

November 1, 2007
Historic Preservation Review Board

Testimony by Benjamin Forgey
concerning
Architectural Significance
of the

Third Church of Christ, Scientist
and Christian Science Monitor Building,
Washington, D.C.

All of us who are attentive to the architectural character of our city are familiar with the questions, "Why do I love this building? What are its outstanding qualities? What especially does it contribute to its particular setting, and to the city as a whole?" We ask these questions all of the time. In this way, the vocation of architecture critics and the members of this distinguished panel are very much the same.

So, as you know, I am here as an architecture critic to tell you that I very much admire a particular building, and why I do so, and to suggest answers to those other important questions. In just a few words, I assure you. For the record, I would like to point out that, back in the early 1990s, I wrote a column in the Washington Post testifying to my admiration of this architecture.

The building at point is of course the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, and the Christian Science monitor Building, on the northwest corner of 16th and I Streets NW. The very name suggests one of its primary aesthetic and emotional characteristics: It is not a single

building. Rather, it is a pair of buildings, separated by a crisp, minimally landscaped space. The word separated, though technically correct, is precisely the wrong word. Its opposite tells the truth: This is a pair of buildings intentionally and effectively *united* by the space in between.

The evidence that the three pieces were designed as an ensemble is there for the eyes to see. First, we cannot help but acknowledge the dramatic, effective contrast in shapes, the octagonal mass of the worship house playing against the flat plane of the office building. Then, there are the telling similarities. Both buildings are clad in board-formed concrete panels with similar, subtle detailing, and with large, long glass windows framed top and bottom by horizontal blades of metal. The architectural vocabulary is the same, down to the reveals between the concrete panels, although the more powerful gestures of piercing and shaping are appropriately reserved for the church building.

And then, there is the triangular grass panel between the two, a bit gussied up now with those little Victorian flower beds at the angles, but still a powerful spatial statement uniting the two architectural pieces. In plan, we see an octagon and a rectangle, held in an appealing, dynamic equilibrium by the green triangle projecting outward into the broad public spaces framing 16th Street. The detailing is so simple here, so careful and nice_manicured grass; broad border made of strong gray granite, and beautiful narrow bricks in a herringbone pattern. In three dimensions, as we walk by or around the ensemble, it comes together convincingly_the play of forms, the contrasting textures, the unifying details.

There are lots of additional things to be said in favor of this architecture, and I should say, some things not so in favor_that hard I Street elevation, with ~~the~~ that necessary but lamentable fire door, is not the stuff that

great streets are made of. But even that negative aspect clearly derives from the intention to create an inward-facing ensemble that, nonetheless, opens itself quietly to the urbane character of one of Washinton's more notable streets—the street of churches, as it is often called. When I ask myself, what is the best thing about this architecture, what is its lasting contribution to the city, I answer as follows: The evidence of the eyes—and ears, too, when that wonderful carillon calls out—tells us that this is a strong, distinguished ensemble that offers a welcome, appealing, refined, quiet visual oasis to the busy city. That, I believe, is a rare quality eminently worth saving.