

'Ugliest' church wins fight to raze building: Third Church of Christ, Scientist

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In a much-watched controversy, city officials have cleared the way for a Christian Science congregation to raze what has been called Washington's "ugliest church" in a fight that has pitted the church against architectural preservationists.

Parishioners at the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, say their 1970s modernist church is crumbling, uninviting and too expensive for the small downtown flock to maintain. Church officials want to tear down the bunker-like structure, located two blocks from the White House, and replace it with a revenue-generating office building that includes space for the church.

On May 12, Harriet Tregoning, director of the city's Office of Planning and Mayor Adrian Fenty's agent for historic preservation, overruled a decision last year by the city's Historic Preservation Board that granted the building landmark status and prevented its demolition.

Preservationists say the building, with its windowless facade and concrete slabs, is a classic example of Brutalist architecture that should be maintained for future generations. In her ruling, Tregoning said forcing the congregation to maintain the building "would result in the inevitable demise of the Third Church as a downtown congregation" and would violate the spirit of the landmarking law.

Tregoning rejected arguments that the building could be retooled for new use as a restaurant or museum, but also sidestepped parishioners' First Amendment claims that they were being restricted from the "free exercise" of their religion. She said the church is free to pursue a demolition permit once a new building permit has been approved that includes replacement space for the church, either on the site or nearby.

Church officials could not be reached for comment, but Terry Lynch, executive director of the city's Downtown Cluster of Congregations, praised the decision. "Historic preservation was never meant to be more important than the very people or purposes that buildings were meant to serve," he said. "This 1970s Brutalist-designed building . . . would have bankrupted this congregation and forced it out of downtown, where it had been for 100 years. That makes no sense." -*Religion News Service*