

Demolishing the White House East Wing to build a ballroom embodies Trump's heritage politics

R. Grant Gilmore III, Director, Historic Preservation and Community Planning Program,
College of Charleston

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Demolition in process on the East Wing of the White House, Oct. 23, 2025.

AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin

From ancient Egypt to Washington, D.C., rulers have long used architecture and associated stories to project power, control memory and shape national identity. As 17th-century French statesman Jean-Baptiste Colbert observed:

“In the absence of brilliant deeds of war, nothing proclaims the greatness and spirit of princes more than building works.”

Today, the Trump administration is mobilizing heritage and architecture as tools of ideology and control. In U.S. historic preservation, “heritage” is the shared, living inheritance of places, objects, practices and stories – often plural and contested – that communities value and preserve. America’s architectural heritage is as diverse as the people who created, inhabited and continue to care for it.

As an archaeologist with three decades of practice, I read environments designed by humans. Enduring modifications to these places, especially to buildings and monuments, carry power and speak across generations.

In his first term as president, and even more so today, Donald Trump has pushed to an extreme legacy-building through architecture and heritage policy. He is remaking the White House physically and metaphorically in his image, consistent with his long record of putting his name on buildings as a developer.

In December 2020, Trump issued an executive order declaring classical and traditional architectural styles the “preferred” design for new federal buildings. The order derided Brutalist and modernist structures as inconsistent with national values.

Now, Trump is seeking to roll back inclusive historical narratives at U.S. parks and monuments. And he is reviving sanitized myths about America’s history of slavery, misogyny and Manifest Destiny, for use in museums, textbooks and public schools.

Yet artifacts don’t lie. And it is the archaeologist’s task to recover these legacies as truthfully as possible, since how the past is remembered shapes the choices a nation makes about its future.

Architecture as political power and legacy

Dictators, tyrants and kings build monumental architecture to buttress their own egos, which is called authoritarian monumentalism. They also seek to build the national ego – another word for nationalism.

Social psychologists have found that the awe we experience when we encounter something vast diminishes the “individual self,” making viewers feel respect and attachment to creators of awesome architecture. Authoritarian monumentalism often exploits this phenomenon. For example, in France, King Louis XIV expanded the Palace of Versailles and renovated its gardens in the mid-1600s to evoke perceptions of royal grandeur and territorial power in visitors.

Many leaders throughout history have built “temples to power” while erasing or overshadowing the memory of their predecessors – a practice known as *damnatio memoriae*, or condemnation to oblivion.

In the ancient world, the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Romans, Chinese dynasties, Mayans and Incas all left behind architecture that still commands awe in the form of monuments to gods, rulers and communities. These monuments conveyed power and often served as instruments of physical and psychological control.

In the 19th century, Napoleon fused conquest with heritage. Expeditions to Egypt and Rome, and the building of Parisian monuments – the Arc de Triomphe and the Vendôme Column, both modeled on Roman precedents – reinforced his legitimacy.

Albert Speer's and Hermann Giesler's monumental neoclassical designs in Nazi Germany, such as the party rally grounds in Nuremberg, were intended to overwhelm the individual and glorify the regime. And Josef Stalin's Soviet Union suppressed avant-garde experimentation in favor of monumental "socialist realist" architecture, projecting permanence and centralized power.

Now, Trump has proposed building his own triumphal arch in Arlington, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the Lincoln Memorial, as a symbol to mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.



German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and architect Albert Speer in 1932, inspecting Speer's model for a huge stadium to be built at Nuremberg.

Corbis via Getty Images

An American alternative

Born of Enlightenment ideals of John Locke, Voltaire and Adam Smith, the American Revolution rejected the European idea of monarchs as semidivine rulers. Instead, leaders were expected to serve the citizenry.

That philosophy took architectural form in the Federal style, which was dominant from about 1785 to 1830. This clear, democratic architectural language was distinct from Europe's ornate traditions, and recognizably American.

Its key features were Palladian proportions – measurements rooted in classical Roman architecture – and an emphasis on balance, simplicity and patriotic motifs.

James Hoban's White House and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello embodied this style. Interiors featured lighter construction, symmetrical lines, and motifs such as eagles, urns and bellflowers. They rejected the opulent rococo styles associated with monarchy.

Americans also recognized preservation's political force. In 1816, the city of Philadelphia bought Independence Hall, which was constructed in 1753 and was where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were debated and signed, to keep it from being demolished. Today the building is a U.S. National Park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Early preservationists saved George Washington's home, Mount Vernon, Jefferson's Monticello, and other landmarks, tying democracy's endurance to the built environment.

Architecture, memory and Trump

In remaking the White House and prescribing the style and content of many federal sites, Trump is targeting not just buildings but the stories they tell.

By challenging narratives that depart from white, Anglo-Saxon origin myths, Trump is using his power to roll back decades of work toward creating a more inclusive national history.

These actions ignore the fact that America's strength lies in its identity as a nation of immigrants. The Trump administration has singled out the Smithsonian Institution – the world's largest museum, founded “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge – for ideological reshaping. Trump also is pushing to restore recently removed Confederate monuments, helping to revive “Lost Cause” mythology about the Civil War.

Trump's 2020 order declaring classical and traditional architectural styles the preferred design for government buildings echoed authoritarian leaders like Adolf Hitler and Stalin, whose governments sought to dictate aesthetics as expressions of ideology. The American Institute of Architects publicly opposed the order, warning that it imposed ideological restrictions on design.

Trump's second administration has advanced this agenda by adopting many recommendations in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint. Notably, Project 2025 calls for repealing the 1906 Antiquities Act – which empowers presidents to quickly designate national monuments on federal land – and for shrinking many existing monuments. Such rollbacks would undercut the framework that has safeguarded places like Devils Tower in Wyoming and Muir Woods in California for over a century.

Trump's new ballroom is a distinct departure from the core values embodied in the White House's Federal style. Although many commentators have described it as rococo, it is more aligned with the overwrought and opulent styles of the Gilded Age – a time in American history, from about 1875 through 1895, with many parallels to the present.

In ordering its construction, Trump has ignored long-standing consultation and review procedures that are central to historic preservation. The demolition of the East Wing may have ignored processes required by law at one of the most important U.S. historic sites. It's the latest illustration of his unilateral and unaccountable methods for getting what he wants.



At a press conference on Oct. 15, 2025, President Donald Trump holds a model of a proposed arch to be built across the Potomac River from the Lincoln Memorial.

Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Instruments of memory and identity

When leaders push selective histories and undercut inclusive ones, they turn heritage into a tool for controlling public memory. This collective understanding and interpretation of the past underpins a healthy democracy. It sustains a shared civic identity, ensures accountability for past wrongs and supports rights and participation.

Heritage politics in the Trump era seeks to redefine America's story and determine who gets to speak. Attacks on so-called "woke" history seek to erase complex truths about slavery, inequality and exclusion that are essential to democratic accountability.

Architecture and heritage are never just bricks and mortar. They are instruments of memory, identity and power.

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