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Decision Saves a Church, Not a Building

By Marc Fisher
Tuesday, May 19, 2009

Score one for the little guy: Mayor Adrian Fenty's representative has ruled that members of a downtown church must be allowed to worship in a building of their choice, despite efforts by historic preservationists to landmark the 38-year-old concrete bunker of a sanctuary that the church wants to get rid of.

D.C. planning director Harriet Tregoning decided last week that historic preservation zealots may not force the Third Church of Christ, Scientist to keep its off-putting building on 16th Street NW near the White House. Tregoning, acting as the mayor's agent in the case, said the city must grant the church a permit to demolish the faceless, spiritually deadening 1971 building so that the church's members can afford to build a new downtown church more suited to celebrating their religious faith.

"The Mayor's Agent finds that the denial of the [demolition] permit would result in the inevitable demise of the Third Church as a downtown congregation," Tregoning wrote in her long-awaited decision on the church's appeal of a pro-landmark ruling by the D.C. historic preservation board.

Tregoning concluded that the Third Church's building, designed in the Brutalist style in a burst of 1960s passion for the avant-garde, was an "experiment" that "failed badly."

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sanctuary elsewhere.

Earlier this year, many hours of testimony in hearings before Tregoning centered on the church's claim that the District government may not tell a religious institution what kind of building it must have. But in her ruling, the mayor's agent steered clear of any discussion of First Amendment rights, limiting herself to the economic burden the church would face if forced to keep a landmarked building.

On that point, Tregoning accepted the church's argument entirely:

"The Church has little or no collateral to use to finance the extraordinary repairs needed and its members have no interest in paying for measures that would not meaningfully contribute to their worship experience," she wrote. "Nor can the Church walk away. While some congregations may freely move their location without losing their identity, that is not the case here. Throughout its history, this congregation has manifested an unwavering intent to remain where it is. Its location is its mission. To leave the area it has served since 1918 would be tantamount to its destruction. Yet, to remain in its present building would have the same result."

Tregoning was clearly taken with the testimony of church members who told of their commitment to keeping the church downtown and to finding a new home that could be more

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readily identified as a church building and more suited to the life of the spirit.

She rejected half-baked proposals by preservationists who suggested that the church could be converted into a restaurant, museum or gallery.

Tregoning wrote that the church should not be stuck with a home it despises just because it commissioned the building four decades ago. "Although the Church's present predicament results from design choices it agreed to, albeit reluctantly, those choices were made in the hope of achieving breakthrough architecture," she ruled. "To force this congregation to live with, and almost certainly die as a result of the failure of its experiment would dissuade others from choosing the novel over the mundane."

Tregoning ordered that the church not be demolished until the Christian Scientists have an approved plan for a replacement building.

The bulldozing of the Third Church will be a huge victory for common sense and for the rights of property owners against a small band of preservation extremists. Historic preservation is a good and essential process that helps salvage and maintain important symbols of our history, but when preservation rules are used to try to freeze the city in its current shape, it's time for a rebalancing of priorities. Tregoning has taken an important step in that direction. And don't worry -- Washington still has more than its share of Brutalist architecture, most notably the ghastly FBI headquarters and the strangely mesmerizing Forrestal Building, which houses the Energy Department.

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