

Church Landmarking Offers a Brutal Lesson



Photos: Kim O'Connell

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The Third Church of Christ, Scientist—a rare example of Brutalism in Washington, D.C.—has been designated a historic landmark over its congregation's objections. What proponents hail as avant-garde and exemplary, others view as forbidding and flawed.

A hulking Brutalist church in Washington, D.C.—designed by the office of I.M. Pei—has been granted landmark status, preventing its congregation from redeveloping the building and igniting debates over the very roles that religion and historic preservation play in American life.

Located on 16th Street just two blocks north of the White House, the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, was designed in 1970 by Araldo Cossutta, who was a principal in Pei's practice before launching his own New York-based firm. The poured-in-place concrete

church is octagonal and mostly windowless, punctuated only by a jutting rectangular bell-cote. A small plaza connects the church with the adjacent Christian Science Monitor building, also designed by Cossutta.

Church leaders and congregants have long decried what they believe are deal-breaking design flaws: High walls and minimal windows shroud the 400-seat sanctuary in gloom, the heating and ventilation system is faulty, and the inward orientation of the front doors toward the plaza is off-putting to visitors, they contend. The congregation hopes

to demolish the structure and replace it with a new building that they say would better suit its small congregation and integrate with the historic 16th Street corridor. “The original design had nothing to do with the theology of Christian Science,” says J. Darrow Kirkpatrick, the church’s First Reader. “Cossutta is on record saying that it was his vision. Now, the newer members are saddled with the issues of low light, the inward entrance, and a plaza that goes no place.”

In a 7-0 vote on December 6, however, the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) effectively prohibited demolition by designating the church complex as a historic landmark. In a hearing before the vote, several board members called the church one of the city’s most significant examples of Brutalism, an offspring of Modernism characterized by heavy concrete walls and abstract geometries. Although the style is often criticized as oppressive and inhumane, the best Brutalist buildings are boldly artistic and visually arresting. In a city crowded with fluted columns and decorated pediments, a Brutalist building can offer relief and contrast.

“This case presents all the fault lines in historic preservation,” says Tersh Boasberg, HPRB chair. “One of them is landmarking churches, which has been a very controversial area for obvious reasons, and the fact that it was less than 50 years old....The third factor was that it was definitely ugly to a lot of people, and a lot of people had difficulty understanding that it’s something worth preserving. Finally, it is in a prime downtown real estate area, so you had these four factors working against the landmarking.”

What convinced the board, Boasberg says, was the oral and written testimony of more than 40 prominent architects, historians, preservationists, and others in support of the landmarking. He also cited the AIA’s *Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*, which states that both the Third Church and I.M. Pei’s office buildings at L’Enfant Plaza “stand well above the level of quality of similar buildings of the period in their maturity of concept and execution.” Richard Longstreth, a noted George Washington University professor of architectural history, testified that the building is in “a league of its own.”

“This building is striking, unusual, and precedent-setting,” Boasberg says,



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Although architect Araldo Cossutta included skylights, the windowless walls, lack of insulation, and faulty mechanical systems contribute to an often dark and dank worship space, church leaders say. Yet the ordered geometry of the building is undeniably striking.

“and even though a lot of people didn’t like it, it is a significant building and an important example of its style. Cossutta was a major designer for Pei. It seemed to us to fit the stature of a landmark.”

Many observers, not surprisingly, disagree—criticizing not only the

church’s muscular design but also what they say is a lack of connection with the urban environment. “[T]he Third Church building is more of a static urban sculpture than a vibrant, active building,” Arlington-based architect Thomas L. Kerns, FAIA, argued in a December



With its interplay of angles, light, and shadow, the Third Church succeeds as an urban sculpture. Its functionality as a church, however, has been challenged by its congregation.

3 letter to HPRB. “If we have learned our lesson from the failed experiments of Urban Renewal in the 1960s, it is that cities do not benefit from empty, lifeless spaces.” In an incendiary blog post about the landmarking, *Washington Post* reporter Marc Fisher called the HPRB the “preservation police” and invoked the hoariest cliché about preservationists—that the board wants “the city frozen in amber.” Comments on the post were divided.

An October 2007 analysis by Emily Eig, an architectural historian with EHT Traceries, a D.C. preservation firm, also challenges the board’s assertion that the church is a Brutalist masterwork. Eig quotes a September 2007 interview with Cossutta himself, in which the architect said that Brutalism was “the wrong word to describe the building,” preferring instead to describe it as an example of “skilled architectural engineering.” The analysis continues, however, with the claim that the building is not Brutalist as it came to be known, but instead emulates Le Corbusier’s raw concrete style known as *béton brut* (whose obvious semantic relationship to “Brutalism” may undercut her argument among some observers).

Beyond the realm of design, church leaders have further argued that the landmarking inhibits their First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. The D.C.-based Becket Fund for Religious Liberty submitted a letter to the HPRB stating that its vote may violate two federal laws that address governmental authority and landmarking as they relate to religious practice. Although HPRB did not address First Amendment issues during the hearing, Boasberg, a lawyer, asserts that several legal cases have held that the act of landmarking does not in itself violate the free expression clause or unduly burden religious organizations.

To appeal the HPRB ruling, the church may now file a lawsuit or seek demolition by claiming economic hardship through an office called the mayor’s agent. “I hope it doesn’t go that far,” says Boasberg, who has pledged to work with the congregation on a new development plan. “We do not want this to be a white elephant. We want it to be adaptively used. We want the church congregation to stay there.”

Kim O’Connell

— Kim A. O’Connell