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An Unheralded Preservation Influence

The American Funeral Industry

Throughout the United States, many contemporary institutions and organizations have become involved in diverse forms of historic preservation, a key component of cultural resources management. Some commercial enterprises—such as the one cited in this article—probably did not set out with a cultural resources management outlook in mind; however, good works are not always the exclusive domain of professionals employed by public or semi-private resource management entities. One specific example of a sector of contemporary private enterprise serves to illustrate the range and extent of grassroots historic preservation in America. The modern American funeral home industry should receive a share of kudos for its endeavors, whether by design or by happenstance, to revitalize a small portion of the nation's older residential housing stock in a useful and thoughtful manner. Although the growing trend has been toward consolidation and corporate acquisition of independently managed funeral homes, many throughout the United States are still owned and operated by a local family who has resided in the same community for several generations. These tradition-oriented independent business people

*Fox & Weeks
Funeral Directors,
Savannah,
Georgia.*



have made a significant commitment to recycling vintage buildings for contemporary purposes. They have made a noteworthy unrecognized contribution to preserving a sample of America's structural patrimony.

In numerous cities and towns across the nation, the funeral home industry has acquired, preserved, and adaptively re-used structures in long-established neighborhoods. Whether in small town or large city, it can be observed that funeral businesses have recycled large ornate houses (in some cases, mansions) as well as other structures for contemporary use. While there is a plethora of examples of funeral homes located in former residences, this article does not purport to suggest that all current-day funeral-related events take place in rehabilitated houses. Certainly the perceptive observer can locate recycled properties or newer contemporary style funeral homes in commercial areas such as the central business district or outlying strip developments of small towns or larger cities throughout the country. The focus of this article will be placed squarely on our personal perceptions of why the adaptive re-use of vintage properties has been embraced by the modern funeral industry. It must be noted that similar rehabilitation and use of traditional style, former residences provides workspace for professional offices used by doctors, lawyers, architects, planners, and others. This part of the preservation story is best left to other authors to study and interpret.

Why has the funeral industry acquired venerable residential structures and adaptively re-used them? There are several plausible reasons for this approach to accidental historic preservation, an example of unintended consequences. First, the cost of acquiring a large vintage house near a community's central business district (and remodeling it for contemporary use) may actually be less than acquiring a developable piece of land in a good location and contracting for a new structure. Originally, members of the community's business or professional class comprised of

Reynolds
Jonkhoff Funeral
Home, Traverse
City, Michigan.

doctors, attorneys, main street store proprietors, local factory owners, and other affluent citizens lived in these grand structures. Property values may have declined during the 20th century as residents or their descendants migrated to newer neighborhoods in outlying areas. In more recent years, younger affluent families have gravitated to these areas to restore aging, yet elegant residences. These revered neighborhoods have become a community's crown jewels. A sizeable number of funeral homes we have seen, admired, and photographed in our travels throughout the United States during the past 30 years are located not far from the central business district in vintage neighborhoods. Additionally well-maintained and restored properties now used as funeral homes have added economic and aesthetic value to such neighborhoods, some of which have been designated as locally significant historic/preservation districts. Hence there is a logical economic imperative that drives the commercial use of these spacious old-fashioned former residences as contemporary funeral establishments.

While an important consideration, cost is but a portion of the total story. We suggest that a number of other underlying factors support a more complex understanding of the symbolic necessities of the present-day funeral industry to place its activities in traditional-style structures. Deep-seated values assume a significant role in the funeral industry's unrecognized, informal commitment to preservation of vintage structures for contemporary use.

Many years ago funeral homes did not exist as we know them today. As is the case with many institutions, diverse customs and practices in the funeral industry evolved over time. When a person passed away, preparations were basic—a local carpentry shop or furniture store supplied the coffin. The undertaker came to the home and prepared the body for burial. Relatives, friends, associates, and neighbors arrived at the house to share memories while viewing the decedent's remains, usually placed in the living room. Following the wake, the funeral was either held in a church or in the home.



Over time, as death has become more institutionalized and remote (meaning that a person now generally dies in a hospital or nursing home and not in a private residence), the funeral industry has developed an accepted substitute for church and home in which the final ceremony honoring the decedent occurs. Basically, the contemporary funeral home is that substitute for the person's home. The widely accepted nomenclature clearly demonstrates this contention. For example, at the Frost Home for Funerals located in Ashland, Wisconsin, the word "home" assumes a prominent role in that firm's title. The designation "home" or "parlor" exudes a sense of warmth, belonging, tradition, and permanence in that area of a private residence used to host guests. For those who care or take cognizance of these deep-seated values, many current funeral homes are located in established neighborhoods, rather than on a community's edge-of-town commercial business strip alongside the big boxes and fast food outlets. In this regard, individuals currently involved in the funeral business have been extremely perceptive and influential in developing their businesses in attractive, well-maintained traditional style former residences. For example, near Denver in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, a locally prominent funeral home owner in the early 1920s built a rural mansion complete with a pergola (still extant), fruit orchard, several classical style statues, and two outbuildings on a five-acre tract. The owner then developed a major cemetery directly across the street. The elegant former country house converted to a funeral establishment projects a sense of style and grace.

Additionally, the very nature of having the funeral in a home-like structure brings comfort and a sense of reassurance to the decedent's family and friends. A sizeable number of funeral homes are sited on large prominent lots on a hill or slope, a design feature that best showcases the house while providing pleasant views for the original inhabitants. Today this location factor helps exude a sense of local grandeur and prominence. Large lawns, shrubs and bushes, gardens, perhaps a flagpole, and trees complement the setting. In many instances traditional, low stone walls, wrought iron fences, or hedges surround the houses, not so much as security devices but as visual accessories to enhance the traditional appearance of the property. The signage denoting contemporary use is low key; frequently one neatly painted sign is placed in a corner of the property. Funeral home owners tend to shy away from neon signs, flashing lights, or gaudy colors to distract the eye or to lessen the solemnity of the establishment.

The carpentry work to convert and modify these veteran houses for contemporary purposes more than likely has not been accomplished by trained historical architects and other preservation craftsmen but, in most cases, the exterior rehabilitation appears sympathetic with original details and in keeping with materials used during construction. Outbuildings have been adaptively used for garage and maintenance supply space. For example, a few funeral homes display antique hearses in their garages. Unusual dependencies have survived. A long established funeral home in Springfield, Ohio, has preserved a two-story child's playhouse in the rear yard to the delight of neighbors and townspeople. Due to the large size of some of these vintage residences, there has been little need for intrusive additions. Once converted, the spacious old houses provided a funeral home with a sufficient number of large rooms to allow the public to come and pay their respects. If an annex has been added for extra space, it has been placed at the rear of the funeral parlor. The purpose of all this effort by the funeral business owner is to transmit a sense of dignity and well being. These venerable traditional houses now adaptively

used as funeral parlors/homes project a serene and solemn image.

These large former residences could be easily modified to provide sufficient interior space for the various functions of the business including viewing areas, lounges, and a large room in which to hold services. Interior spaces have been modified in keeping with the prerequisites of the funeral business. In some instances the funeral director's family living quarters were also located in the upper stories of these former residences. These buildings' interior detailing such as wooden staircases, banisters, newel posts, fireplaces, doors, windows, and lighting remain indigenous to the property. One can find original hardwood flooring in some converted residences. Large chairs, tables, and sofas accent the scene more naturally than in a sterile, box-like modern funeral parlor situated along a traffic-choked commercial strip.

The modern funeral industry has undergone rapid change in the recent past. Besides the trend toward corporate concentration, funeral homes have gone online to showcase their facilities including color photographs of these adaptively re-used vintage residences. This cyber information often contains narrative material about purpose and mission as well as statements linking the contemporary business to the community's heritage. A family-owned funeral establishment in Yutan, Nebraska, states on its web pages that the firm is "committed to our communities and are proud to continue the long tradition in each town. We strive to preserve the traditions of the past. . . ."1 In fact, this particular firm has adaptively re-used a decommissioned

*Cooper Funeral Home,
Richmond Hill,
South Carolina.*





Hunter-Anderson Funeral Home, Berkley Springs, West Virginia.

Lutheran church as one of its funeral homes. A number of funeral home web pages present detailed histories of the former residence and its owners. Typically the cyber narrative offers insights to the rationale for using a large vintage residence as a funeral parlor. One history stated: “This lovely old home also helped to do away with the old stereotype of the ‘funeral parlor’ that was so common in those days. The new location would prove to be one of a warm and friendly atmosphere.”²

Although many of the funeral homes used large, rehabilitated aging houses, other types of structures serve the industry throughout the country. Besides the recycled church mentioned in the preceding paragraph, in Richmond Hill, Georgia (near Savannah), a local funeral parlor recycled a large frame building that once served as an important gathering place in auto magnate Henry Ford’s agrarian-based community developed in the 1920s. This structure originally was used as the Ford community center where employees and families gathered for various events and social gatherings as well as the center of local government. Two main street buildings used previously as a hotel, grocery store, and a dry goods emporium were converted to a funeral parlor in the 1920s in Golden, Colorado. In northern Wisconsin a local funeral home is located in a large house that underwent several transformations evolving from a “dance house” of the 1890s, a local hospital, a private residence, and finally a “home for funerals” in the 1950s. This particular structure is so noteworthy in this community that the daughter of the doctor who re-developed the building as a hospital in the

1890s published a book length history of the structure in 1978.³

It is not unusual that the evolving funeral home industry has adaptively recycled vintage houses and other buildings throughout the nation for a person’s final, social gathering. These rehabilitated buildings offer tradition, security, friendliness, and a symbolic sense of home, arguably one of the most basic almost mythic human affinities. A Springfield, Ohio, funeral home ended its web page history by noting, “While the mansion is now a place of business, it still remains a feeling of home.”⁴ In so doing, the modern American funeral home business has assumed a significant if unheralded role in the preservation of a portion of America’s past through its adaptive re-use of traditional style houses and other structures to serve contemporary end-of-life necessities.

Notes

- 1 Web page. Reichmuth Funeral Homes, Yutan, Nebraska, <www.reichmuthfuneralhomes.com>. The firm converted the church in 1989 with a minimum of alteration. Community reaction was positive concerning the adaptive re-use of an abandoned sanctuary. Email from Jon C. Reichmuth to Ron Johnson, February 8, 2001.
- 2 Web page, Littleton & Rue Funeral Home, Inc., Springfield, <www.littletonandrue.com/history.html>
- 3 Edith Dodd Culver, *610 Ellis and The Hospital Children* (Ashland, 1978), pp.93-95, 192-93, 202-205.
- 4 Web page, Littleton & Rue Funeral Home, Inc.

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