

Expanding Access

The \$43M Green-House at Green-Wood Cemetery is ADA Accessible

By C.J. Lake



With a power wheelchair, visitor Monica Bartley was able to navigate the Welcome Center independently. Photo credit: C.J. Lake.

The newly restored Green-House at Green-Wood challenges the notion that a 19th-century Victorian Gothic cemetery is an inaccessible—or dreary—place.

“The entrance is wide,” notes power wheelchair user Monica Bartley of the entry courtyard designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. Inside the 19,200-square-foot Welcome Center visitors can browse the main exhibition gallery. Floor-to-ceiling “curtain windows” let the sun filter over cases of historic artifacts and curiosities connected to the lives of those who are interred, and the times in which they lived.

Items on display include Coney Island memorabilia, Hudson River School landscape paintings and MGM advertisements featuring actor Frank Morgan, who played the traveling fortune-teller Professor Marvel and the Wizard of Oz.

“I come here for the history and the free concerts—always Memorial Day to honor veterans,” said Deborah E. Reid, of Brooklyn.

Reid says the Welcome Center is the best starting point for a visit as she peruses photos of “permanent residents” artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, piano-maker Henry Steinway, Leonard Bernstein and the Freedom Lots that were established in 1840 for African Americans.

With a power wheelchair, Bartley says she's been able to navigate the Welcome Center

independently although “people who use walkers or canes might find the long walk from the center to the cemetery more challenging. The trolley is the best way to get around the grounds—it has a lift. There are steep hills and uneven ground. Walkways don't always have curb cuts.”

The attached 19th-century landmark Weir Greenhouse is the only standing Victorian commercial greenhouse in New York City. Fresh flowers are sold in the newly restored atrium Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10 am to 6 pm by a local pop-up vendor.

Construction on the project was partly funded with \$4.1 million from the state, \$2 million from the NY State Council on the Arts, \$1.5 million from Empire State Development, and \$600,000 from the state legislature as well as private support.

Full of cobblestone and steep rolling hills, the site is now more accessible for visitors who have mobility needs. The new \$43 million Welcome Center spans the corner of 25th Street and 5th Avenue in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The pleasing ADA-accessible site allows more than 500,000 annual visitors to immerse themselves in what was once the second most popular destination in New York state after Niagara Falls.

An accredited arboretum, Green-Wood annually welcomes more than 500,000 visitors. [June](#)

events include: birding; piano concerts in the catacombs; an outdoor storytelling event with performers and artists on a main stage; and a family-friendly “Juneteenth at Green-Wood” event June 19th from 10 am to 1 pm at the Modern Chapel.

While paths to some grave sites wend across uneven grass and cobblestone, the abundance of free, special events are always accessible by car, rideshare and Access-a-Ride. “The ground is sloping in some areas so visitors may experience difficulty in certain parts. But drive on in,” says Christy Jones, Development and Programming Coordinator. Parking within the cemetery is on the shoulder of the road.

The inspiration for Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park and nearby Prospect Park, Green-Wood was established in 1838

during the rural cemetery movement. According to Jones, “When originally built, it was a sprawling getaway from the city. All their graveyards were full and the stench had become a problem. Brooklyn had a lot more greenspace. It became the place to be on the weekends for carriage rides. Families would go on a Sunday outing, bring a picnic and relax in the shade at the cemetery.”

President of the Green-Wood Cemetery Meera Joshi said partnering with cultural, arts and educational nonprofits can alter a cemetery's reputation as a spooky place. She acknowledged, “Lots of people are nervous about walking into a cemetery. They associate it with their own mortality. With things that may be taboo in their culture. Green-Wood's staff keep up the magnificent landscape so that it invites reflection and fellowship.”

Bartley agrees. “I like the way Green-Wood presents death—they take out all the sadness. They present death as another stage of life. It's such a lively place to visit.”

The Green-House at Green-Wood Cemetery is free to visit and is open from Thursdays to Mondays, from 10 am to 6 pm daily.

To arrange specific accommodations that meet many needs, contact (718) 210-3080, ext. 1, or email events@green-wood.com.

C.J. Lake is a licensed special education teacher and author who lives in Brooklyn. Her book “Eugene Pioneers: Voices from the Oregon Frontier” (Arcadia/The History Press) will be released June 16.



The Green-House at Green-Wood, an inviting new and accessible Welcome Center just across the street from the Brooklyn cemetery's main entrance, opened to the public in April.