



SWITCHBOARD

Natural Resources Defense Council Staff Blog

[Kaid Benfield's Blog](#)

"Brutal" preservation

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My first thought when I heard about this was, *you've got to be kidding me*. But nope, the concrete bunker you see to the left of this paragraph, actually a church building in downtown Washington, is about to be designated a historic landmark. Here are the things it is not: older than 50 years, as must be the case under the usual rule; well-suited to its congregation, which wants to build a smaller, better church on the site; making any positive contribution whatever to passers-by or the city's streetscape. I mean, let's face it: this building is not very attractive and certainly not historic.

In fact, notice the resemblance to the sad building of the University of the District of Columbia, in the second photo. You may remember what I had to say about UDC's unfortunate architecture in my [very first entry](#) on this blog.



Now here's what the church building *is*: a little over three decades old, built in the 1970s, not exactly a banner decade for architectural quality in this country; and, according to the city's preservation staff, "one of the best examples of *Brutalism* in the Washington area." I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried.

As the Washington Post's Marc Fisher put it in an [excellent recent column](#), "that must be cheering to the souls who might wander into the church seeking spiritual uplift. Sorry for your pains, my good man, won't you enter our dark, forbidding chamber and soak in our Brutalism?"

The column continues: "For those of us who may not be professional architects, Brutalism is 'the use of exposed, unadorned, roughly cast concrete to construct buildings of stark forms and raw surfaces,' the city report says with great admiration." I learned about all this from Fisher's column, and he says the rest better than I can. Check it out. Sheesh.

Unfortunately, this immediately brought to mind another perverse use of preservation law, brought by some [NIMBYs](#) in a neighborhood not far from mine who decided to fight the modernization of the 'hood's Giant



Foods supermarket.

The next two photos are of the "landmark" in question. Good heavens. While working with the store's parent company on design options that best fit the neighborhood is a fine idea, and one I would strongly endorse, twisting preservation laws to landmark an ordinary, mediocre building and tie the zoning approval process up in knots is not.

Unfortunately, that has been exactly the result. The trouble with the old, 1960s-style box of a grocery store is that it is not adding any charm to the neighborhood and, more importantly, is way too small and crowded to accommodate local shoppers' needs. The environmental result? People who live nearby drive to the suburbs where they can find a real supermarket to buy their groceries. While this costs fuel and emissions, as well as time, it is completely understandable, if what they have nearby is inferior. These pseudo-preservationists never have spoken for the community as a whole, by the way. (See page three of [this newsletter](#) for a retort from the other side.)



This exercise in civic engagement began over eight years ago and, although rumor has it that the NIMBYs have now decided that they would like a new store after all, oriented to the street and with some residences and other mixed uses in the building, nothing is happening as far as I can see. Long ago, when the owners of the Giant anticipated going forward, they let the leases expire on the other businesses that were on the same block. Where the neighborhood (Cleveland Park, one of Washington's loveliest) used to have a wonderful independent bookstore, a Chinese restaurant, and a general store in the block along with the market, now they just have boarded-up entrances and a long, low, useless relic of a building.

I still have a feeling this will work out in the long run, but this delay has accomplished very little and has been totally unnecessary.

And, worse, when people consider examples like the downtown church and the neighborhood supermarket, they lose respect for historic preservation and the millions of good citizens who support the cause in the right way.



I am proud to be one of those. I give money every year to the [National Trust](#), one of my favorite organizations. I am a big fan and professional friend of their president, Dick Moe, who frankly has done more to put smart growth on the national public agenda than any leader of an environmental group. Their staff is awesome. The work they do in preserving not just buildings but historic communities, and refurbishing Main Streets is some of the best work in our broader movement. I have no doubt that they win every time someone does something like this, because they know it hurts their cause.

I'm sure we don't always get it right, but we try to use that same sort of good judgment at NRDC. We're known for seeking enforcement of environmental laws, but we also try to think carefully before bringing any particular case to make sure we're not hurting the broader cause or, as many environmentalists learned the hard way in the early days of our movement, inviting the legislature to overturn our "victory" because they see that our use of the law brings results that they did not intend.

I am just fine with a downtown free of "Brutalism," thank you very much, and I also want a better grocery store in the neighborhood, too. Surely we can have these things while focusing our preservation efforts on the parts of our heritage that are really worth saving.