

Modernist 16th Street church elicits preservation battle

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Next month, the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board will settle a long-unresolved question: Does the controversial Third Church of Christ, Scientist building deserve historic-landmark status?

The windowless, octagonal church structure at 16th and I streets NW has been a subject of contention since 1991, the date of the original landmark application. In the face of scholars and preservationists who praise the architectural merits of the building, the congregants argue that their house of worship is dark, forbidding and functionally impractical — and have asked the preservation review board to deny the application.

"We know the issues are emotional. We know they're also financial. They may be spiritual," said Tersh Boasberg, chair of the preservation board, at a recent hearing.

A developer's plans have highlighted the



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Congregants of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, oppose historic designation.

need for a final resolution for the long-pending case. ICG Properties, the company that now owns the land surrounding and underneath the church building, has visions of revamping and unifying the block of 16th Street between I and K streets, which also includes the Christian Science Monitor build-

ing and another office complex. The landmark designation would require the developer to obtain the board's permission to demolish or alter the church structure or the adjoining Christian Science Monitor building, which was built at the same time and is also covered in the application.

Preservationists who support the landmarking argue that the city cannot stand to lose such a striking modernist structure, which offers sharp contrast to more traditional churches in the area. Architect Araldo Cossutta, working for the internationally renowned firm I.M. Pei & Partners, designed the church in the late 1960s. Some scholars consider Cossutta's work a compelling example of an architectural style known as Brutalism, known for its stark forms and raw surfaces.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City, a civic organization that focuses on land use, nominated the church for historic designation

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in 1991, at word of the near-sale of the property, and the D.C. Preservation League joined shortly thereafter as a co-sponsor.

"This is not a few aesthetes or wacko fringe-types who are trying to put the screws to a religious organization to satisfy some minor need," said Richard Longstreth, an architectural historian and member of the Committee of 100. "This is a building ... greatly admired by people who know it all over the country. Many people consider it one of the most exceptional buildings of its era in Washington," he continued in an interview.

The church's congregation, though, has opposed the application from the start. In addition to disputing several key arguments of the application — some of which the nominating committee now say they are prepared to concede — the congregation is seeking the right to build a more practical structure.

Though the congregation was initially excited about Cossutta's unique building, "within less than 20 years, it became clear that the church wasn't working," church board member Whitney Louchheim said at a recent Dupont Circle meeting.

Church members have offered a host of reasons that the church is barely functional. The building is

environmentally unfriendly, an "energy hog" with its heating and cooling systems located, unpractically, in the Monitor building. The simple act of changing a ceiling light bulb requires a scaffolding system and costs thousands of dollars. The church's exterior concrete is deteriorating, and its dim interior lighting threatens basic functions, members contend.

Beyond practical concerns, the congregants also have more emotional arguments for wanting to revamp the church: The building is cold, inaccessible and not conducive to their mission or identity, they say. "You can come down I Street in either direction, and you can't tell who we are or what [the building] is," Darrow Kirkpatrick, a church member, said in an interview.

Former Washington Post architecture critic Ben Forgey praised the church and argued for its preservation, but he also acknowledged "the rough, mean way" the building faces I Street, with its imposing walls. "Strolling by, one thinks, irresistibly, 'bunker' — a forbidding impression that colors one's perception of the whole complex," he wrote in a Post critique.

"It's certainly fair to say that this place is unloved," Mike Silverstein, a Dupont Circle advisory commissioner, said in an interview.

Those who favor the, landmarking contend that the church's historical merit transcends modern tastes and the congregation's preferences. "You don't consign a Michelangelo to the garbage because its current owner doesn't like it," said Longstreth.

"The argument for keeping a lot of components of heritage is based on ... scholarship that researches the past and begins to understand its meaning," he said. "Otherwise, everything is simply whether people like it or not."

Conservancy groups in Foggy Bottom and Dupont Circle have passed motions supporting the landmarking. The controversial building — "not a Gothic cathedral or a nice little chapel on a New England green" — reflects "an urban environment that was strong, gutsy and defensive," Tim Bower of the Foggy Bottom Conservancy said at the recent hearing.

The opposing side has argued for a more practical approach that sympathizes with the congregation's current needs. "This is not a classroom; this is a living city," Silverstein said. "Buildings come and buildings go. We don't wrap everything up in plastic and keep it for future generations."

The Dupont advisory neighborhood commission voted unanimously last week to oppose the landmark application. In a letter to the Historic Preservation Office, the commission pointed to a Clinton-era act of Congress that prevents governments from implementing any land-use regulation that "imposes a substantial burden on the religious exercise" of a person or institution.

"There are very serious church-state issues" involved in the case, Silverstein said.

Though it acknowledges the building's flaws, a staff report by the Historic Preservation Review Board recommends that the church receive historic landmark status within D.C. and that the application go forward to the National Register of Historic Places. "It is always with reluctance, and fairly rarely, that we recommend a designation over an owner's objection," a staff member wrote in the report.

The complex case will reach a conclusion during a special Dec. 6 meeting of the preservation board. The public hearing will take place at 9 a.m. at 441 4th St. NW.