

The Roberts Mausoleum – Woodlawn



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The Roberts mausoleum is in Woodlawn cemetery in Bronx, NY. Standing among the other gigantic and decorative mausoleums in the cemetery, it looks almost too plain in its square shape. However, it has dignity out of austerity and simplicity. The mausoleum was designed in December 5th, 1922, and is owned by the Roberts family. This paper will cover: (1) The Story of the Mausoleum and (2) formal analysis of the Roberts mausoleum.

1. The Story of the Mausoleum

William John Robert (October 7th, 1877 - June 8th, 1941), was the father of two children, Hilary Dorning Robert (April 4th, 1907 - July 23th, 1922) and Geoffrey Dorning Robert (August 18th, 1916 - April 23th, 2004), and married to Hilda Dorning Robert (June 12th, 1879 - February 06, 1953). He was the president of W. J. Roberts & Co., Inc, Fire, Marine & Transportation Underwriter.¹ In July 23th, 1922, the Robert family was in grief due to the sudden death of Hilary Dorning Robert at the age of fifteen.² While their home was in Summit, New Jersey, Hilary died in Rhode Island, a famous vacation spot, which indicates that there was an accident related to her death. The funeral was held privately in Summit, NJ, near their house. After the death of their beloved daughter, the Roberts decided to build the mausoleum in the Woodlawn Cemetery for Hilary and the Roberts family, in 1922. They hired Gilbert Stanley Underwood, who later designed Yosemite National Park's Ahwahee Hotel in 1925, to design the mausoleum. At that time, he was studying at Harvard University as a graduate student, but he concentrated more on securing private commissions than his school assignments.³ He had New York architect William John Cherry, who was specialized in design of church, as an associated architect for this project. The mausoleum was designed in December 22, 1922, and the construction was finished sometime in 1923. William John Robert followed his daughter in 1941. Hilda Dorning Robert was cremated after her death in 1953, and her daughter-in-law, Olive Willett Smith Robert, in 2000 and her son, Geoffrey Dorning Robert, were placed in the same catacomb in 2004. The mausoleum went through several treatments including cleaning of exterior, re-pointing of joints, and change of catacomb tablet.⁴ In February 27th, 1980, the bronze door of the mausoleum fell down to the round, and the cemetery substantiated it as vandalism.⁵ Major repair was made on the door, vent, and stained glass afterward.⁶

2. Formal Analysis

(1) Environment

The Roberts mausoleum is located in lot No.15337, Myosotis Plot. On the plot plan from the Woodlawn Archive, it has a walk in front of the lot, but in fact, there is no actual walk. Since the lot is away from the main road, it is hard to see the mausoleum from the distance. The lot is neighboring with other tombs and mausoleums, and different kinds of vegetations are growing around it, and some of them are invading the lot. (Fig. 1) According to Woodlawn archive, there has been change of vegetation overtime, and the flagstone path was added later in 1946⁷.

(2) Design Analysis

It is important to ask why this mausoleum is so austere in its design. Based on the family history, the Roberts, who suddenly lost their beloved fifteen year old daughter, must have been very frustrated. They probably wanted to commemorate her by building a mausoleum, but not a gigantic and decorative mausoleum design, which not only takes a long time to construct, but also is inappropriate for their little daughter who passed away accidentally. The client would have asked the architect for a simple, but dignified design. Therefore, the architect would have made subtle changes on the austere and simple design. Restraint and dignity are expressed in this mausoleum in which the square plan was used with appealing results. The severity of plain walls is relieved by a pilaster-like break at the door and the ornament above it, which is not flamboyant, but enough to create a decent and humble manner. In the floor plan, it is easier to see the subtle changes, such as chamfered edge and molded frame, which prevent the mausoleum from becoming plain. (Fig. 2)

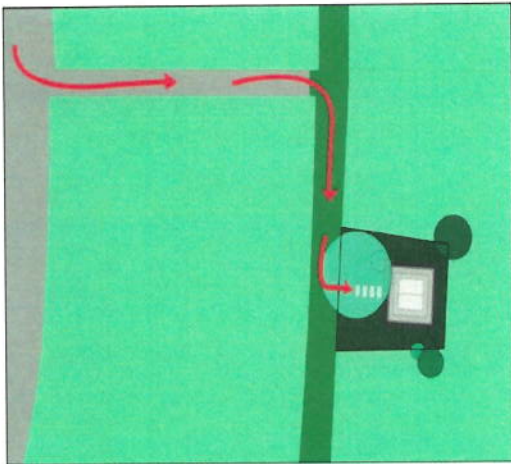
The mausoleum was built as a masonry block structure with 1'-3"x3'-1" size granite blocks which create approachable and friendly sense because the blocks are in human scale. The 1/4" joints between each block divide the huge solid structure into human scale structure. (Fig. 3) The exterior wall is battered in 1 degree, which gives the mausoleum stability along with the completely symmetric structure. (Fig. 4, 5) Here the stepped roof crowned with jointed slabs is used to ensure water-tight construction. The roof is slightly inclined, so water runs off efficiently. (Fig. 6)

The bronze door which was originally designed by the architect also has a simple and transparent design to show what is going on the other side of the door. (Fig. 8) Through the door, a visitor can see the vestibule, bench and stained glass. Therefore, compared to the solid metal doors of other mausoleums in the cemetery, this semi-open door gives the impression to visitors, that the mausoleum is a place where they can meet their lost family in an inviting manner, while still having the function of dividing the space. This explains why the bench was included in the design: to create an atmosphere where the family can seat and “talk” to the beloved family members. The grill pattern of the door was used once again in the architect's design for the Los Angeles Federal Court House.⁸ (Fig. 8)

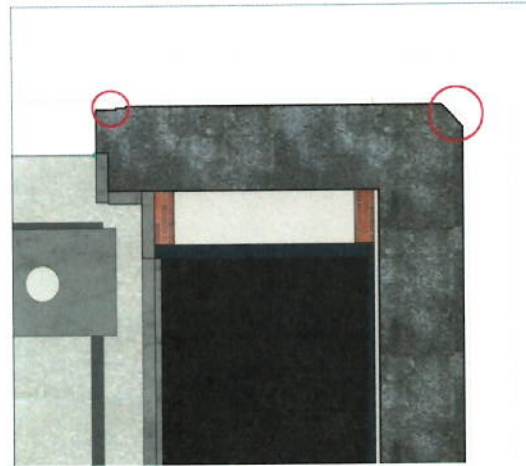
In the section, it is clear to see that the space is divided into a public and private sectors. The division was made by different space size and material. First of all, the large size and heavy mass of the mausoleum magnifies its existence in a public open space by acting as a monument. On the other hand, the relatively small inner space, which is just enough for one or two visitors, gives the impression that this space is for a private use. (Fig. 9) The use of different materials, rough granite on the outside and polished marble on the inside, also clearly differentiates the use of the space.

Mausoleums of square plan have afforded a desirable change from prevailing oblong temple forms with pedimental roofs. The square plan, particularly when columns are omitted, leaves the designer free from the conventions which dictate the form and detail of the temple type of building.⁹ In fact, this mausoleum of square plan is not the only of its kind. There are several square plan mausoleums designed by companies such as Presbrey Leland Studios. However, the Roberts mausoleum is different from those moderate cost mausoleums from the company catalogues. Its granite block structure which provides a friendly feeling to the facade is different from the monolithic and therefore somewhat overbearing facade of the similar kinds. Safe from being excessively simple, the mausoleum design creates not only a dignity that commemorates the dead, but also a welcoming atmosphere that provides an inviting space for the visiting family members to connect with the people they lost.

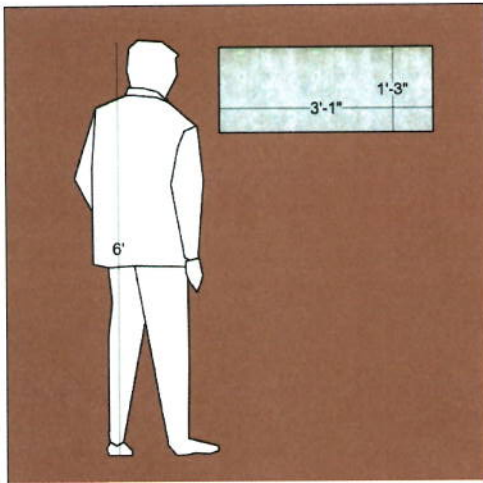
Appendix



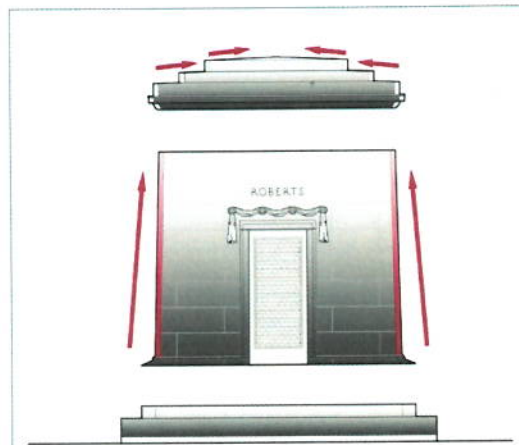
(Fig. 1)



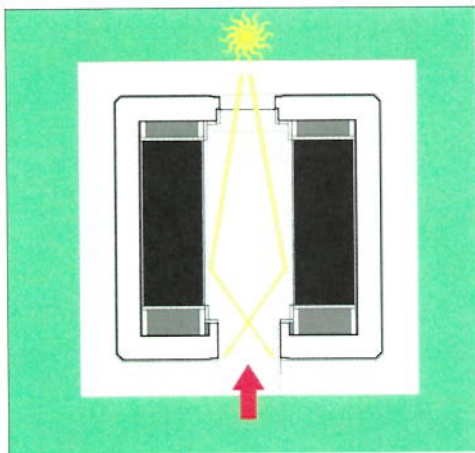
(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)



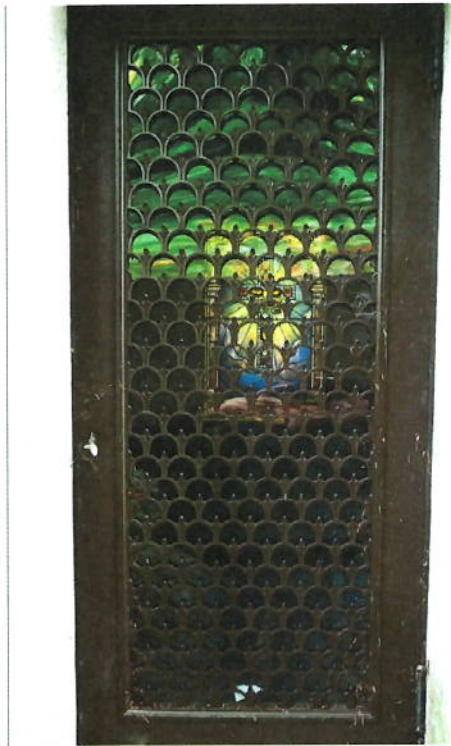
(Fig. 4)



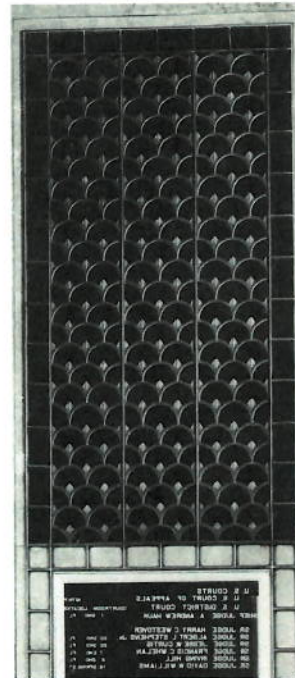
(Fig. 5)



(Fig. 6)

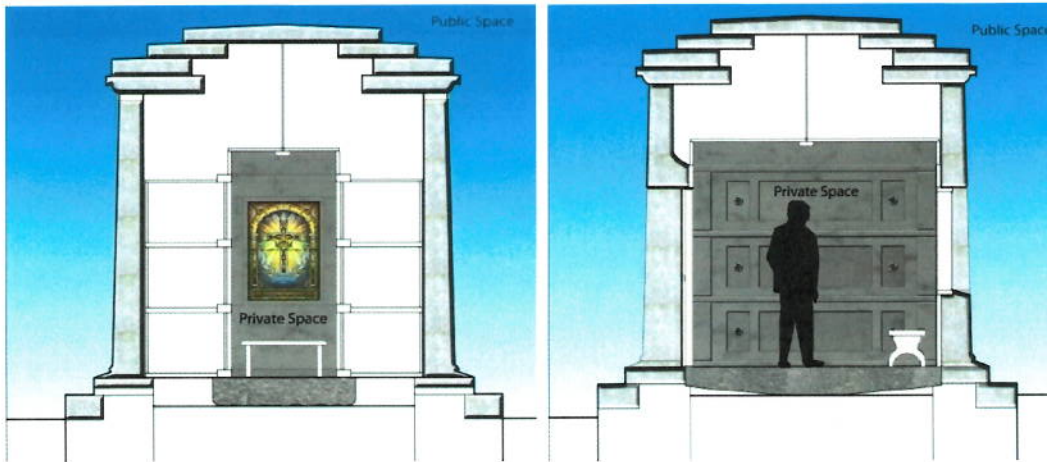


(Fig. 7)



Detail of grill in lobby of LA Federal Court House (Photo by Fred Licht)

(Fig. 8)



(Fig. 9)

¹ Robert, William John. "Notification of Changed Mailing Address." Letter to The Woodlawn Cemetery. 2 Aug. 1938. MS. New York, NY., Woodlawn Archive, Avery Index

² New York Times. "Obituary." *New York Times* [New York] 25 July 1922: 11. Print.

³ Zaitlin, Joyce. "Prelude : Choosing Directions." *Gilbert Stanley Underwood: His Rustic, Art Deco, and Federal Architecture*. Malibu, CA: Pangloss, 1989. 12. Print.

⁴ The Woodlawn Cemetery. "Major Repair." Letter to Geoffrey Dorning Robert. 1 Feb. 2001. MS. N.p

⁵ The Woodlawn Cemetery. "Vandalism on Roberts Mausoleum." Letter to Geoffrey Dorning Roberts. 27 Feb. 1980. MS. N.p

⁶ The Woodlawn Cemetery. "Major Repair." Letter to Geoffrey Dorning Robert, 1 Feb. 2001. MS. N.p

⁷ The Woodlawn Cemetery. "Management." Letter to Hilda Dorning Robert, 16 May, 1946., 1 Feb. 2001. MS. N.p.

⁸ Zaitlin, Joyce. "Prelude : Choosing Directions." *Gilbert Stanley Underwood: His Rustic, Art Deco, and Federal Architecture*. Malibu, CA: Pangloss, 1989. 144. Print.

⁹ "Square Form-Columnar and Non-Columnar Stepped Roof." *The Book of Presbrey Leland Memorials*. Ed. The Book of Presbréy Leland Stvdios. N.p.: Book of Presbrey Leland Stvdios, 1932. N. pag. Print.