HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 08-13

First Church of Christ, Scientist
1770 Euclid Street NW
Square 2560, Lot 872

Meeting Date:	October 2, 2014
Applicant:	Adams Morgan Main Street Group
Affected ANC:	1C
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate First Church of Christ, Scientist, at 1770 Euclid Street NW, a landmark to be entered in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the Board request that the State Historic Preservation Officer forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1912, the date of the building's completion.

The property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types… or are expressions of… design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia," specifically for being a fine example of a grand neoclassical church.

Background
First Church of Christ, Scientist was erected in 1912, intended as a permanent home for the first Christian Science congregation of Washington. Established in 1895 and first meeting in the homes of its members, First Church had had at least two other houses or worship (including a former Methodist church at 15th and R Streets) before deciding to custom-build its own sanctuary.[1]

The lead architect was probably Edwin D. Ryerson, a member of the congregation and its building committee, and a member of the prominent Washington architectural firm of Marsh & Peter. Marsh & Peter and the major local builder Boyle-Robertson Construction Company received the commission. They designed and erected an auditorium of gray tapestry brick in the form of a Greek cross atop a square base of gray sandstone. An ionic sandstone portico is the frontispiece.

[1] The congregation of Second Church was the first in Washington to erect its own chapel, in 1900. Second Church combined with First Church, however, before the latter's Euclid Street edifice was erected. Another Second Church congregation was founded later.

The building is a striking example of Roman neoclassicism characteristic of the City Beautiful movement, monumental while exhibiting sensitive treatment of details and texture.

Evaluation

The property possesses added significance as an early building associated with the first Christian Science congregation in the District of Columbia, but it was not the first house of worship for that congregation.

Still, the building's architecture is an expression of the denomination, especially as it was the first that this congregation built. Christian Science was by no means alone among Christian denominations for taking an interest in the architecture of its buildings. But as a young denomination competing for adherents, impressive architecture became a signal that Christian Science had arrived and was vital. This may seem ironic, because among the group's central tenets was the idea that matter is ultimately illusion, and salvation is mostly an individual spiritual pursuit. But the apparent contradiction is no more unusual than other sects' displays of material wealth despite their emphasis on an afterlife. But Christian Science's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, stressed not only individual awakening to oneness with the mind and spirit of God, but also the *demonstration* of the power of God's spirit in day-to-day life. In practice, this played out in many ways. One of these was a nonpartisan reformist bent in social and political matters. Another, less ideal manifestation among some followers, was the belief that, if one applied the precepts of the faith to one's life, one would naturally be rewarded materially.[2] These trends of thought intertwined and appealed to middle-class adherents, who joined the church in large numbers around the turn of the twentieth century. The majority of church members in the first half of the century were professionals, office workers and businessmen. As a consequence, many Christian Science churches ultimately reflected the relative affluence of the congregations, as well as a certain class-self-consciousness. A house of worship became a statement about the faith practiced within, and faiths competed for followers in a very real way, believing that the stakes included salvation itself.

At the turn of the century, Christian Science churches reflected their faith's modern, utopian outlook.[3] They also reflected the rapid growth of the church in the cities of the Midwest especially, adopting the neoclassicism of the Columbian Exposition and the City Beautiful movement which became the preferred mode of the esteemed architects they hired. In subsequent decades, church architecture would keep up with the times; important Modern movement examples include the expansion of the Boston "Mother Church" complex and the construction of a "representative" church in the center of the national's capital by I.M. Pei & Partners, and Harry Weese's design for Seventeenth Church in Chicago.

The Christian Science church shared with the City Beautiful movement the belief that its architecture could positively shape the behavior of citizens. As a consequence, its edifices were typically sited in prominent locations in commercial and institutional corridors to attract new members and were "bright, modernized, comfortable, yet neo-classical monuments," that drew on ancient precedents, but eschewed overtly religious symbolism.

[2] This grew out of two conspicuous aspects of business life at the turn of the twentieth century: its precariousness and its rapaciousness.

[3] Even Christian Science's rejection of much of the practice of medicine could then be seen as modern; in part, skepticism at both quackery and the deficiencies of licensed medicine.

First Church of Christ, Scientist was identified as historically significant in the 1991 comprehensive plan for the District of Columbia and has been recognized since in the subsequent plans as one of the most important resources in the "Mid City" area of the District and one of the more important houses of worship for its architecture.

While the history of the church and congregation undoubtedly influenced the design of the building, it is less clear the degree to which the building or congregation influenced the history of the neighborhood or city. The nomination points out that the building was naturally a visual landmark in its prominent location, but it does not make a case for contributions other than to neighborhood character.

This, of course, is the tricky aspect of evaluating houses of worship: there are many of them, widely distributed, and they all tend to contribute to the character and the development of a neighborhood or city, but often in ways that are not easy to document or to distinguish from their peers. It is for this reason that the National Register does not strongly encourage nominating religious properties. It is difficult to compare most houses of worship except on the basis of design. Of course, obvious exceptions are where there are very compelling associations with events or individuals. If there is a case to be made for distinctive contributions of the congregation, it is not presented in the nomination. As a consequence, it is recommended that the property be designated for its architectural significance alone, and not for history (as is claimed in the nomination), other than as the design illustrates broader trends in the nation's and the denomination's architecture.