery records, Dept. of Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia, 8.

^{vii} It is interesting to note the rather out of place stepped-pyramid shape of the roof on the mausoleum designed by Albro. It could be a subtle reference to the previous mausoleum Arents, Jr.'s father built.

^{viii} Lewis Colt Albro and Harrie T. Lindeberg. *Domestic Architecture* (New York: Private Distribution, 1912), 1.

^{ix} The residence was completed by 1918, as John Taylor Boyd, Jr. wrote the article cited below in April 1918. This was the same year that correspondence between Albrow and Woodlawn Cemetery began regarding the excavation of the Mausoleum's foundation.

^x John Taylor Boyd, Jr. "The Residence of George Arents, Jr., Esq." *The Architectural Record* 43 (1918): 308.