BOSTON UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

LIKE A REAL HOME:

THE RESIDENTIAL FUNERAL HOME

AND AMERICA'S CHANGING VERNACULAR LANDSCAPE, 1910 – 1960

by

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ABSTRACT

American undertakers first began relocating from downtown parlors to mansions in residential neighborhoods around the First World War, and by midcentury virtually every city and town possessed at least one funeral home in a remodeled dwelling. Using industry publications, newspapers, photographs, legal documents, and field work, this dissertation mines the funeral industry's shift from business district to residential district for insights into America's evolving residential landscape, the impact of consumer culture on the built environment, and the communicative power of objects.

Chapter One and Two describe the changing landscape of professional deathcare. Chapter Three explores the funeral home's residential setting as the battleground where undertakers clashed with residents and civil authorities for the soul of America's declining nineteenth-century neighborhoods and debated the efficacy and legality of zoning. The funeral home itself became a site for debate within the industry over whether or not professionals could also be successful merchants. Chapters Four and Five

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demonstrate how an awareness of both the symbolic value of material culture and the larger consumer marketplace led enterprising undertakers to mansions as a tool to legitimate their claims to professional status and as a setting to stimulate demand for luxury goods, two objectives often at odds with one another.

Chapter Five also explores the funeral home as a barometer of rising pressures within retail culture, from its emphasis on merchandising and democratized luxury to the industry's early exodus from the downtown as a harbinger of the postwar decentralization of shopping to the suburbs. Amidst perennial concerns over rising burial costs and calls for greater simplicity, funeral directors created spaces that married simplicity to luxury, a paradox that became a hallmark of modern consumer culture.

Notwithstanding their success as retail spaces, funeral homes struggled for acceptance as ritual spaces. Chapter Six follows the industry's aggressive campaign to dislodge the home funeral using advertisements that showcased the funeral home's privacy and homelike comforts. In the end, a heightened emphasis within consumer culture on convenience and the funeral home's ability to balance sales and ceremony solidified its enduring and iconic place within the vernacular landscape.