

'Ugly' Washington church files suit to challenge its historic designation status: Third Church of Christ, Scientist

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A Christian Science church that some have called the ugliest church in Washington, D.C., has filed a federal lawsuit challenging the historic landmark designation on the windowless 37-year-old building.

Leaders of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, terming the current structure “bunker-like” and “unwelcoming,” reiterated on August 7 their desire to replace the stark concrete building with a new church at the same location.

“Little is more representative of a church’s religious exercise than its architecture, and we do not feel this architecture properly represents us to our community,” said Darrow Kirkpatrick, a former lay leader at the church.

The city’s Historic Preservation Review Board contends that the building, located three blocks from the White House, offers a unique example of the modernist architectural style known as Brutalism.

“Third Church is a rare modernist church in the city, and the complex possesses amazingly high integrity . . . down to the original carpeting and seat upholstery in the church auditorium,” said David Maloney, the state historic preservation officer for the District of Columbia, in a statement.

The lawsuit alleges that the designation ignores two federal statutes that protect religious groups’ freedom of exercise.

Anita Hairston, chief of staff for the city’s office of planning, said the department does not comment on litigation that is pending or under way.

Araldo Cossutta, an associate of the famed architect I. M. Pei, designed the building, which was completed in 1971. Shortly thereafter, Kirkpatrick said, church members began to complain about their new house of worship.

Kirkpatrick said the building's interior design forces the church to spend as much as \$8,000 per year on scaffolding to use in replacing light bulbs, and drives up heating and air-conditioning expenses.

The board granted the building landmark status last December over the protests of church members; on July 24, a church application to demolish the building was denied.

Under city law, members now have a right to a hearing with a third party from the mayor's office. A positive ruling from the mayor's agent, Kirkpatrick said, could cause him to reconsider the lawsuit. *-Religion News Service*