

Brutalism

Many of the world's most beautiful buildings are churches and religious edifices. Architecture ranges from simple New England meeting houses to vast cathedrals (Norman, Gothic, Byzantine, and Romanesque) to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to Temple Emanu-El in New York. Ugly churches — and their numbers are legion — seem offensive, even blasphemous.

Washington's Third Church of Christ, Scientist, sits only a few blocks from the White House. A neighbor, St. John's Episcopal

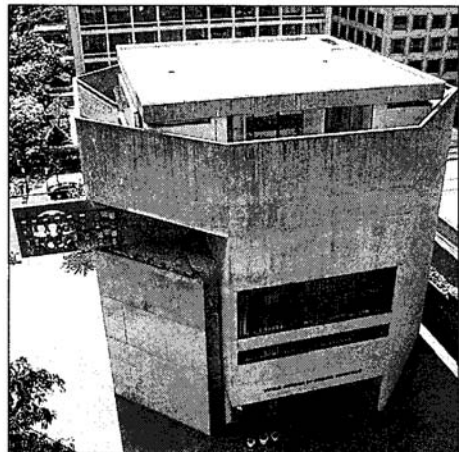


PHOTO BY ROBERT FRAZIER

Church on Lafayette Square, is one of the capital's loveliest. No one would describe Third Church that way.

Built in the late 1960s, it is an example of the so-called Brutalist school — a style celebrated by scholars but deplored by real people. The façade catches the eye for a second or two, then assaults it for eternity. The interior

appalls, too. Visitors suspect the pile was not designed by Christopher Wren, whose St. Paul's Cathedral and other works endure because he considered himself God's instrument. Neither would many mistake Third Church for Wayfarers Chapel, a Swedishborgian shrine on the California coast.

The Washington congregants do not like their building very much, either. The dwindling numbers in the auditorium find the place burdensome to maintain. There has been talk of a sale, and of plans to raze the church and replace it with something as gentle as a beatitude. The church's harsh aspect mocks the "God Is Love" message hammered into rock over the readers' platform.

Third Church ought to determine its own destiny, but cannot. The District of Columbia has given the building landmark status, which means changes must go through an Architectural Review Board. The church did not seek the designation — which could complicate efforts to sell, renovate, or replace. Indeed, it has challenged the decision on the grounds that it violates the separation of church and state. Third Church enjoys the support of parishes from diverse denominations; religious liberty groups side with it as well. Others speak of a compromise in which the structure is preserved in a manner the church can afford.

It may be possible to justify preservation of Third Church as an example of the visual injury architects can inflict. A compromise could include subsidies for maintenance, although they surely would bring additional lawsuits regarding church-state issues. Although there is little doubt that preservation makes cities more livable, specific interventions are not always right. In the instance of Third Church, the questions run into the First Amendment. The right to worship trumps the city's power to preserve. Third Church wins the argument. This also might be an appropriate moment to reiterate our belief that a Reconstruction-era Virginia law on church governance violates the Constitution as well. The District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of Virginia need to stop brutalizing the sacred sphere.

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