

Summary of “Third Church – A Hard Building to Love” Symposium
June 21, 2009

The purpose of the symposium was to use the Third Church of Christ Science building at 16th and Eye Streets, N.W., Washington, DC, as an example to demonstrate the challenges of modernizing a mid-century modern building. The goal of the symposium was to show how historic preservation can be flexible and can meet the needs of property owners and building occupants. The event was well-attended, with over 100 in the audience.

Denise Johnson, local preservation consultant and former Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) member, moderated the symposium. The first part of the program consisted of a review of mid-century modern architecture, with an emphasis on the “Beton Brut” or Brutalism style, as exemplified by the Third Church. Local preservation activist and architectural historian Sally Berk led a presentation on the historic significance of the church building. Architect David Fixler of Einhorn, Yaffee, Prescott followed with a presentation on other examples of mid-century buildings and how they have been compatibly altered.

The second part of the program consisted of a panel discussion. Architect and urban planner Charles Trace discussed the challenges of maintaining and altering mid-century modern buildings. Preservation architect Arthur Cotton Moore and landscape architect Carol Johnson presented lively schemes to increase the size of the church building and re-landscape the courtyard to make it more welcoming. Finally, attorney Lou Cohen (also a former board member of Partners for Sacred Places) presented solutions that congregations across the country have saved their historic buildings and have found creative ways to maintain a small congregation in an urban setting.

Feedback following the symposium has generally been good. It was an important step in healing the rift that the controversial Third Church case has created between preservationists and the development and religious communities. It was successful in giving historic preservation a “human” face.

Denise Johnson
6/25/09