

KERNS GROUP
ARCHITECTS

December 3, 2007

Mr. Tersh Boasberg, Chair
Historic Preservation Review Board
801 North Capitol Street, NE; Suite 3000
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Mr. Boasberg:

We are keenly aware that the architectural community is divided over the issue of applying historic preservation standards to modern architecture and we believe that the current debate over the Landmark Application of Third Church of Christ Scientist comes out of that division.

Just to be clear, we are in absolute support of preserving our architectural heritage, including the best buildings out of classically modern sensibilities from the 20th century. Unfortunately, the Third Church and Monitor buildings are not the best of that period and do not meet the standards for Landmark status. The buildings on this site just do not compare to the historic and architectural contribution of other nearby projects, including Latrobe's St. John's Episcopal Church just down the street. Preserving the Third Church building as the work of a creative master would also undermine the fact that the city already has better examples of both Brutalism and the work of I. M. Pei's office from the same time.

For the first fifteen years of practice, our firm was located in the District where we had frequent opportunities to walk by Third Church. It always seemed vacant, inward and inactive. This past year, we conducted detailed interviews with the church members and discovered that the building has never functioned for its intended use and that it does not meet the needs of their interior space planning requirements. In addition, we found out that the church's original input was largely ignored by the designer and that the image of the building does not represent the church's vision for its mission in the community. Each of these characteristics is integral to works of modern architecture just as much as the aesthetically sculptural qualities of the design. To disregard them is to disregard the design as a whole and to undermine the notability of other well-designed buildings that successfully achieve these goals. According to structural engineers who have reviewed the project and even Aldo Cossutta's own descriptions of the extent to which he integrated mechanical, electrical, and structural systems into the design, it would be nearly impossible to modify or adapt the building.

Removing all the other intrinsic qualities of design leaves only the sculptural attributes. Considered in this context alone, the Third Church building is more of a static urban sculpture than a vibrant, active building. If we learned our lesson from the failed experiments of Urban Renewal in the 1960's, it is that cities do not benefit from empty, lifeless spaces and that cities should not force owners to retain places that destroy their character and mission. It forces people out of our cities and into the suburbs and, if this were to happen to Third Church, the building would be irreversibly converted to just a piece of sculpture, entirely devoid of people, activity, and the character that comes from faithful people working out their lives in our communities. In short, it would cease to be architecture and preserving it would be without merit. We believe the city and this corner would be better served by denying the Landmark Application and allowing the church to faithfully fulfill its mission as it sees fit.

Sincerely,

KERNS GROUP ARCHITECTS, P.C.



Thomas L. Kerns, FAIA