



Solution for a sensitive site—a four-part landscape design, “a statement that is an understatement.” A circular walk, below this view of the model, leads to an elliptical overlook with steps to the grave platform and eternal light, backed by a wall.

Architecture

Design Dilemma: The Kennedy Grave

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A YEAR after the assassination, the design for the Kennedy grave has been released by the architects, John Carl Warnecke and Associates. Never have the complexities of a design problem and the difficulties of a site been so painfully and publicly clear, and rarely have results been greeted with such general praise so obviously motivated by relief.

The green slope on which John F. Kennedy is buried has an importance on the Washington scene even beyond its significance as the grave of a President and the pilgrimage point for a people, still responding at the rate of 50,000 a day, to a great American tragedy.

This particular expanse of hill in Arlington Cemetery, with its open sweep from the crowning Custis-Lee mansion to the Potomac below, is the focus of the formal, monumental approach of the Memorial Bridge and Avenue. Beyond that, it commands the eye in Washington as far as it is physically possible to see. As one of the finest and most pervasive of the capital's vistas, its rising expanse becomes a dominating and extremely sensitive visual feature of the city.

Site Problems

This fact has been recognized for more than half a century. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, writing in the McMillan report of 1902 — the planning document that re-established L'Enfant's vision of the city and has been the foundation of its physical form to this day — made the site one of his serious concerns.

“The noble slope toward

the river should be rigorously protected against the invasion of monuments which utterly annihilate the sense of beauty and repose. This is one of the most beautiful spots in the vicinity of Washington; it should not be defaced or touched in any way, and a law or rule should at once be passed forbidding the placing of any monument on this hill.” One wonders if this important piece of planning literature was ever consulted during the extensive research that was done on grave selection and Presidential burial.

It is quite possible that even if such a rule had existed it might have been waived at a time of national mourning and at the wish of a bereaved family for whom the world grieved. For better or for worse, the grave is there. There were only two choices: to build a monument or to minimize the architectural treatment to avoid violation of the slope that is so critical a part of the city.

Fortunately, the architect and the family have chosen the latter course. They have exercised good judgment and good taste. But having made the choice, what did the architect face?

He had to seek a statement that was an understatement, to find maximum meaning in minimum terms, to achieve impact and monumentality without any of the usual devices, all of which would have been monstrous on the site. And at the same time that he was attempting to reduce the design to inoffensiveness where almost anything would offend, he had to produce a meaningful public memorial that solved functional problems of circulation, tourism and official use.

What Mr. Warnecke was

dealing with, basically, was a problem in landscape architecture. But it was complicated formidably by the need for symbolism, ceremony and a specific emotional ambiance.

Landscape architecture is a great art, and a singularly expressive one. In our time, however, the tradition leading from the formal fantasies of Le Notre to the abundant romanticism of Frederick Law Olmstead, to whom much of the planned beauty of this country is due, has been reduced to the geometric shuffling of planting pots on concrete platforms. Nevertheless, this design is essentially a landscape solution.

The Warnecke office worked long, hard and conscientiously to come up with an answer that is admirable in many ways, if short of greatness. They sought fitness — that overused word — simplicity and dignity, and they have achieved all three. If they have not achieved more, the nature of the problem might have defied a Michelangelo.

The Solution

The design has four parts. A circular walk leads to an elliptical overlook, both of granite, where steps rise to a marble platform surrounding the graves of the President and his two young children and the font with eternal flame. Behind this platform is a wall. The actual spot of burial will be moved twenty feet down the hill to bring it to a less steeply inclined location. Considerable engineering reinforcements of the hill will be necessary to insure the stability of the slope.

There are some admirable sensitivities in this scheme. The circular walk is cut six feet into the hill with a slight crown at its grassy center so

that people approaching will be concealed from those above. The elliptical overlook, which could easily be average, becomes a piece of landscape sculpture through angled shaping and a radiating pattern of cut granite, a design of enough subtle intricacy that the stonecutting will probably be determined by computer. Its highest point rises at its bottom end to come a low, curving wall with engraved quotations, facing the view.

The raised marble platform is also saved from the ordinary by seeming to float delicately above ground, elevated slightly over a bed of round white stones. All this is an excellent and far from banal integration of form and purpose.

No one doubts that further refinements and changes will be made as the design goes into working drawings. But some questions arise at this stage.

One is the necessity or desirability of the terminating wall behind the platform. This element gave the architect a great deal of trouble in the studies; perhaps a sure indication that it wasn't needed at all. Not only does it introduce a convention dangerously close to a cliché that has the air of a well-studied afterthought, but it disrupts the unity with the landscape that has been conscientiously maintained to this point. True, the model might not look quite as effective without it, but the hill would look a great deal better.

Moreover, this vertical “backstop” does much to negate the best feature of the design, which is not apparent in photographs and has not been discussed in criticism. This is the sense of gentle,

continuous movement on a low horizontal plane; of uninterrupted flow through a sequence of well-planned landscape experiences that provide progressive esthetic and emotional effects with considerable skill and the least disturbance of the natural scene. Visually and psychologically, the wall is a gratuitous addition. Its purpose, to make the grave more visible from a distance by day—the flame is insistently visible by night—is open to serious question in terms of the site.

A Proper Focus

The real focal point of the grave, inevitably, is the font with the eternal flame. In its present form, which is reminiscent of a good commercial symbol by a competent advertising agency, it is a let-down rather than a climax.

There are reports of a short-lived attempt to get a first-rate piece of sculpture for this feature, and it seems imperative to pursue the idea further. A memorial design must aspire to that particular transcendental expression, that sense of beauty and elevation of the spirit that art provides at its finest moments, in the highest fulfillment of emotional needs. This is lacking now.

The answer could be a simple shape by a skilled and sensitive hand. It might be pure geometry, or have the delicate, flaring forms of a Somaini, or be a flat ground plaque incorporating the flame, with the grace and elegance, perhaps, of the Giacometti doors of the Kaufmann tomb at Bear Run. There are many possibilities. But there is surely an American artist capable of working within the necessary restrictions to do honor to a man who deserved it.