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New England Chapter

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

Mary O'Neil
Principal Planner for Development Review
City of Burlington
Office of Permitting & Inspections
745A Pine Street
PO Box 849
Burlington, VT 05402-0849

Re: Burlington Cathedral

Dear Ms. O'Neal,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the fate of one of America's great mid-Century modern religious properties, the former Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Burlington, VT. This property is exceptional in several respects, being a rare collaboration among several internationally prominent designers, an imaginative architectural response to changes in liturgical doctrine, a contribution to international debates about church architecture, and an inspired response to its urban setting. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the building and landscape be retained and incorporated into a new use for the property and not destroyed. With serious thought and consideration, a creative solution for how to adapt this property for new use can be identified. We strongly encourage you to pursue a path of sensible redevelopment of this important property in a manner that retains and celebrates the existing building and landscape. The property can be relegated to profane use by the church, and deed restrictions can ensure that it is only used for appropriate and respectful activities in the future.

The Cathedral replaced an important Gothic Revival predecessor of 1864 by prolific church architect Patrick Keely, which had been destroyed by an arsonist's fire in 1972. The new building was created by Edward Larrabee Barnes (1915-2004) and lead designer Alistair Bevington in 1974 and opened in 1977. Barnes combined elements of modern and vernacular architecture and his understated designs profited from his fine sensibility for space light and materials. Prominent landscape designer and Vermont resident Dan Kiley created the park-like setting with its grid of 123 honey locust trees, and renowned stained-glass artists Robert Sowers and David Wilson were responsible for the windows. Architect Toshiko Mori, who was just starting her career at the time, worked on the interior design and furnishings. She then went on to establish her own firm and teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, becoming the first female faculty member to earn tenure in the program. As such, the Cathedral is a collaboration between three major figures in American Architecture. While Barnes and Kiley have passed, Toshiko Mori runs a very successful practice in New York City.

The Cathedral is also an important example of the changes and innovations in Catholic church architecture following the 2nd Vatican Council (1962 to 1965). Its fan shaped seating enables the “full and active participation” of the congregation, which the Council had encouraged. While the five-sided sanctuary with seating for 450 in a half circle took some inspiration from H.H. Richardson’s Billings Library at the University of Vermont, many details, such as the copper roof and clerestory, hint at international influences, such as Jørn Utzon’s Bagsværd Church in Copenhagen, built at the same time.

The building’s urban context could hardly be more prominent. It is only one block away from Burlington’s urban core, the pedestrian zone on Church Street, and three blocks from the waterfront. In an area disfigured by large *urban renewal* in the 1960s and 1970s, its central location on its urban plot, and the surrounding grove of locust trees provides coherence and a calm respite from the visual unrest surrounding it. The church’s traditional east-west orientation allows for western access from a parking area, but also provides for two pedestrian routes, crossing through Kiley’s locust grove towards its side entrances. The free-standing bell tower commemorates the location of the previous church at the plot’s corner and carries its bell, rescued from the ruins of the destroyed cathedral.

Modern Architecture has produced only a very limited number of important ecclesiastical structures. The Cathedral in Burlington is one of them. Its demolition would represent a significant loss for American and International Mid-Century Modernism. It would also represent a significant loss to the urban fabric of downtown Burlington, eroding the very qualities that make Burlington unique.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dietrich Neumann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Dietrich Neumann

Professor of the History of Art and Architecture

Director, John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage

President, Docomomo New England