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Church fights landmark status

By Jen Haberkorn
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Members of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist fear that landmark status will hinder any attempts to renovate. (Bert V. Goulait/The Washington Times)

Historic preservationists are trying to grant landmark status to the Third Church of Christ, Scientist's building, a large concrete structure at 16th and I streets Northwest. One thing in their way? The church's members.

The church members say that the building no longer suits their needs and they want the freedom to possibly tear it down and replace it.

Each side is expected to present its case before the city's Historic Preservation Review Board today in a morning hearing. Both the church and the attached Christian Science Monitor building are up for landmark status.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City, a group that advocates responsible land use, and the D.C. Preservation League say the building is an important downtown church and an important example of the Brutalist architectural style — which relies on the use of many angles and exposed concrete.

David Grier, a member of the Third Church of Christ congregation who is scheduled to represent the church at today's hearing, said it is concerned that the building will become more important than the work being done inside and near it.

"Fundamentally, we're here to do a human service," he said. "We don't want the headline to be, 'Building saved, church departs.' "

Mr. Grier also said the church building, which cost \$1.2 million and was completed in 1970, no longer serves the community's needs. Churches of the '70s needed to accommodate large communal groups, he said. Now the assembly space is too large for the 60 or so members who attend weekly service and can't be broken down for small groups, he said.

Mr. Grier disputed many of the points in the Committee of 100's application, including claims that the Washington location was built to mark the Christian Science movement's 100th anniversary and that the church's stated goal was a strong Washington presence for the denomination.

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Mike Silverstein, the local advisory neighborhood commissioner, called the argument a "battle between those who worship architecture and those who worship God."

Brutalist architecture often gets a bad rap today because it appears cold, bare and plain. But the Committee of 100 says the building should be preserved for what it represents.

"It's a superb example in Washington of a Modernist church," said Sally Berk, a trustee of the Committee of 100. "It's also significant that the congregation chose to keep the church downtown during a time when an awful lot of people were fleeing downtown."

The staff at the Historic Preservation Review Board agrees with the committee and suggested that the board grant the building landmark status.

The staff report calls the building "a striking and overall architecturally successful composition of great importance to Washington as one of its best example of Brutalism as a style ... and particular construction method. Third Church is certainly one of the most important, if not the most important Modernist church in the city."

If the landmark status is denied, as Third Church wants, the church is going to "have a serious decision to make on where we go from here," Mr. Grier said, adding that they're "very seriously" considering building a new structure. If landmark status is granted, Third Church plans to appeal the decision to the mayor's office.

The application was originally filed in 1991 but tabled in hopes that the parties would come to an agreement. The land was sold by Third Church's parent organization, Christian Science Church, two years ago, bringing the issue to the forefront.