

GRACELAND CEMETERY: A DESIGN HISTORY

Christopher Vernon. 2011. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press in association with the Library of American Landscape History. 254 pages, including color and black and white photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 clothbound. ISBN: 978 1558499263

Reviewed by Heidi Hohmann

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the publication of Blanche Linden-Ward's *Silent City on a Hill* (1989) and David Sloane's *The Last Great Necessity* (1991) did much to define the historical conception of the 19th century rural cemetery movement in the United States. These works firmly grounded the cemetery as part of the development of the profession of landscape architecture and also helped build support for the recognition and preservation of cemeteries as important, designed landscapes. Since then, however, the rural cemetery has been something of a "dead" topic in landscape history. With the possible exception of Keith Eggener's *Cemeteries* (2010), a lavishly illustrated overview, few innovative full-length works on the subject have been published—until now, with the arrival of Christopher Vernon's *Graceland Cemetery: A Design History*. The book breaks new ground by delivering on its subtitle, explicating the evolution of a place rather than discussing the evolution of the typology.

Thankfully, Vernon assumes the reader already knows the social and cultural history of the American cemetery and instead begins his story by contextualizing Graceland within the history of landscape design in Chicago region. Together, the introduction and first chapter provide an overview of Chicago's urban development in the mid 1800s, reminding us that Chicago's design history does not begin with the Worlds' Columbian Exposition in 1893. Vernon contrasts the city's early conditions with its badly fitting motto *Urbs in Horto* to squarely situate Graceland within the city's aspirations to become a "City in a Garden." Looking at a smaller design scale, chapter one also relates Graceland to the residential landscapes of Chicago via the home grounds of the cemetery's founder Thomas Bryan, a Chicago lawyer and real estate investor, adding some nuances to our

understanding of the mutualistic relationship between the rise of landscape architecture and residential design during the era of A.J. Downing. The context of Chicago, too, is never far away throughout the rest of the book, as Vernon consistently relates Graceland to its surroundings, via descriptions of real estate transactions or other designs in the Chicago area.

Chapters 2 through 7 provide a complete account of the first four decades of the cemetery's development, from 1860 to 1900. Vernon adeptly covers all facets of the cemetery's history, from the formation of the cemetery company to the technical aspects of stormwater calculations to the aesthetic details of monument placement. The central historical narrative, however, revolves around the succession of designers—Swain Nelson, William Saunders, H.W.S. Cleveland, William Le Baron Jenney, and O.C. Simonds—who worked on Book Reviews 239 the site. Vernon describes in detail each man's distinct physical contribution to the design, from Nelson's and Saunder's initial layouts to Cleveland's planting design, Jenney's drainage, grading, and lakes, and Simonds' final orchestration of the whole via planting design and scenic composition.

Happily, the book is not just an enumeration of each man's individual design achievements. Instead, Vernon uses the historical chronology of Graceland's construction to explore the ways sites are collaboratively or sequentially designed and redesigned. By examining this process the book necessarily rejects the cult of the individual designer so common in much design history as Vernon recounts cases of awkward collaboration (during Nelson's and Saunders' apparently simultaneous employment as consultants); stylistic adaptation (Cleveland's alterations of Saunders' plans); and wholesale destruction (Simonds' obliteration of Saunders' grotto). Vernon also writes at length about the important client-designer relationships that influenced the design. Both Bryan, who supervised the cemetery's first 20 years of development, and his nephew Bryan Lathrop, who took over as superintendent in 1877, not only selected designers, but also participated in the design process. Lathrop, in particular, had a penchant for planting and, as Vernon recounts, had some major influence not just on

the design of Graceland, but also in turning Simonds, an aspiring young architect, into a landscape gardener. Their mentor-mentee relationship is examined in detail in chapter seven, revealing that Graceland's spatial sequences of open lawn and long views supported by structural plantings of trees and shrubs were very much a collaboration between the two men.

For me, the most interesting chapters in the book are Chapters 5 and 6, which explore Jenney's Graceland work. Well known as an architect, Jenney's landscape designs have not been overly explored by landscape historians (Reuben Rainey's article in Tischler's *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* [2000] excepted), and Vernon's examination of Jenney's career and other cemetery designs redresses that oversight. More importantly, the account of Jenney's role in implementing Riverside for Olmsted and Vaux and descriptions of his designs for West Park, not only add much to our understanding of his work at Graceland, but also add welcome new historical distinctions to the usually Jens Jensen dominated history of Chicago landscape architecture. Yet even as Vernon forges new ground, he also acknowledges previous scholars, and his citations inspire me to go dig up Theodore Turak's book *William Le Baron Jenney: Pioneer of Modern Architecture* (1986) and to re-read Creese's *The Crowning of the American Landscape* (1985).

There are, of course, a few things to quibble about. Although the book is wonderfully illustrated, including a folio of contemporary photographs by Carol Betsch at the front and a folio of historic 1904 photographs at the back, key images, primarily the 1860 foundation plan, 1865 Nelson layout, and 1878 Rascher map were obviously difficult to reproduce. Their poor legibility makes the sequence of design changes difficult for the reader to track and understand spatially. One wonders if a few redrawn plans—standard in design monographs but admittedly not standard fare in art history texts—might not have been useful, an idea that raises the question of whether a so-called design history might utilize a different methodology from an art history.

In addition, the book's conclusion is somehow

unsatisfactory, perhaps because the story ends but the book continues. A lengthy epilogue catalogues Graceland's post-Simonds changes; although this is useful information, it is neither a jubilant encore nor a definitive (or poignant) final word. The same is true for the afterword, which covers recent restoration efforts, but further dissipates the energy of the historical story. The problem with these multiple endings speaks more to the difficulty of structuring a large, multivalent history and a heartfelt desire to address the landscape's ongoing change than it does to any major failing in the conception or research of the book.

Indeed, the research that grounds *Graceland: A Design History* is impeccable, as evidenced by the range of contemporary historic and archival sources consulted. Consequently, even the notes make interesting reading (at least for landscape history geeks) with nugget after nugget of supplemental information and intriguing detail. The bibliography, too, is an excellent resource for anyone seeking to understand landscape design in Chicago prior to 1900. Overall, *Graceland: A Design History* is a wonderful example of site-based design research and history, and is destined to become the definitive work on the site. Although the book may not launch a full-scale resurrection of cemeteries as a 240 *Landscape Journal* 31:1–2 potent topic of historical research, it is a worthy addition to the canon of landscape history.

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