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A Congregation Fights for the Right to Raze Its Ugly Church

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By JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN

At first glance, the continuing clash between the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, and Washington's Historic Preservation Review Board looks like dozens of others that have roiled American cities. A declining congregation considers demolishing its expensive-to-maintain church, only to be opposed by local preservationists, who argue that the building should be made a landmark.

The actions taken are the familiar ones. The congregation, which bitterly opposed landmark designation in December 2007, filed a federal lawsuit this August arguing that the designation violated its First Amendment rights by restraining its ability to practice religion freely. The District of Columbia responded by asking the court to dismiss the complaint on technical grounds, but urging the court to wait until the mayor's agent -- the chairman of the office of planning, which oversees the review board -- makes a decision. The mayor's agent has scheduled a hearing for Tuesday. If her decision goes against the District -- which seems unlikely -- all will be settled. Otherwise, both parties will return to federal court.

But this case is more outrageous than the norm, given the structure in question. Most such controversies swirl around church properties of a certain age, as when, in 1981, St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue in New York sought, in vain, to demolish its lovely community house in order to build a modernist tower alongside its renowned Byzantine church, constructed in 1916.

The Third Church's building, by contrast, is relatively new -- indeed, too new to be designated historic under federal law. Opened in 1971, it had been designed in Brutalist form by Araldo Cossutta, then of the architectural firm I.M. Pei & Partners. And if it weren't for the smallish sign naming the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, few people walking by the four-story, octagonal concrete structure in downtown Washington would guess that it housed a church. The only remotely religious indication of the building's purpose is a set of bells projecting outward from the carillon in the belfry. Unlike most Christian Science churches, it has no stained-glass or traditional windows -- just two horizontal slits on one side of the building. What's more, it presents two utterly blank beige walls to the street -- rather than the beckoning entrance traditional to church architecture. Its low, glass front door, hidden from passersby, faces neighboring office buildings.

Ironically, these are some of the characteristics that earned the building its landmark designation from the preservation review board, whose staff report called it "one of the best examples of Brutalism in the Washington area and one of the most important Modernist churches." It also praised the church's relationship to the office buildings for its "inward-focused unity."

J. Darrow Kirkpatrick, the congregation's first lay reader, acknowledges that "what we have in this building is inwardness, brutalism, roughness," but he sees this as inimical to Christian Science. "Ours is not an inward-looking, secretive religion," he says. "This building does not represent our theology or our beliefs." As church member and George Washington University historian David Alan Grier says, "The building's bunker look suggests a congregation not trying to reach the outside."

Still, an observer might well wonder why the congregation built such an unsuitable structure in the first place. Mr. Grier, who spent weeks in the church basement poring over old records, says that part of the problem was financial. Congregation members were financing the new building from their collection plates and therefore were open to the suggestion that they build their new church on a site already owned and being redeveloped into office building by the mother church. Having already hired I.M. Pei and Mr. Cossutta, church officials urged the congregation to do the same.

Trouble started almost immediately, recalls longtime church member Julia Cuniberti, who said the congregation had almost no negotiating power with Mr. Cossutta. "He said he had his vision -



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- take it or leave it. And mother church wanted us to build a much larger structure than we had planned in order to accommodate joint activities." While many members wanted a "normal church with a spire and columns in front," others thought the Cossutta design was "forward-looking" and right for the times. Ms. Cuniberti adds: "We were building just as Washington was being torn apart by riots. We were committed to downtown, but people were fleeing. Members said, OK, if we want to be downtown we have to protect ourselves."

Lack of money made the bunker design even harsher than intended. Originally, the building was supposed to have been covered in limestone or, failing that, textured concrete. Instead, the contractor used bare concrete, which has cracked over the years, causing damage to the interior as well; there is a persistent smell of mildew. Because the lack of windows keeps out most natural light, the architect installed high bulbs in the sanctuary. But they can't be replaced without first erecting scaffolding that's 80 feet high, an expensive enterprise. Even worse, says Ms. Cuniberti, the church lacks independent heating and cooling: "Our engineering systems are tied . . . to the office buildings. But we need service on the weekends, when they're closed. Combine that with the lack of insulation and you can see the problem."

The preservationists argue that all these things can be fixed -- and no doubt they can, with enough money. But the 40 or so who attend Sunday services in a building designed for 400 worshippers will not be able to manage. Why should church members be forced to pay for a building that they say is at odds with their theology?

For the sake of legitimate landmarks around the country, preservationists should rally to the side of the congregation. If this case goes forward, it will surely undermine the faith of many Americans in the justness of landmark regulations.

Ms. Vitullo-Martin is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

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