

Modest proposal, major tiff

HISTORIC Grove Street Cemetery presents its proud Egyptian-inspired entry gate and open iron fencing to Grove Street, but the rest of its perimeter is enclosed by a solid sandstone wall. Charles Ellis of the cemetery's standing committee has asked Robert A.M. Stern, dean of Yale's School of Architecture, to perforate the wall facing Prospect Street by replacing sections of stone with wrought-iron fencing similar to its open side.

Reaction by the historic preservation community has been swift, strong and negative. The cemetery is a 1797 institution and one of nine National Historic Landmarks in New Haven. The entry's biblical quote "The Dead Shall Be Raised" is virtually iconic, and it was built by famed New Haven architect Henry Austin in the 1840s. The cemetery space can be seen as a twin with the New Haven Green. They are of similar size and are the focal voids in an active fabric of building, commerce and academic bustle.

But, Grove Street Cemetery is fundamentally different from the Green. Even though New Haven's Green has three historic places of worship set upon its verdant carpet, of the two urban green spaces it is Grove Cemetery that is overtly spiritual.

"Yale is cut through the liver by that cemetery," says Vincent Scully, the legendary Yale architectural historian.

Yet, Stern's proposal is not in any way, shape or form radical—it would silently create space where solidity now blocks connection. Despite the New Haven Preservation Trust's adamant opposition, to me the real issue is not what is proposed, but the surrounding atmospherics.

Some fear opening the cemetery's walls is part of Yale's scheme to build new residential colleges north of the cemetery, with the openings connecting them to the rest of the campus. The theory is the voids would mitigate a sense of isolation and second-class citizenship for occupants of the new colleges. But, the proposal is for the Prospect Street wall—leaving opaque stone facing the colleges.

The conspiracy theory was not helped by the fact that the drawings that were released for view by Stern's office had on their label "Colleges, 13 and 14 Yale University." But, it turns out Stern was informally contacted by Ellis to noodle on the idea, so Yale is not Stern's client nor is the cemetery, just Ellis.



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Beyond the inevitable town-and-gown controversies that attend any Yale proposal, we in the Northeast are generally queasy when it comes to spirituality. Like most colleges started before the 20th century, Yale had religious faith at its core, as did 17th century New Haven. Since World War II, every college in America has had the presence of religion wane in campus life. Yale has a divinity school and an Institute for Sacred Music, but it has veered dramatically away from any other acknowledgement that spirituality has a place in the vast majority of American lives. So, the desire to perforate a 154-year-old wall that defines a sanctum sanctorum of the dead can legitimately be seen as violative and tone deaf.

Obviously, spirituality is not created by buildings, but spiritually focused architecture is fostered by a sense of connection to a greater reality.

Consider the Vietnam Memorial, perhaps the most successful piece of 20th century American architecture, designed by Maya Lin. It changes those who encounter it, regardless of their belief in a higher power. The design channels the depth of pain and moral ambiguity of all wars, and especially one so recently fought with so little tangible benefit.

The freshness of Vietnam makes any thought of changing the memorial's reality seem heinous and gratuitous. While its poignancy may be a bit dusty, Grove Street Cemetery's enclosing wall is part of a place that is inherently sacred.

The basis for this proposal is guileless. Ellis loved to walk beside a cemetery while attending graduate school in Boston. Similarly, when he walked by a graveyard in Manhattan, he found the visual prospect both comforting and intriguing. It is his personal sense that the wall presented to Prospect Street is a tough visual circumstance that could use some "softening."

American culture still believes in life after death. Caught in these cross-currents and suspicions of attempts to de-ghettoize Yale's new residential colleges, a modest proposal has created outsized controversy. It may be best just to let sleeping souls lie, shielded by brownstone.

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