

# Classicism by Decree

Julia Friedman

IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE TRUMP administration doesn't subscribe to the idea of federal funding for arts and humanities. Its 2019 proposed "Budget for America's Future," once again, placed the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in a section on "wasteful and unnecessary funding." But just as the arts and humanities are declared inessential, the White House made it a public priority to turn the architectural clock back, drafting an executive order titled "Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again." For an administration well versed in the optics of success, such manifested awareness of architecture's symbolic and ideological significance to any long-term political project makes perfect sense. Their 2019 Independence Day extravaganza in Washington, D.C. (repeated, albeit on a slightly reduced scale against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020) was just one recent example of splurging on pageantry, and their timing of the executive order in the run-up to the 2020 elections indicates the sociopolitical urgency of the outlined changes.

I first learned about the executive order from architecture-themed publications on my social media feed in early February—both *Dwell* and *Architectural Record* ran articles about the pending order that would mandate a "classical architectural style" for all federal buildings. Given the sources, the

articles did not appear to be fake news, so I followed a digital trail to the document itself, finding its PDF version embedded in a piece by the *Chicago Sun-Times*. I quote the opening section, "Findings" in full:

*Section 1. Findings. The Founding Fathers attached great importance to Federal architecture. President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson consciously modeled the most important buildings in Washington, D.C. on the classical architecture of democratic Athens and republican Rome. They wanted America's public buildings to physically symbolize our then-new nation's self-governing ideals. Washington and Jefferson, both amateur architects, personally oversaw the competitions to design the Capitol Building and the White House.*

*For more than a century and a half America's Federal architecture produced beautiful and beloved buildings. Typically, though not exclusively, classical in design, buildings such as the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme court, the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, the Treasury Department, and the Lincoln Memorial have become international symbols of democratic self-government. These universally cherished landmarks, built to endure for centuries, have become an important part of our civic life.*

*In the 1950s the Federal government largely abandoned traditional, classical designs, and began adopting mid-century modernism, including Brutalism, for Federal buildings. This trend accelerated after the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space issued what has become known as the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture in 1962. The Guiding Principles implicitly discouraged classical and other designs known for their beauty, and declared that design must flow from the architectural profession's reigning orthodoxy to the Federal government.*

*The Federal architecture that ensued, overseen by the General Services Administration (GSA), ranged from the undistinguished to designs that public widely considered uninspiring, inconsistent with*

their surroundings and the architectural heritage of the region, and even just plain ugly. Structures such as the Hubert H. Humphrey Department of Health and Human Services Building, the Frances Perkins Department of Labor Building, and the Robert C. Weaver Department of Housing and Urban Development Building inspired public derision instead of admiration. In 1994, having recognized the aesthetic failures, including ugliness, of the buildings it was commissioning, the GSA established the Design Excellence Program in order to adhere to the Guiding Principles' mandate that Federal architecture "must provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government."

Unfortunately, the Design Excellence Program has not reintegrated our national values into Federal buildings, which under the Program have often been works of, or have been influenced by, Brutalism and Deconstructivism. For example, the new San Francisco Federal Building, Austin U.S. Courthouse, and the Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. U.S. Courthouse in Miami have little aesthetic appeal. With a limited number of exceptions, such as the Tuscaloosa Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, the Federal government has largely stopped building beautiful buildings that the American people want to look at or work in. Surveys show that the public prefers buildings that predate the Guiding Principles to those built under them. [Footnote with three citations for the same AIA Favorite Architecture list.]

After 57 years it is time to update the Guiding Principles to Make Federal buildings beautiful again. Federal architecture should once again inspire respect instead of bewilderment or repugnance. New Federal building designs should, like America's beloved landmark buildings, inspire the public for their aesthetics, make Americans feel proud of our public buildings, and, where appropriate, respect the architectural heritage of the region. Classical and traditional architectural styles have proven their ability to inspire such respect for our system of self-government. Their use should be encouraged. This preference does not exclude

experimentation with new, alternative styles. However, care must be taken to fully ensure that such alternative designs command respect by the public for their beauty and visual embodiment of America's ideals.

In response to the draft of the executive order, the GSA's Chief Architect and Director of the Design Excellence Program, David Insinga, resigned, and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) posted a statement, condemning the overhaul of the 1962 Guiding Principles, with its top-bottom direction of architectural styles, and warning that the mandated changes could jeopardize fundamental democratic principles:

*The AIA strongly opposes uniform style mandates for federal architecture. Architecture should be designed for the specific communities that it serves, reflecting our rich nation's diverse places, thought, culture and climates. Architects are committed to honoring our past as well as reflecting our future progress, protecting the freedom of thought and expression that are essential to democracy.*

To understand the reasons for AIA's concern, one only has to visit the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) website. It introduces the 1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture with a two-fold requirement of practicality and symbolism in all federal buildings as "efficient and economical facilities for use of Government agencies," that "must provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government." The first section of the three-point architectural policy that follows, is mostly concerned with the quality and economy of construction, but it also states that "major emphasis should be placed on the choice of designs that embody the finest contemporary American architectural thought." (Presumably "contemporary" is what the executive order refers to when it says that the original Guiding Principles

“implicitly discouraged classical and other designs known for their beauty.”) The second section is even more unequivocal in regard to the dangers of government mandated aesthetics: “The development of an official style must be avoided. Design must flow from the architectural profession to the Government. [sic] and not vice versa.” Instead of mandating or even favoring a single architectural style, GSA defined the parameters to maximize innovation while guaranteeing quality and longevity of construction. The notion of originality was key to the Guiding Principles. Its preface even quotes President Kennedy’s January 9, 1961 address to the Massachusetts legislature in which he evoked Pericles’ words to the Athenians: “We do not imitate—for we are a model to others,” establishing the goal of not only maintaining the canon, but adding to it.

In the “Design Excellence Overview” section of the site, the GSA specifically mentions “rigorous assessment processes to ensure enduring value in that work” with the aim of creating “holistic environments that add contemporary form and meaning to America’s rich legacy of public architecture.” The process includes advisory boards consisting of “national peers, distinguished private-sector design professionals appointed by the Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service to advise procurement and to critique concept designs under development,” in order to allow for flexibility in the multi-step procedures that include charrettes (“studies of a design issue by a team of design professionals within a limited time frame”) and competitions. The GSA puts additional emphasis on green design and construction as well as on sustainability.

At least in its present form, the draft of the “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” executive order is a peculiar example of either self-conscious denial or willful ignorance of the GSA Guiding Principles it intends to supplant. It sets up a straw opponent

through the fallacy of equating “classical architectural style” with beauty, then rhetorically topples this straw opponent, to arrive at a staggeringly disingenuous and unfounded claim of acting on the part of the American people who are sick and tired of looking at, and working in, modernist and post-modernist federal buildings. The order’s central assertion—that modernist and post-modernist architecture “ranged from the undistinguished to designs the public widely considered uninspiring, inconsistent with their surroundings and the architectural heritage of the region, and even just plain ugly”—is supported by informal polls conducted by The American Institute of Architects (AIA) and Harris Interactive. (That is the same AIA that promptly put out a statement condemning the drafted executive order on the grounds that “freedom of thought and expression [...] are essential to democracy.”) These informal polls are footnoted in the Findings section with three separate references, one of which is a link to “America’s Favorite Architecture” Wikipedia page (!). The “Criticisms” section of the Wikipedia page cites the AIA president R.K. Stewart acknowledging “that the rankings did not represent architects’ professional judgments, but instead reflected people’s ‘emotional connections’ to buildings.” Yet, despite that, and the fact that the 150 “Favorite Buildings” list includes “a few” modernist and post-modernist buildings, it is nevertheless used to assert the superiority of classical architecture.

If the AIA, whose survey is cited as a predicate for the order, is not at all on board with the pending changes, for whose sake is this drastic statute being proposed? The obvious answer is—the current administration. The “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” executive order will bring federally funded architecture under the umbrella of MAGA executive legislation, outlining the program meant to revive a



Figure 1 Nevada Supreme Court and Nevada Court of Appeals building, 408 E. Clark Ave., Las Vegas, Nevada. Yohan Lowie, EHB Companies, 2017. Photo: Julia Friedman.

nostalgic utopia, which in architectural terms is equated to classical, pre-modernist architectural styles. But while it might be based on “emotional connections,” the overhaul by executive order will be anything but symbolic. The mandated changes are top-down and will be implemented almost immediately. Once the decree is signed by President Trump, the Committee that oversees its implementation will have 60 days to present a plan reversing the current U.S. General Services Administration Guiding Principles that specifically reject “the development of an official style.” Gore Vidal’s infamous moniker “the United States of amnesia” fits this unfolding situation well. In 1962, when President Kennedy signed the Guiding Principles into law, the notion of a mandated official style seemed antithetical to democracy, because it had clear associations with totalitarian regimes.

The members of the committee that put in place the original Guiding Principles were understandably reluctant to dictate a single approved style, since they witnessed, first-hand, contemporaneous examples of mandated aesthetics in Russia, Germany, and Italy. In each of those countries, the official architectural style was classical, expressly anti-modernist, and, supposedly exemplified “beautiful architecture” in the mind of the *demos* in whose name it was imposed and enforced.

The assertion that totalitarian regimes favor classicism over modernism has been well-documented by historians. In his 2004 monograph *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*, R. J. Overy reviews the record of architectural construction led by Hitler and Stalin, concluding that “both understood symbolic significance of architecture for the ideological project” and

that both vehemently rejected modernist architecture.<sup>1</sup> What's more, the two dictators acted proactively against modernist architecture, with Stalin championing the Central Committee's 1930 resolutions against experimental styles approved, and the 1931 resolution against "architectural formalism"—essentially, Bauhaus modernism. Hitler was a driving force behind the 1933 shutdown of the Bauhaus, the hotbed of modernist architecture. His own preference was for classical models "designed to reflect the imposing grandeur and historical permanence of the German empire."

## **"The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch," writes Greenberg.**

Both Hitler and Stalin made their building plans a crucial ideological focus of their larger political programs. Both were very much hands-on: Hitler "saw himself as the German people's 'master-builder,' building the German 'New Order' in a very literal sense," and personally supervising every minute detail of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst ("House of German Art") construction. The museum was built in Munich to contain Germany's finest (classically inspired) art in the celebration of the triumph of the Third Reich. The Haus der Deutschen Kunst opened with great fanfare in mid-July of 1937, concurrently with the infamous display of "Degenerate," modernist, art across the street. Likewise, Stalin personally reviewed and approved all building designs for the reconstruction of Moscow. In fact, the blueprint for the

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<sup>1</sup> All Overy citations here are from Chapter 6, "Constructing Utopia," pp. 221–239.

reconstruction came to be known as "Stalin plan." After the war, in the late 1940s, Stalin's building program culminated in the 'tall buildings' erected based on a sketch made by the leader himself.

Totalitarianism's assault on modernism was not limited to architecture. By declaratively walking out of the opera house during a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's avant-garde opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in January 1936, Stalin reset the course of contemporary Soviet music, ensuring that modernism would not remain in its creative vocabulary. Two days after the ill-fated performance, *Pravda*, the Communist Party's official paper, published an editorial entitled "Muddle Instead of Music," where it accused the young composer of "petit-bourgeois formalism." The argument put forth by the reviewer, was based on the premise that the Soviet people have a preconceived aversion to modernism: "The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music."<sup>2</sup> These words echo Hitler's rants "in the name of the German people" about "a so-called modern art" during his inaugural speech of the "Great Exhibition of German Art" in the Haus der Deutschen Kunst.<sup>3</sup> Totalitarian dictators demagogically accused composers, artists, writers and architects—cultural elites—of creating useless cultural products that the public rightly despises.

An axiomatic notion, embedded in the *psyche* of the Soviet regime, stipulated that the workers "have a more concrete form of thinking... than bourgeois intellectuals," pitting experts and professionals against the monolithic mass of "the people," and

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Seroff, *Dimitri Shostakovich: The Life and Background of a Soviet Composer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), pp. 204-7.

<sup>3</sup> "Speech Inaugurating the 'Great Exhibition of German Art,'" translation by Ilse Falk, published in H. B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, CA, and London, 1968, pp. 474–483.

presenting the experts as saboteurs and wreckers. All the more remarkable, then, is the part (d) of the second, “Policy” section of “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again,” from which we learn that the experts are to be expressly excluded from the open comment period when everyone else is invited to share their opinions on new designs:

*With respect to the public panels, participants shall not include artists, architects, engineers, art or architecture critics, members of the building industry or any other members of the public that are affiliated with any interest group or organization involved with the design, construction, or otherwise directly affected by the construction or remodeling of the building.*

Since the only difference between the general public and the experts is the experts’ excessive and inconvenient knowledge of the discipline, were these experts excluded for their likely bias against classicism mandated from above in the name of the masses below?

I believe they most certainly were. Architects, art historians, architectural historians are attuned to the 20th-century uses of classicism for political purposes thanks to the writings of the art critic Clement Greenberg, especially Greenberg’s discussions of the top-down academicism in Russia, Germany and Italy. His seminal essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was published in 1939 as a contribution to the debate about the political role of art in the Trotskyist journal *Partisan Review*, has since become a staple of North American arts education.<sup>4</sup> In it, Greenberg recounts the development and the current function of “kitsch,” which he defines as “academicized simulacra of genuine culture,” and as “vicarious experience and faked sensations.” According to Greenberg, “all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all

that’s academic is kitsch” because “the academic as such no longer has an independent existence.” Kitsch tends to be the default mode of cultures in which “the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question.” The critic gives Soviet Russia as an example, with kitsch as the official culture of the state which opposes modernist, avant-garde art, favoring, instead, the “academicized simulacra.” As Greenberg notes, the dichotomy between “merely the old and merely the new” is false, and the choice is actually “between the bad, up-to-date old and the genuinely new.” “The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch,” writes Greenberg, tracing the route of preference for kitsch over genuine modern art to “a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism.” His conclusion is that decreeing kitsch as an official cultural policy is just pandering to the masses:

*Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagoguery. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level.*

Of course, Greenberg can be justly accused of dated elitism, and the masses, to whom he referred so disparagingly, should have their say. Besides, as history teaches us, their vote will not necessarily be for the *status quo* and against innovation. In 1401, the citizens of Florence decided that their baptistry

4 *Partisan Review*, New York, VI, no.5, Fall 1939, pp. 34–49.

(Battistero di San Giovanni) needed spectacular new doors. They did not mandate a specific style to a chosen artist, instead holding an open competition. Among the seven semifinalists, the jurors chose two finalists: a temperamental architect and designer Filippo Brunelleschi, and a young sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti. While Brunelleschi worked in secret on his design, Ghiberti kept an open studio to allow the public view and comment on the designs. The visitors came from different strata of the society, making Ghiberti's inclusion of their feedback truly democratic. The resulting design was much more innovative in the treatment of space than the "classical" version proposed by Brunelleschi. In the end, Ghiberti got the contract, and the doors, known as the "Gates of Paradise," became a key Renaissance landmark.

So, why is classicism by decree such a bad idea? One obvious problem with officially-mandated style is that variety will be compromised. Although the order makes exceptions to the "Classical style" in principle, further sections indicate the improbability of anything innovative being approved. Part (b) of Section 6, "Agency Actions," stipulates:

*... in the event the Administrator proposes to approve a design for a new applicable Federal public building that is not in a preferred architectural style (or, in the National Capital Region or for a Federal courthouse, not in the classical style) the Administrator shall notify the President of this fact not less than 30 days before the GSA could reject such design without incurring substantive expenditures.*

The Administrator is then obliged to provide "a detailed explanation [...] of why the Administrator believes selecting such a design is justified, with particular focus on whether such design is a beautiful and reflective of the dignity, enterprise, vigor and the stability of the American system of self-government as alternative designs of comparable cost in

a traditional architectural style," along with "a description of the traditional or classical designs seriously considered for such project." This would make anything but the mandated styles practically impossible.

Another problem is that Hellenic classicism, originally developed in Mediterranean antiquity, cannot possibly meet the current criteria for sustainability. Those criteria are based on the steep technological advances of the past few decades, which made architectural Modernism possible. Buildings are more than façades, and the GSA is not supposed to raise Potemkin villages. It is telling, that the San Francisco Federal Building by Morphosis Architects, named in the executive order as an example of construction Americans regard with "bewilderment or repugnance," is known for establishing a benchmark in sustainable design. Large Federal buildings are complex engineering mechanisms and, by turning back the aesthetic clock, the Executive order will simultaneously turn back the technological clock.

A final problem is that classical buildings require appropriately dated and therefore costly materials and outdated methods of production. This would make it very difficult to match their quality to the models they are intended to emulate—the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court, the U.S. Capitol building. It also virtually guarantees that many of these new buildings will be contenders for inclusion into Kate Wagner's McMansion Hell Hall of Fame. An example of such a building is Nevada's Supreme Court of Appeals, constructed in the record period of fourteen months by the independent developers/builders EHB Companies (Figure 1). The building is an unfortunate riff on Neoclassical style that ineptly combines elements of the current and original U.S. Supreme Court buildings. Sixteen Corinthian columns that support the west entrance pediment of the U.S.

Supreme Court were substituted with four square-shaped half columns. These are out of scale and are pathetically weighted down by a portico and architrave that are too large for them (and appear even larger because of the stylistically incoherent bas-relief inscription on the architrave, in what looks like the Arial Rounded Bold font, designed in 1982). The functional columns that support the frieze along the façade are vaguely Roman Tuscan and seem made of different stone than the remainder of the building, which is done in white marble. The massive *brass* doors at the front are no doubt meant to reference the monumental *bronze* doors of the U.S. Supreme Court, except that the pediments are out of scale: the central door's pointed pediment is adjusted to the height of the doors on either side, making the central door look smaller. Because of its miniscule size, the bronze dome that tops the building looks more like a functional base for the statue of Blind Justice that it supports. The building is surrounded with fluted rectangular planters and one-ton stone balls, and an illogical single Neoclassical gate pillar on the northeast corner provides the *coup de grace*.

Clement Greenberg was right when he said that “the alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch.” As described in “Definitions” section 3 of the executive order, “Classical architectural style” is derived from the forms and principles of classical Greek and Roman architecture, as later employed by such Renaissance architects as Michelangelo and Palladio...” After its initial antique phase, classical architecture in the West has already been reincarnated twice: during the Renaissance and then again during the Neoclassical period of the 18th and early 19th century. Any classical style of the 21st century is inevitably kitsch, because it is formulaic and academized, not to mention expensive and environmentally unsustainable. Imposing classicism by decree goes against not only the letter but also the spirit of the 1962 Guiding Principles. It rejects the notions of progress and evolution in American architecture. In the process, it transforms the GSA from a guardian of excellence in design to a prison warden, whose sole job is to keep architecture permanently confined in an ersatz-Palladian cell. ㄹ