

Cemetery wall enhanced by landscape plan

SEVERAL years ago, a major spat popped up about the battered brownstone walls that surround the Grove Street Cemetery.

A member of the standing committee of proprietors of the cemetery, Charles Ellis, engaged Yale School of Architecture Dean Robert A.M. Stern to draw up plans to remove some sections of the wall along Prospect Street.



DUO DICKINSON

The idea was to enhance that part of a streetscape that would become more active once the two Stern-designed Yale residential colleges are built.

In the end, the sanctity of the resting place of hundreds of souls trumped the desire for civic enhancement and the walls were not breached. That blowup had a whiff of *deja vu* of the history between the New Haven preservation community and Yale University.

But, a recent non-event at the same site offers a lesson that mutual accommodation can overcome historic suspicions.

More than 30 years ago, Yale heard the outcry when it contemplated tearing down the Davies Mansion on Prospect Street, and ultimately saved the structure to use it as the Betts Center.

The recent removal of buildings on Whitney Avenue to build Yale's new School of Management and the wholesale demolition of the site for the two new residential colleges has made preservationists and their allies antsy about Yale's sensitivity to both sustainability and New Haven's cultural heritage.

These recent removals of inconvenient buildings have called into question whether the weaving of new uses and old buildings was becoming unstitched by Yale's outsized importance to New Haven.

In the past few months, a new improvement has been suggested for the very same stretch of the Grove Street Cemetery wall that caused the flare-up. The potentially awkward removal of 18 Norway maple trees down the street from the super-Green



Eliezer Santiago/Register

Removal signs were posted to trees along the Prospect Street side of the Grove Street Cemetery in August.

Yale School of Forestry's Kroon Hall was proposed by Yale to once again soften that stretch of streetscape.

Those trees are of varying ages and sizes. Many of my arborist friends consider Norway maples to be junk trees because they are invasive, spreading quickly and choking off other plants.

In the vagaries of our human judgment, there are trees that are more noble than others, and apparently Norway maples are at the low end of the totem pole. To replace these 18 trees, Yale proposed planting 21 smaller oak trees.

But, it's not just replacing the trees that is contemplated. It's the creation of a quietly elegant raised bed coming off of the sidewalk, a sort of green hearth where a "planting curb" elevates the ground plane at which the new trees will be planted so that a clear, clean distinction can be made between a new concrete walk and a garden of daffodils and tulips that would surround these new scarlet oaks.

This proposal can be seen as the polar opposite of removing sections of the cemetery wall. The raised bed and consistent planting of a new generation of non-invasive trees dramatically reinforces the wall's presence, providing a rhythm and order of natural resonance with the unbroken

brownstone cemetery wall.

But, cutting down trees is about as controversial as removing built history.

This time, the potential for town-gown histrionics gave way to the give-and-take that is often sadly lacking when new ideas suggest change to beloved realities in nature or architecture.

New Haven's Department of Parks, Recreation and Trees has made Solomon proud with a decision that calls for seven of the Norway maples to be removed, and nine new oak trees to replace them.

Yale has agreed to prune and maintain the "junk" trees that remain. The Department of Parks has authorized Yale to: "if and when necessary, remove those trees as they require removal following the usual procedures of the tree warden."

No scorched earth. No knee-jerk worship of "invasive" species. A thoughtful approach to renovate a visual focus that avoids setting off a minefield of potential overreactions by the Yale, preservationist and natural correctness constituencies.

Duo Dickinson, an architect, writes about architecture and urban design for the Register. Readers may write him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison 06443. Email: duo.dickinson@snet.net.