Project Description:

The Old City Cemetery in Lynchburg is the oldest active municipal cemetery in Virginia. Established in 1806 with one acre of land, it grew through the years to encompass its present 27 acres. It is an active place of burial and remembrance, but has also become one of the most popular attractions in the city with more than 33,000 visitors annually. From 1806 to 1824, everyone who died in the town of Lynchburg was buried here, and almost everyone from 1825-1860. During the four years of Civil War, Lynchburg served as the site of the second largest permanent Confederate hospital center in Virginia (Richmond was first). Three factors contributed to this: room for the soldiers in the large tobacco warehouses, the excellent railroad connections, and the remoteness from active battle lines. At the time of the war, Lynchburg boasted a population of 6,000; the hospitals in Lynchburg admitted in excess of 20,000 patients with nearly 3,000 deaths. Over 2,200 of those soldiers from fourteen different states are buried in the cemetery.

The City owns and maintains the cemetery grounds and buildings, but has had a unique contract with the Southern Memorial Association since 1866 to manage the historic property on behalf of the city. The official original purpose of the Southern Memorial Association (SMA) was to protect the Civil War graves with a permanent brick wall, and unofficially, to organize the parades and other events marking the sacrifices of so many. SMA helped Lynchburg grieve after the Civil War and shaped its collective memory of the event. This emphasis on the Confederate section of the cemetery continued for 127 years until the windstorm of June 1993. This windstorm and its 70mph microbursts raced along Virginia’s Route 460 corridor as part of a larger path of destruction that spread eastward from Missouri to North Carolina. The physical devastation wrought by the storm revealed a state of “benign neglect” in the rest of the cemetery.

From the date of this storm, the rehabilitation of the entire site includes the multi-faceted efforts of the City, the non-profit SMA community organization and thousands of volunteers. SMA sponsors five small museums on the site and numerous regular tours and events that tell various stories interpreting the life and times of the nearly 20,000 people buried in the cemetery. The grounds are also filled with hundreds of varieties of native and heirloom plants, such as an antique daffodil collection and the largest public collection of antique roses in the state. All of this has contributed to changing the Old City Cemetery from a forgotten and overgrown graveyard to a lively and bright location for events large and small.

SMA’s signature 150th anniversary project for 2016 was the construction of a “comfort house” to enhance the beauty and interest of the Cemetery, improve the overall visitor experience, and support the long-term sustainability of this historic site. It is no small task to construct a new building on such a significant site. The Comfort House is the result of nearly twenty-four months of careful effort for site selection, programming and design.

A talented team of committed volunteer gardeners, a landscape architect, and the architect searched for possible building locations within the 27 acre site. Together the team considered grades, aspects, service access, utilities, significant landscaping, and future programming. Simultaneously, the committee analyzed the programmatic needs to distill the wish list down to a modest sized, multi-purpose room/bridal parlor, public toilets, and catering support space. The program and size of the proposed construction swelled and shrank by alternates as different locations were tested.

After one year of diligent efforts by the design committee, a concept scheme and design principles were developed that would guide the design as it moved forward. This new “comfort house” would be located near the Bicentennial Chapel; it would emulate the 2:3 proportions of the Chapel; it would not exceed one-third the size of the Chapel, so as to read “little sister to big sister”; it would not be as “finished” as the Chapel in materials and aesthetics; it would read more as a gardener’s tool shed, and it would resolve an accessibility issue to the Chapel’s lower level Columbarium. The design committee allowed an additional generous year of design iterations to resolve the specific site issues, to incorporate historically significant salvaged and donated materials, and to relocate landscaping at the optimal dormant time.

The Comfort House is a small, two-story building located beside the 2016 Bicentennial Chapel, along the Cemetery’s main driveway. It provides a private parlor, outdoor terrace, and restroom facilities for the many weddings, funerals, theatrical performances, school tours, and other events now held in and near the Chapel. This special anniversary gift begins a new chapter in the life of this unique “grave garden.”

Category: Architecture
Early sketches show the key design elements. Front and rear porches were added as sheltering elements, and to help resolve the topographic challenges.
The Bridal Parlor is located on the upper level of the comfort house, to correspond with the chapel entry. The final design included a first floor restroom, intended to appear “built over time.” This first floor meeting room also accommodates private rentals for 8-12 people.
Public restrooms and a catering support space are located on the lower level of the Comfort House. A wide resin-bound gravel path provides a much-needed, accessible link from the main drive to the active columbarium in the chapel's lower level. Large stone steps lead back to the chapel's upper level entry.
Once the location was determined next to the Bicentennial Chapel, several design principles were established. One of these was the 2:3 proportions and the limitations on overall size. The comfort house would read as “little sister” to the chapel - her “big sister.”