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Church cleared for demolition: Building goes so that Church can survive

May 13, 2009

Washington, D.C. May 13, 2009 - Today a District of Columbia official cleared the way for the Third Church of Christ Scientist to demolish its bunkerlike "Brutalist" building three blocks north of the White House. The District's Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) had landmarked the building, claiming that it is an example of "low bar Brutalism" a mid-20th Century school of French architecture that typically involves large expanses of windowless concrete. In the decision, Mayor's Agent Harriet Tregoning upheld the church's appeal from the HPRB's landmarking decision, holding that the church would "almost certainly die" if it were required to remain in the Brutalist building. She also made clear that forcing the church to "move out of downtown would destroy its identity and mission."

"We're happy the District has finally recognized that it should not kill churches in the name of historic preservation," said Eric Rassbach, national litigation director at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a civil rights law firm that represents the church. "Although this does not resolve all of the issues in the lawsuit, it is important statement that the people inside the building are more important than the building itself."

The congregation felt that the windowless concrete facade spurns visitors and passersby instead of welcoming them. The decision came after a multiyear dispute between the congregation, preservationist groups, and the HPRB.

The Becket Fund is jointly representing the church with Roman Storzer of Storzer & Greene.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty is a nonpartisan, interfaith, public-interest law firm dedicated to protecting the free expression of all religious traditions.

Related Links:

- [Decision to allow demolition.](#)
- Initial Becket Fund [legal opinion letter](#) to the Historic Preservation Review Board informing it that it risks violating federal and constitutional law if it uses landmarking laws to impose a substantial burden on the congregation's religious expression. The letter focuses on the applicability of two federal laws, the [Religious Freedom Restoration Act \(RFRA\)](#), which applies to instrumentalities of the District, and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) which applies to landmarking decisions specifically.
- Also see www.rluipa.com.

The Washington Post has covered this story with two columns linked below:

- [State vs. Church: March of the Preservation Police](#)
- [Church Gets Landmark Status Over Congregation's Objections](#)

For more information: Please contact Kristina Arriaga at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty at karriaga@becketfund.org or cell 703.582.8962.

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